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PARADISE RUN

by Cypher

The disposal droids creaked past, escorting a repulsorlift handtruck heaped with charred twists of metal. The pile was no more than half a meter high and the pieces unrecognizable, but the sight had stilled the once- riotous Festival crowd that surrounded Han Solo. As it passed, the revelers dipped their heads or other anterior appendages in respect.

The moment was so uncharacteristic of Festival time on Salos that Han cast about for someone to provide an explanation. The closest was a woman at his left who, sad duty done, was just resuming her holiday smile. It did wonderful things for her appeal, Han reflected. So did her easy, graceful carriage and the way in which her silver hair cascaded to her waist over the crimson shimmer she wore. Earlier, he'd watched her out of the corner of his eye, hoping to catch her attention in the crowd. Now he had a natural opening for conversation.

He started with a touch of the lazy grin that had set female hearts aflutter on a score of worlds. "Scuse me," he began. "That junk the droids brought by; what was it?"

Her voice was husky and strong. "That, my friend, was Masterfire Renno and his racer, Black Hole. Prettiest little speedster you ever saw." Her holiday smile took on an edge. "Well, she's a real black hole now."

"That was a racer?"

The woman shrugged. Like her holiday smile, it did wonderful things, this time somewhat south of her shoulders, but Han was too stunned by her

information to do more than register the motion for future reference. "You haven't been planetside long, have you?" she asked.

"Just arrived. Set down with some fricasseed relays and a damaged top hatch." He prudently didn't mention that the damage had been inflicted by an Espo cutter on the far side of Starrown and that he and Chewbacca had just barely managed to nurse the Millennium Falcon to this backwater world.

"Well, spacer," the woman said, sweeping her silver hair back with a careless hand, "what happened to poor old Renno and the Black Hole was Paradise."

"Didn't look much like Paradise to me," Han muttered.

The woman unclipped a flask of intoxicant from her gilded belt and offered him a swig. A blend of chivalry and prudence made him wave her to take the first drink; then he accepted the second. The liquor went down less than gracefully, the local distillers lacking the skill of their counterparts on more sophisticated planets.

Still, Han thought, it never hurts to befriend the locals. And this particular local, he reflected with a glance at her topography, was well worth befriending. Masterfire Renno's fiery fate temporarily forgotten, Han mused on the possibility of a diplomatic negotiation. Maybe she'd be curious to get a look at a genuine--if somewhat battered--starship, the fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy . . . and if Chewie's search for replacement parts kept him out in the suburbs for more than a few hours, Han and the lady would have the Falcon to themselves.

He was about to begin the mating dance with one of his more successful opening gambits when the woman waved the flask toward the far horizon. Two red suns were about to slip behind a jag-toothed mountain range.

"Oh, Paradise is right here on Salos," she said easily. "Over there, beyond the Fangs. The Paradise Run, it's called; highest-stakes race on the Rim. Don't tell me you haven't heard of it."

Han ran the name through the computer in his brain. "Yeah, I think I have. Isn't that the one with those little two-seat flitters? Not space-worthy, but fast as hell in atmosphere?" He shrugged. "Don't recall much else. What's the purse?"

"You a pilot?"

"I'm a pilot."

"A good one?"

"The best. "

She chuckled. "That's what they all say. Until they see Paradise." She paused for a wry grin. "The ones who survive get rich. The purse is one hundred thousand credits--winner take all. "

Han was so taken aback that he couldn't even let out a whistle of surprise; he got as far as a pucker before all the air went out of him. That sum would repair the Falcon and get Chewie and him off this dustball and into some very gracious living for a very, very long time.

The woman caught a glint of appraisal in the hazel eyes and shook her head. "If you think you could do better than Renno, think again. You see the results of his confidence. Usually, the remains aren't even brought back; Renno just happened to buy it at the edge of the Run and had a rich father who bought his ashes from a retrieval crew with more greed than sense. Several of them didn't make it, either."

"Somebody must make it; this race's been won, hasn't it?"

"Sure--the last time just four days ago, at the start of Festival. That's when Renno got his. Another Run's coming up tomorrow, for those who didn't have the nerve or the entry fee before. Look," she said, "Paradise is for the very best, the very fastest, the ones with freon where their nerves ought to be. The Paradise King's held the crown for two years and he's young and quick enough to hold it for a couple more until the Run gets him--or until someone better knocks him out of the race. Don't be foolish."

Her open admiration of this Paradise King and her casual dismissal of his own skills brought a flush of anger to Han's lean face. He was about to snap a retort; then he was caught once again by the woman's statuesque beauty and softened his words. "Hey, honey, don't worry 'bout me," he said lightly. "I've flown everything fast enough to get me off the ground. I smashed every tolerance on the Kessel Run and I've played skipjack through a fleet of Espo cruisers. If your Paradise Run can be won, I can win it." Inwardly, he winced. His words sounded bombastic even to him, although they were nothing but the truth.

The lady, however, was less than impressed. In fact, her obsidian eyes twinkled as she said, "You look a little young to have accomplished all you claim."

"I've done a few things here and there," Han bristled. Mostly illegal things, he added to himself. "My partner and I get around. Never been this far out on the Rirn, though. If I'd known about the Paradise Run before this, we'd've made planetfall long ago."

Her gaze judged him, from his rumpled brown hair to the toes of his scuffed spacer's boots. En route, it took in the wide shoulders, muscled torso, long legs, and the stance of a man never quite at home on terra firma. "Hmph," she said. "You're young--but not that young. And the King is even younger than you. Who knows?" She grinned. "Maybe you and your ship won't end up in a heap of carbonized parts."

Han returned the grin. His held an edge of sensuality, just enough to express his interest without getting his face slapped. "Well, darlin', one hundred thousand credits is pretty good incentive for some sharp flyin'. Why don't you just show me where to sign up? For that much money, I'd tap-dance on an active volcano."

"Oh, you will, spacer," she said. "You will. "

Eyeing the race marshal, Han thought he'd discovered the etymology of the word 'officious'. The man carried his dignity as though he still owed money on it.

"That's the requirement, young sir. No Paradise Run with fewer than ten pilots, and so far only seven have signed up. If we don't get the minimum, there won't be another Run until next Festival, four solar turns from now."

Han did a little quick calculation, equating Salos's solar turns with Standard measures. Four solar turns was nearly a year.

"Now you've got eight pilots. " Han plunked down the entry fee: five thousand credits, the Falcon's emergency fund. Chewie'd skin him alive when he found out, but Han figured that his chance of winning the race--any race-- was good enough to gamble on. Especially for a return of twenty to one.

The official eyed the money. "Son, has anyone told you the rules?"

"Not yet. Why don't you?"

The official drew himself up to his full meter-and-a-half and launched into an obviously well-rehearsed spiel. "The rules are that there are no

rules. In short, anything goes, except carrying weapons. You'll be outfitted with a flitter if you don't have one of your own, and assigned a docking bay where you can alter it to your satisfaction. If you come back and the flitter doesn't, you'll be fined two thousand credits. Of course," he added with a touch of dryness, "that seldom happens. Lose your ship on the Paradise Run, and your life goes with it. In that case, we take the flitter cost out of your entry fee so we won't have to institute legal proceedings against your next of kin."

"Big of you," Han grunted. This was starting to sound a little too interesting for his own good.

A flash of red at the corner of his vision made him recall the stately beauty who still stood near, waiting for the transaction to end. Although he resented her obvious disbelief in his prowess, he also was wrestling with a near-irresistible urge to impress her.

Hey, he thought, how bad can it be? It's just a race, right? Okay, so the boys play rough here; well, you've played pretty rough, too, and for a lot less reward. And usually, he added with a covert glance at the silver-haired woman, your only witness was about a half-meter taller and a whole lot hairier than this one.

"This race is some kind of obstacle course, right? Just what does it consist of?"

The official's eyebrows migrated north. "Why, everything, son. Every-thing. You see, due to a confluence of powerful gravitational and electro- magnetic pulls involving this planet and three of its sixteen moons, Salos's polar axis is in a state of constant physical flux, caught, to put it in simple terms, in a suspension of natural law. It's never the same from one moment to the next. Water, fire, shiftings of the earth, strange air currents-- you never know what you might encounter." He paused to see if Han was displaying the proper degree of awe. Han was. "That, young sir, is why the race is worth one hundred thousand credits."

Han cranked his jaw back into position and reassembled his usual 'don't care' air, which had temporarily slipped. So many questions were scrambling for priority in his brain that he finally discarded them all and asked simply, "Is the King signed up?"

"Of course. If he wants to keep his title, he must defend it in any duly constituted race." The official risked a smile. It looked like a gas pain. "With his four victories, the King should be a very wealthy young man. Unfortunately, he has fallen into wasteful habits. I fear he has

squandered most of his winnings on fast ships and slow women." He paused, his brow furrowed. "Or is it the other way around? Well, never mind. At any rate, since Festival ends tomorrow at sun-set, and since the Paradise Run is only held during Festival, there is time for only one more Run. It will start at dawn and end at dusk, so if the ten pilots haven't paid their entry fees by tomorrow dawn, the race will be canceled. In which case," he added, "the fees will be refunded, of course. "

Han sneaked another peek at the woman to see if she was impressed yet. As far as he could determine, she wasn't. Okay, Silverhair, he thought, maybe this doesn't mean all that much to you--but it will, once I win this sucker. We can do a lot of celebratin' on one hundred thousand credits, you and me. As he turned back to the race marshal, an errant synapse in his brain added, Provided you survive, Solo.

He shook off the warning. "Hey, buddy, what's the course? How long is it? Any landmarks?"

Being called "buddy" did little for the race marshal's geniality. "Young sir," he huffed, "pray show a little respect for your elders." Since the respect, he saw, wasn't forthcoming, he picked up the shards of his dignity and resumed the orientation. "The flux extends from the far side of the Fangs to the Blue Water, a distance of approximately one hundred, eighty-seven anthuls, or five thousand, four hundred and forty goloons if that makes more sense to you." Neither anthuls nor goloons made much sense to Han and he let the official know with a shrug. The marshal sighed. "About five hundred and sixty-four K's, Standard. You needn't worry about plotting a course; each flitter is preprogrammed to follow the same approximate route, with allowances for deviation to avoid hazards. Each ship is also fitted with a beacon, the signal of which rebounds from a satellite to a receiver here in town, so the officials can be certain that no contestant has reprogrammed his flitter to avoid the flux altogether."

"Trusting souls," Han muttered. Too loudly.

"Precautions are necessary," the race marshal sniffed. "In the past, the race has drawn an unscrupulous competitor or two. For that reason, also, I would advise that you or your spotter sleep in the docking bay with your flitter, to prevent sabotage."

"Spotter?"

"You are running with a spotter, aren't you? Most of the first-time contestants do. True, you sacrifice a little in speed and maneuverability but the extra pair of eyes can be invaluable in the flux."

Han imagined Chewbacca packed into the tiny flitter. The vision made him chuckle, briefly. Then he got back to business. "I'm makin' this trip alone. Where's my flitter?"

The official shook his head in disapproval and added a resigned shrug. "Well, young sir, it's your funeral--so to speak. Take the gold one in docking bay twenty-seven. As I said, you can make any modifications you please--at your own expense, of course. Check here tomorrow at dawn. And meanwhile," he added, "I would advise foregoing the fleshpots of Salos and getting a good night's sleep. If you run Paradise, you will need every edge. Every edge."

Han turned away from the official's platform, his mind full of calculations. One or two of them had nothing to do with the Paradise Run, and he called out, "Hey, Silverhair--" before realizing that the beauty in red had vanished. Hordes of riotous revelers pushed past him, but she was not among them. Pique stabbed at him briefly, but was succeeded by a sense of relief. She'd been tempting, true--but he had work to do.

Better pick up some tools from the Falcon, then find docking bay twenty-seven, he thought, heading down the street toward the spaceport. If it's a factory-issue flitter, I can pull a few tricks outta her. Wonder if I really could cram Chewie in as spotter? Naw . . . he'd be more apt to spot my head for a long kick. Hope he hasn't gotten back yet; I can leave him a message and hope he won't show up 'til this business is all over.

Engrossed in his ruminations, Han wandered a couple of blocks, brushing shoulders with Festivalgoers who thronged the street. Suddenly, the crowd ahead of him turned into a panicky mob, scattering to the alleys and flattening against walls on either side of the dusty roadway. Simultaneously, he heard the whine of a high-torsion engine; then a sleek black flitter whipped around a corner and swept toward him, stubby fins winking with the red sunlight.

Like other pedestrians, Han dove for the gutter, landing hard on a fragment of ceramic molding that had fallen from a roof overhang. Enraged, he caught it up and, as the flitter roared past, launched the tile with all his strength. The missile caught the flitter just forward of its aft fin, clanking of the hull and shattering on the street.

The flitter screamed into a controlled spin, far faster than Han had thought possible. In a handful of seconds, the craft was hovering before him, its transparent canopy rising. Han's eye registered a flash of silver hair in the spotter's seat, but he didn't have time for more than a glimpse of the woman in red before the pilot launched himself from the craft like an avenging angel. He didn't even touch ground, just slammed into Han with the full force of his charge, dropping them both onto the roadway.

His weight knocked Han's breath away, but that was the newcomer's sole and temporary, advantage. As he fended the pilot off long enough to catch his breath, Han appraised his style and figured that experience, not anger, would tell the tale--and experience in hand-to-hand combat was a Solo specialty.

The flitter pilot flailed away, landing blows more by luck than by skill. Han simply rolled to one side, gained his feet, then, when the pilot struggled to a stand, decked him with a Corellian combination, a series of blows that struck four pressure points in quick succession. Poleaxed, the attacker dropped, gasping and gagging. The crowd, which had gathered for the brief combat, started to disperse. Han spared a glance at the flitter's cockpit. Cool obsidian eyes studied him dispassionately.

Han shifted his attention to his hors-de-combat opponent. Still a boy, no more than seventeen or eighteen Standard, he thought from his half-dozen years' advantage. Lean and sandy-haired and, at present, preoccupied with pain in several different portions of his anatomy.

"Had enough?" Han drawled.

Brown-green eyes glared back. "Offworlder," the boy hissed between clenched teeth, "I'll get you for this!"

"Wrong," said Han, dusting his hands on the seat of his pants. "I got you. Next time, slow down when you take that speedster through a crowd. Who d'you think you are, the flamin' Emperor?"

"Better than that." The boy started unfolding in a generally vertical direction. It took him a while, but eventually he stood nose to nose with Han, of a height with the Corellian but a few pounds lighter. He was pale, but spots of red rode his cheekbones. "Matter of fact," he said, "I'm the closest thing they got to royalty around here. Ever heard of the Paradise King? I'm him."

Han gaped in simulated awe. "You're s'posed to be the hottest pilot on the Rim? Boy, they're hard up for heroes on this backwater planet."

Privately, he had to admit that the flitter looked speedy enough. Undoubtedly it was souped up 'way past the factory regs; he'd been able to tell that much from the sound of the engine. And the kid was cocky as hell, sufficiently full of himself to drive the hot little machine full out. Han grinned to himself, not letting it show. This might be an interesting race after all--especially if Silverhair were watching . . .

Flushed from Han's slur on his abilities, the King balanced himself on the balls of his feet, ready to take another jab at the older man.

Then fate intervened.

When it did, Han reflected wryly that fate had certainly fallen on hard times. Its current guise was that of a slightly built human male wearing a thick head of dark hair and a salt-and-pepper beard apparently cultivated for someone of more imposing stature. The man's clothing was casual to the point of shabbiness and under his left arm, he cradled an industrial-strength holorecorder.

Han turned away, habitually averse to having his image recorded. A smuggler never knew where such a picture might wind up. But the newcomer ignored the dodge, planting himself in front of the Corellian and announcing in a voice that could've shattered plasteel, "Why, as I live and breathe! You're Han Solo!"

Han's big hand clutched a fistful of the man's shirt and hauled it, and him, as far as feasible into the air. "You ain't gonna live and breathe much longer, you don't dampen that voice down a bit."

The newcomer wasn't stupid; he dropped his voice to something below normal conversational level. "Sorry, sorry." Somewhat mollified, Han let him touch earth again. "But you are he . . . Han Solo? The smuggler? The man who broke the Kessel Run record? The pilot who took a freighter down to the deck on K'harria and dodged forty imperial dreadnoughts on the way to Morollis? The man who blasted twelve Espos in a cantina on Prath? The man who--"

Han's hand cut off the stream of verbiage, and breath as well. He waited for the stranger to turn an attractive shade of puce, then eased back his hand and shook his head slowly. Despite his irritation, he couldn't help being a little flattered that his exploits had been making the rounds.

"Friend," he drawled,, "you got a faster mouth on you than a Linerian whore. 'Sides, it was only eight Espos, and it wasn't in a cantina, it was

in the Authority hotbox. So just cook your afterburners unless you know what you're talkin' about."

The chastisement had little effect. "But that's what I need, don't you see? The truth, from the one who lived all those adventures. Why, young as you are, your exploits are being discussed from one end of the galaxy to the other' Not officially, of course--I know better than to talk with the Authority and the Imperials--but by starpilots, smugglers, freebooters and free traders. The ones who admire what you've done. Among them, you're almost a legend!"

"Bein' a legend's no good for business " Han grumped. "I just wanna keep my tail outta jail and my face outta the holocasts. I don't know what you got in mind, but I don't think I like it." He fixed the stranger with one stormy eye. "Just what've you got in mind, anyway? You ain't asked for my autograph yet, so I expect you're thinkin' of something else."

The Paradise King, who had been hovering, forgotten, on the fringe of the conversation, suddenly injected himself into the circle with all the diplomacy of a Gammorean svotha salesman at a wedding on Alderaan. "Hey," he yelped to the holo man, "what's all this bantha boodo? You mean this old guy's some kinda hotshot?" He grinned. "Save your power, fella; you want holos, I'll give you holos. You just ride with me tomorrow on the Paradise Run. I'll give you material for a dozen holos you can peddle to the networks."

From his inferior stature, the stranger projected utter scorn. "Boy, you may be the Paradise King, but you're purely a local hero. Your exploits are nothing compared with those of Captain Solo here. I have ambitions, my friend. The shows I'll make of this man will be disseminated throughout the galaxy."

Han couldn't help noticing the Paradise King's interesting evolution in hue from flesh-toned to crimson. The flush crept under the collar of his snug tunic, slid up his neck, over his sharp-ridged jaw and within seconds, Han noted with satisfaction, turned the boy the approximate shade of a Corellian bloodstripe. Han expected a physical reaction to follow, and braced himself, but the King seemed paralyzed by his rage; although he shuddered, he did not attack. Finally, he gulped enough air to fuel a few words and, with a stab of his index finger at Han's solar plexus, rasped, "You--watch out tomorrow. Anything goes. Remember: Anything goes."

"Just be sure," Han said mildly, "that the anythin' that goes ain't you."

He said it to the boy's back; the Paradise King was already on his way to the flutter, his spine rigid with humiliation and anger. As he slammed the

canopy down, Han caught one last sight of silver hair, and sighed. With a roar, the flitter launched itself down the road, raising a dust cloud through which Han could just read an inscription on the stern: "If this ship's rockin', don't bother knockin'."

Han sighed again. Damm cocky kids would be the death of him, if this bearded holo man didn't take the honors first. "Now," he turned to the stranger, "What was that you were sayin' about me and my exploits?"

Balancing the holorecorder carefully, the smaller man stuck out a hand and said, with a hopeful smile, "Captain Solo, my name is Jorj the Dreamweaver. I would like to make you famous."

The End of Paradise cantina was packed with residents and visitors drunkenly celebrating Festival; the decibel level was high enough to require conversation at the top of the lungs. Han's half-empty glass sat forgotten before him as he vented his astonishment and irritation on the wide-eyed Dreamweaver, who sat across from him with a flask of the local lubricant.

"You wanna spread my face all over the civilized galaxy?" Han yelled. "You're outta your mind!"

"But--but--" Jorj sputtered, "You'll be famous, Captain Solo! Everyone will know of your daring and resourcefulness!"

"Yeah," Han said dryly. "Every Espo, every Imp, every territorial governor and every free-lance lawkeeper--every one of 'em'd be out for my hide. Man, you ain't got enough brain matter to fill a water sack on Tatooine."

"Fame in itself can be a protection," Jorj argued. "Right now, you're known only to a small circle of free spacers, and you're prey to every legally constituted enforcer. But, if you were famous, no one would dare touch you."

"In public, maybe." Han took a slug of his drink. It went down like water, which it mostly was. Festival or no, the local innkeepers weren't about to lose a chance at squeezing an extra credit out of a thirsty spacer. "But all they'd have to do is hire a bounty hunter. Nobody'd know what'd happened when I disappeared. Forget it." Throwing back his head, he drained the remains of the liquor in a single swallow that bobbed the Adam's apple in his long throat.

"Money would be involved--"

Suddenly, the proposition was a little more to Han's liking. "How much money?"

Jorj backed off at once. "Not much, I'm afraid, at least, not immediately. I work on a very limited budget, you see, being a free-lancer--"

"Not much is not enough." Han unfolded his lanky length to tower over the seated Jorj. "Look, friend, I know what you're after. You wanna turn me into a holo hero, then pocket the proceeds and get famous yourself. No, thanks."

He flipped a coin onto the table as payment for the drink, then turned toward the door. "Find yourself another sucker," he called over his shoulder, "I got work to do."

Han needed sleep, but it would have to wait. Three hydrospanners and a protowrench later, he had done about as much as he could for the flitter's factory engine, but there was always that margin against which he would test his abilities--and the machine's.

In the light of the glowbulb hovering above the opened engine, he was rummaging in the flitter's metallic innards when he heard the door to the pit iris open.

Annoyed, he emerged from the engine to see Jorj the Dreamweaver hovering just within the door, holding a bottle like a benediction.

"Sssssalute," Jorj said. From the slurring of the word, Han guessed that the Dreamweaver had saluted himself frequently during the evening. "I brought you what is probably a much-needed libation. Although you probably shouldn't indulge," he added owlishly. "The Run is quite hazardous enough without any added handicap." He hiccuped.

Han waved away the bottle, but decided to accept whatever information Jorj had to offer. "Have you run this race, or what? Just how much d'you know about it?"

"Well, actually, I haven't run the race. But I've interviewed every survivor for the past three years--all nine of them. That, by the way, includes the young man with whom you had your contretemps this afternoon." He hiccuped again, then chased it with a swig.

Han grabbed a hydrospanner and once again bent over the flitter, his head and torso disappearing into the engine compartment. His voice echoed from within. "And how many didn't make it in the past three years?"

Swaying gently, Jorj counted. He was sufficiently impaired to require the aid of his fingers. Several times. Finally, he sighed. "I make it sixty-seven. "

Han came up so fast that he cracked his skull on the elevated engine cowling. "Sixty-seven?" Rubbing his head, he put down the hydrospanner and hiked one buttock onto the edge of the open cockpit. "And just what did the survivors--all nine of 'em--have to say about the course?"

Jorj's sway had developed a pronounced list to starboard. Finally, he conceded the battle to gravity and slid to the ground, cradling the bottle gently. "They say that, once you pass the mountains, it's like flying into a grinder and being spit out again. If you're lucky. That's why lots of the pilots take spotters. Even with cockpit instruments, you can't keep track of everything; it all happens too fast. A second pair of eyes comes in handy." He grinned; it was lopsided, like his entire body, which was sliding ever more toward horizontal. "If you need a spotter, Captain., I'm ready. I can just catch a few holo shots here and there, and the rest of the time I can, watch out for--"

Han cut him off. "I'm not carryin' any extra baggage, thanks. I'll sacrifice the extra eyes for less weight and more maneuverability."

Growling to himself, he tapped the edge of the engine well in a gesture that was part nervous reflex and part good-luck charm. Gods knew, he'd hit many a warp, a couple of asteroid fields--once, even, the rim of a black hole. He'd been through more hair-breadth escapes than he cared to recall, and he'd honed his piloting skills to a gleaming edge. But the Paradise Run sounded like a fool's errand. Frankly, he was beginning to hope that the requisite ten competitors wouldn't show up at dawn and the race would be canceled.

Then he thought of the one hundred thousand credits.

He started to ask Jorj another question, but realized that he was too late. The Dreamweaver had slipped into dreamland, the near-empty bottle still cradled lovingly in his arms.

There was no sign of Chewbacca, for which Han was grateful; he was having enough trouble keeping his breakfast down without having to handle a

hysterical Wookiee. With luck, he thought, the whole hooraw would be over by the time Chewie returned. Over, one way or another.

Nine pilots of assorted species and sexes were lined up in front of the judges' stand. Han stood at one end of the ragged line; at the other, as far away as he could get, was the Paradise King. The boy stood rigid, Han's insult still upon him, although he grinned and occasionally, with a wave, acknowledged the cheers of the crowd.

The race marshal's voice caught his attention: "Ah, Stannis, there you are. I was beginning to wonder if you had decided against competing."

"Not on your life, my friend." The tenth competitor elbowed through the crowd and took her place next to Han. The silver hair was encircled by a jet wrap so that it tumbled, a narrow glistening waterfall, down her spine. Her attributes, Han noted, were encased in a cerulean jumpsuit.

She flashed a smile at the King, but her greeting was for Han: "Hello, spacer; hope you're as good a pilot as you say."

"What about you?" Han was having trouble reconciling the crimson vision of the day before with this businesslike pilot in sky blue. "You got enough experience for this?"

She shrugged. "I've never run Paradise, but there are a couple of star systems that know the name Stannis of Ocho. And I have one decided advantage." Her obsidian eyes bored into his hazel ones. "I have no home, no family, no lover, no friend. I have nothing to lose, and a great deal to gain. I figure that puts me ahead at the starting line."

Han frowned slightly. He could be careless enough of his own life, when the game was worth the candle, but her declaration made him uneasy. A few times in the rough-and-tumble past he'd come up against other people with nothing to lose. Not caring--really not caring--gave them an edge, no doubt about it.

"Ladies and gentlemen and others," the race marshal intoned, "the Paradise Run is now an official competition. As I call your names, please step forward. Stannis of Ocho."

The crowd raised a lusty cheer as Silverhair--Han still thought of her by that name--took the spotlight, her head high and right fist raised in a salute.

"Edris Corval, free spacer." The acclaim swelled again and Han stepped front, letting himself be washed in its waves. Sure, the name wasn't his--

no use risking untoward publicity, he thought--but the cheers were every bit as sweet as they would have been if he had been racing under his own.

"Elsm ths Ech I t-o. Wraaknia el Wraaknia. Teeforqwotyx of Errerris. Ch'thon'is of Ch'thorii Mylantiis Com. Myriaa of Denos. Y-Isnyid DdylInnys of T-2.11

The tumult grew with each added name. Then it peaked and held in riotous tribute as the marshal boomed, "And last--but certainly not least-- the reigning champion, the four-time winner of the Paradise Run, defending his title once again: F'aalfa of Klafawnya, third moon of Salos."

The King, Han noted, took his time acknowledging his fans, grinning and waving and winking at the more nubile members of the crowd. Han could appreciate the urge to grandstand, but privately he thought F'aalfa was overdoing it.

"Competitors," the marshal snapped, "to your vehicles."

Before them the crowd parted and ten flitters sat, canopies up, gleaming varicolored in the sunlight, their noses aimed at the distant mountains. In unison, the pilots strode forward. Han noticed that six of the ten were being joined by companions: spotters, he guessed. He checked Stannis of Ocho, but she was walking alone; so was F'aalfa. A slender pale-green sauroid he recalled as Myriaa of Denos was also flying solo.

As Han climbed into his gold flitter, the marshal and a starter droid stepped to one side of the line of aircars. The starter carried a small cylinder that Han recognized as a signal laser.

"Attention!" The marshal's command quieted the crowd. "Once the signal has been given, the Paradise Run is officially begun. It will end at dusk. The first pilot to return before then, having successfully negotiated the entire course, will be declared the Paradise King and will receive the sum of one hundred thousand credits. Anyone jumping the signal will be disqualified; anyone remaining at the starting line ten seconds after the signal will be disqualified. The signal will be given on a count of ten. One--"

To his left, Han saw Stannis slam down the canopy of her silver flitter and grip the controls

"two- "

Han reached for his own canopy, but his grip was broken by a flying object that catapulted into the spotter's seat. The object, he realized with a groan, was a small, bearded man carrying a holorecorder.

"Jorj," Han snapped, "Get the hell outta here!"

"No, Captain." Considering his overindulgence of the night before, the Dreamweaver looked more or less alive. At least, he was only slightly chartreuse. He fumbled for the seat harness and clicked it shut before Han could eject him.

"Five--"

"Jorj, I ain't takin' you on this run, and that's final. You don't get outta here on your own, I'm gonna throw you out . . . piece by piece if necessary."

"You don't have time." The words were confident, but the Dreamweaver looked anything but. In fact, Han thought, he appeared quite frightened. "It'll take you too long to get me out of the harness and out of the flitter, and if you're stuck at the starting line, you're out of the race. You have to take me. "

"Eight --"

"Jorj, you worthless--"

"Captain Solo you'd better lower your canopy; you have only a second or so left."

""Ten!"" The laser shot out a beam of crimson. With a roar, nine of the little ships flung themselves from the line; in the tenth, a red-faced Corellian wrestled with a determined stowaway.

Suddenly, Han realized that the rest of the flitters had gone. Already, they were vanishing toward the distant massif, the Fangs.

"Damm you, Jorj!" He banged down the canopy and hit the controls, sending the flitter into the air with a lurch that slammed both its passengers back against their shock seats.

Han reached cruising height of ten meters before sparing enough attention for words. "Jorj, I didn't want you on this ride, but there doesn't seem to be any way I can eject you, so you got one chance to live: Earn your keep.

Put that damned machine away and open your eyes. I catch you makin' one holo, I'll say the hell with the race and dump you into the first lethal flux phenomenon we pass."

"But, Captain, I have to record the Run; that's why I came."

For emphasis, Han sent the flitter into a sharp nosedive, then pulled her out of the fall with a hairsbreadth of safety to spare. A sidelong glance confirmed the success of his maneuver: The recorder, torn from Jorj's hands, had bounded to the floor, where it lay, bleeping a forlorn signal that indicated internal injuries. In fact, Jorj himself wasn't looking too healthy. Having the bottom dropped out of a hungover stomach, Han reflected, didn't do much for one's digestion. He guessed that the Dreamweaver would be a little subdued for a while.

Far ahead, the other ships streaked toward the Fangs and the unknown terrain on the other side. Han let the flitter all out, hoping to catch at least the rearguard before entering the flux zone. The modifications he'd made to the engine, he noted with satisfaction, had boosted her power considerably.

He was giving himself a mental pat on the back when Jorj came to life again. "Captain Solo," he croaked, "aren't we going a little fast?"

Solo spared a glance to his right. The Dreamweaver appeared to be in the grip of a severe malaise. His chartreuse hue had deepened, and judging from the convulsions of his throat, he was having trouble keeping his last meal from decorating the cockpit. Han, who had gotten his own stomach under control long ago, hoped fervently that Jorj's traitorous viscera could be whipped into submission.

"Captain Solo I am not certain that I can tolerate these speeds."

"You better," Han growled. "'Cause they're gonna get a lot faster. You wanted to take this ride; okay, you're takin' it. Now shut up and watch out; we're about to hit the mountains."

"Ooooooh nooooooo . . ." The moan faded in the roar of the engine as Han squeezed another iota of power out of the tiny craft.

He was closing on the pack, or at least on the rearguard. The bright red flitter, he recalled, belonged to the Wraaknian, el wraaknia. The pilot, a befeathered avian, appeared to be nursing his ship through some kind of mechanical spasm; the craft vibrated and bounced as el Wraaknia's spotter glanced nervously behind them. Sighting Han's ship, he nudged his pilot and Han could see his beak clicking urgently.

Han's flitter swept alongside the Wraaknian's failing craft. A plume of black streaked from the flitter's engine; the pilot struggled to regain control, but apparently had pushed his jury-rigged ship too hard. As Han roared past, the Wraaknial's flitter choked, shuddered, then nosed toward the earth below. Han could spare only a glance, but it was enough to let him see the red flitter spiral into the ground. A cloud of dust and debris and smoke rose over the wreck, but Han caught two avian forms soaring, alive.

One ship down, and the race hadn't even reached the flux yet. He shook his head, frowning.

Then the mountains were upon him and he had no time for reflection. The flitter, limited in its altitude capacity, threaded the needle through crags and canyons, between the razor-edged peaks--peaks comparatively new in geologic terms, not worn and friendly like the mountains on older worlds.

"Captain, that wall is terribly close!" It was the first peep Han had heard out of the Dreamweaver since before the Wraaknial's crash, and it took him by surprise. He'd almost managed to forget his unwelcome copilot.

"Jorj, just keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. I think things're about to get interesting."

"Oh, Captain, I hope not! "

Han discovered that he was grinning, partly at the Dreamweaver's discomfort and partly at the sheer joy of testing his flying skills. This's real seat-of-the-pants pilotin', he mused. Almost fun. But it won't be fun much longer; wonder if I can catch that blue boy up ahead before the flux gets us?

He whipped around a blind corner and just barely missed being creamed by a jagged promontory that jutted from below. Hissing through his teeth, Han wrestled the flitter over onto its starboard side and cleared the obstacle by less than a meter. As he skimmed past it, he caught sight of a flaming wreck tumbling down the far side of the slope.

Two down. Seven to go.

Ahead the sawtoothed peaks crowded together, shoulder to shoulder. Only a couple of canyons appeared wide enough for the flitters, and each of the

seven ships was maneuvering to be the first through. As Han peeled to port and squeaked through a space just wide enough to be called a crevasse, he caught sight of a silver flitter flanked by two others, all three racing toward a needle's eye of an opening. His eyes, slitted in concentration, widened as the sun-colored flitter on the left lurched sideways, brushing the fin of the silver craft. Stannis's ship recoiled into the third craft, but Silverhair fought and regained control. The third pilot wasn't so skilled. As the aggressor raced into the opening with Stannis on his heels, the third ship rocketed into the massif.

Han didn't know which pilot had bought the moisture farm this time, but he didn't have the luxury of time to speculate. He was recalling the race marshal's spiel: anything goes. Apparently, anything did.

"Did you see that?" The Dreamweaver's dark eyes were as wide as possible, and his chartreuse complexion had faded to dead white. The realities of the race, Han thought, had finally come home to his passenger. "Why, that pilot deliberately--"

Han swooped the flitter beneath an overhang, and groaned. The mountains abruptly, were behind them; ahead stretched a featureless ocean, an unbroken expanse of lavender liquid that shimmered with an opalescent life. It was eerily beautiful until a waterspout arose from its depths and engulfed the sun-colored flitter. Just behind it, Stannis wrenched her craft to starboard and skimming the surface, dodged the spout. Ahead, the rest of the pack, still bunched together, flew on.

Han gave a mental nod of respect to the silverhaired woman's flying.

Then Jorj yelled, "Captain--! " As the Dreamweaver cried out, Han felt the flitter lurch, then yaw sickeningly as a vacuum opened beneath it and dragged the speeder down toward a vortex created as the waterspout sank.

Gunning the engine, Han fought the vortex with all his strength. Caught in a pillar of vacuum, he felt the flitter begin to rotate with the whirlpool beneath. Jorj's terrified scream echoed in his ears, but he spared no attention to his passenger as he fought the drag, watching the engine-temperature readout on the console edge toward the burnout line.

The flitter hung only a few meters above the lavender surface when Han reached a decision. Taking a deep breath, he eased back on the acceleration; the flitter, no longer battling the vortex, was swept into a downward spiral, gaining velocity until Han's head and stomach were spinning and he no longer could find the horizon. Still, he braced himself, waiting for his moment. It came more quickly than he had expected, but he was ready. As the flitter barely touched the surface, Han

wrenched the nose up, simultaneously slamming on every increment of power he had poured into the craft the night before. Screaming, the little ship flung itself upward and away from the vortex, soaring nearly sideways, out of control, until Han could throttle back and fight it into alignment.

As the flitter resumed its forward trajectory, Han discovered that he was shaking. Sweat was pouring down his face and into the collar of his flight suit. A glance to his right told him that the Dreamweaver was in far worse shape. In fact, the little man had one arm wrapped around his head as if to protect him from horrors unknown, and his eyes were squeezed so tightly shut that not even a Bothan microbe could have wedged its way between his lids.

With a gulp, Han steadied his voice and said, as conversationally as possible, "Enjoying the ride?"

Jorj peeked tentatively out of one eye. He seemed surprised to discover that he and the Corellian were still among the quick rather than the dead. "Captain Solo, I take it back."

"Take what back?"

"Everything. I don't want to make-you famous. I don't want to be rich. I just want to live." His expression held all the hopeful optimism of a starving mynock eyeing an unshielded power cable. "Captain Solo, you wouldn't consider . . . quitting the race?"

Privately, Han was beginning to think that quitting wasn't such a bad idea. Only trouble was, he didn't know how to get out of the flux zone except by flying through it; the preprogrammed course eliminated any other options.

Besides, there was the matter of the one hundred thousand credits.

"Just hang on, Jorj," he said, "we're not through this yet."

Stannis was ahead and slightly to starboard. For some reason, her flitter seemed to be losing headway, or his was gaining; he wasn't sure which. As he closed on her, he realized that she was caught in a fearful headwind that had brought her craft nearly to a standstill, buffeting it while keeping it from moving forward. Han braced himself for the shock of the wind, but to his surprise, he swept past Stannis about forty meters away with no trouble at all. The headwind was so localized that he hadn't even felt it.

Stannis's ship was flung sharply upward as though by an invisible hand. The little craft tumbled and spun, but Stannis fought it back onto course. Only now it was behind Han, and five ships raced along ahead.

No, four. Han counted again. One was missing, apparently a victim of the wind or the waterspout or the maelstrom. Han wasn't certain which pilot had vanished, but he knew it wasn't F'aalfa; for the first time, he was close enough to the pack to spot the sleek black flitter setting the pace for the others.

He swept up on the rearmost flitter, an azure custom job with silver stripes. In the cockpit he saw a mane of turquoise hair: the Ch'thorian, Ch'thonlis. They were over land now, a stretch of rolling earth, unquiet as the sea.

"Okay, kid, here comes the competition," Han sang out, gunning his ship.

He saw the Ch'thorian glance toward him; then the azure ship heeled sharply and its fin glanced off the nose of his flitter. The ship jerked, but Han's grip kept it under control.

Anything goes. He dodged another bump, debating whether to retaliate in kind. Han Solo wasn't one to back down from a fight, and his hot Corellian blood was steaming up toward boiling, but there was something unsettlingly impersonal in this attack. He could see the Ch'thorian's face through the canopy, as well as that of Ch'thonlis's spotter. Both were intent, grim.

Ah, the hell with it, he thought. Han nosed the flitter down, then touched the retros just enough to slow him a bit. His ship slipped into the Ch'thorian's shadow, the blind spot just beneath and a little behind. He chuckled to himself, anger fading, as he thought of pilot and spotter cranking their heads around, trying to figure where he'd gone. He'd just ride there for a while, until--

Jorj's gasp was about a half second behind Han's automatic reaction. As the sheet of fire rose from a crevasse before him, he threw the flitter into a climb, just missing the Ch'thorian's rear fin. Ch'thon'is wasn't so fast; his ship was swallowed by the flames. Even through the canopy, Han felt the searing heat as he fought for altitude, hoping to ride over the blaze.

His Corellian luck held once again. Spotting a notch in the flame, he powered through it. To either side the blaze roared higher than his little ship could climb; as it was, the opening he had sighted pushed the flitter's altitude tolerances to the maximum. He flew through a shimmer of

heatwaves and felt the controls burn in his hands--and then they were through, and chasing the four remaining ships.

Han dared not spare a glance behind. "Jorj , " he said as casually as he could manage, "anybody on our tail?"

Jorj checked. "Yes, Captain Solo. That silver ship seems to have made it through." His voice was strained, rising.

Han's breath came out in a rush of relief, but it was swallowed by a wail from Jorj. "Captain, oh, Captain--I do not wish to perish by fire." The Dreamweaver was white as winter on Hoth, and his hair and beard dripped sweat. Terror had given his voice a pitch audible only to certain canines and sharp-eared Corellians. "Please, I beg you, stay away from flames."

Han was shaky from the last close call, but at least Stannis was safe. He scraped up a jibe: "We just got a little cooked, Jorj; there's probably somethin' worse in store." He grinned. "You wanna get out and walk?"

The Dreamweaver didn't answer. Instead, he closed his eyes and clutched, with the strength of utter despair, at his malfunctioning holorecorder. It no longer emitted even the pathetic beeps of injury; by now, Han noted, it was well and truly dead.

Suddenly, absurdly, Han felt a twinge of sympathy for the little man. Yes, Jorj was stubborn and irritating in his quest to spread Han's face all over the galaxy. But he was at least no coward; his coming along proved that, even though the shocking reality of the Run had stunned him. And he had lost what appeared to be his most precious possession, his livelihood; a decent holorecorder, Han figured, was costly, and Jorj didn't seem to have two credits to rub together.

Annoyed with himself, Han shook his head to clear the errant thoughts. Keep your eyes open, Solo; quit worryin' about this pint-sized picture-taker More trouble comin' up; wonder what this godsforsaken place is gonna throw at us next?

Cold. Abruptly, he was shivering in his flight suit. Then the ships ahead of him lurched and veered from their course. For a moment Han couldn't figure what had happened; then he saw a large white sphere rocket from the sky, barely missing F'aalfa's ship and smashing into the ground with the impact of considerable weight. A shower of the missiles rained down, recoiling off the ships and turning visibility into little more than a

guessing game . The ice spheres were so dense that Han could barely see the flitters only fifty meters in front of him.

Then he, too, was among the ice balls, which cracked against the flitter's sides like tiny explosions. Some of them weren't so tiny at that. A few were half a meter in diameter; these rocked the craft in its flight.

"If one of those things smashes the canopy--" he growled to himself. He hadn't meant to speak aloud, but a whimper from Jorj told him that he had. Han shrugged and concentrated on getting through the ice shower; the Dreamweaver would simply have to fend for himself.

Han was flying blind now, the ice storm so heavy that visibility was nil. Suddenly he was hit with a suspicion; a glance at the altitude read-out confirmed it. He was being driven, pummeled, toward the ground. He slammed the ship upward, hoping that the very air hadn't solidified in front of him. It hadn't. In fact, shortly he was in the clear, the bright light of Salos's twin suns shocking his eyes.

For a moment, he thought that the light had burned a hole in his retina, blanking out part of his vision. He knew that something was missing, but it took him a moment to realize that only two ships raced ahead of him. One was iridescent green; one was black. The Paradise King was still defending his crown. Then the green ship slammed into the black one, hard. The ferocity of the attack shocked Han; by now he had a pretty good idea just how durable the flitters were, and the green pilot seemed to be pushing his luck. But the maneuver nearly worked. F'aalfa's craft heeled sharply, losing about fifteen meters of altitude before the pilot could regain control. The green flitter raced toward the horizon, and victory.

Below, the earth contorted as the tectonic plates beneath its surface danced in the creative agony of the flux. Then the earth split to disgorge a newborn range of needled peaks rising toward the sky in a fast-motion parody of geologic evolution. F'aalfa, still off his pace, saw them in time, but the green pilot didn't. At the last minute, he took evasive action, but his ship slammed into a wall of rock. The concussion was followed immediately by a gout of fire as the flitter's power train exploded.

One ship remained before him on the Paradise Run, but Solo found that he couldn't celebrate. The price of victory was too high, even if he could survive long enough to pay it.

To his right he heard Jorj moaning, "Dear gods, the waste So many lives--"

"Yeah. A waste." When Jorj looked around in surprise, Han covered himself immediately with a brittle shell. "What'd you expect, Jorj? Thought you'd interviewed the survivors-all nine of them."

"Yes, of course. But hearing it from others and seeing it myself . . . well, that's a different matter entirely. Entirely." He raised a face on which tears streamed through the sweat. "Captain, haven't we seen enough?"

Privately, Han agreed, but he was pragmatic enough to know that his own anger and sense of futility would have to take a back seat to reality. "Jorj, for good or ill, we're in this thing 'til the end. Or at least 'til we leave the flux." He checked his distance and velocity readouts. "According to these, we don't have a whole lot farther to go." He paused. "Wonder if Stannis . . ."

He was turning for a check behind them when Jorj screeched, "Look out!"

The scream was enough to jerk Han's eyes back to the terrain before him, and enough to save their lives. At first, Han saw only a gust of flame; as he spun the flitter to skim its side, he realized that it was a spout of molten rock. Stannis's words of the day before came back to him. "Terrific," he muttered. "Time for the volcano dance."

"What, Captain?"

"Never mind."

The heat seared them briefly as they passed, but the flitter flew on, Han mentally praising the sturdy little craft and himself for the hours of work he'd put into it.

Dodging another gout of lava, he spotted the black flitter not far ahead. Without the extra weight he carried, he thought, he could've caught F'aalfa.

"Jorj," he snapped, "I'm gonna slow down a bit. When I do, you pop the canopy and throw out that damned hunk of scrap metal."

"What?" He hugged the machine even tighter, cradling it like the last of his virility. "Do you know what you're asking? Do you know how much this cost?"

"Jorj," Han said as patiently as he could manage, "that machine's dead. And if you don't get rid of it, both it and us're gonna be history. The weight's adding just enough drag to slow us." Fearing another outbreak of hysteria, he prudently didn't add that jettisoning Jorj would remove most

of the load. "Anyway, if we toss that out, we have at least a chance of winnin'--and if we do, I'll buy you a new one. Spacer's word."

Jorj's lips were framed for a "no," but another tower of lava scorched the underside of the flitter. "All right, then, Captain. Slow down."

As the flitter lost velocity, Jorj opened the canopy and, with a wrench of arm and shoulder muscles, tossed the bulky machine out. The hot wind ripped at his hair and clothing and nearly tore the canopy away, but desperation gave him strength and he managed to slam it down again. Han sighed in relief and cut in the high burners.

Immediately, Han felt a slight additional lift and response. Trimming his vectors, he rode into F'aalfa's slipstream, grinning and whooping. "Got you, buddy! Got you now!" For a moment, the other pilots, dead and lost, were forgotten.

He saw F'aalfa glance back over his shoulder with a frown, then roll the black flitter downward, trying to break Han's lock on the slipstream. Han followed him down, still chortling.

The thrill of the chase even got to Jorj: "Oh, Captain, catch him! "

Han's surprise was manifest in his voice. "Don't tell me you're startin' to enjoy this?"

Jorj drew back a bit, then defiantly stuck out his chin--or, rather, his beard. "Well, Captain Solo, if you win, after all, I get a new holorecorder." His eyes widened in hope. "Perhaps it could be one of the new models, the Starlight 49QST? A truly wonderful machine, capable of--"

"Damn!" Han's curse cut him off as F'aalfa suddenly hit his retros. Han yanked the flitter up to avoid the black craft, and as he skimmed over its top, F'aalfa slammed his own ship into its underside. The concussion cracked Han's head against the side of the canopy and threw the flitter upward and sideways. He was wrestling it back into alignment when a second blow threw them aside again. This time the flitter nearly rolled, and it took all Han's strength and coordination to get her upright again.

"Damn you, F'aalfa!" Han slipped the flitter to the left to intercept the black ship, to ram. But at the last moment, he pulled up and dropped back again into the slipstream. He was flushed with anger and the desire for revenge, but controlled himself as he had controlled his craft. "No, buddy," he muttered to the pilot in the black ship, "I ain't playin' your

little game . You try to ram me, I'll dodge you, an' we'll see just who's the better pilot."

Something struck the aft fin, jolting the flitter, and he saw a slab of glowing rock ricochet away. Instinctively, Han reacted before he even saw an obstacle; the flitter cleared the lava spout with a meter to spare. It all happened so quickly that it took Han a moment to realize that the sky before him was empty.

"Jorj, where's F'aalfa?"

"I don't--down there, Captain, to your left!"

The black flitter, its tail fin torn away, was spiraling down. Han fully expected to see an explosion as it hit, but at the last moment, F'aalfa wrestled the tiny craft into something approaching a landing attitude and it plowed on its belly along the turbulent ground, bouncing from hillock to dip until it scraped to a halt. The canopy popped open and F'aalfa climbed awkwardly out, his left arm hanging.

"He's alive!" Jorj yelled.

"Not for long." Cutting in the retros, Han spun the little ship around in a circle above the fallen King, who was trying to stand upright on earth that rumbled and bent beneath his feet.

A flash of silver caught Han's eye and Stannis of Ocho streaked past, far above. Han doubted that she'd even seen the fallen F'aalfa or Han's flitter hovering there.

Jorj, too, caught sight of her passing, but for once he had nothing to say. He merely swiveled his head back and forth, alternating his gaze between the King on the ground and the silver sliver in the sky.

Han hesitated, but just for a moment. A crack, he saw, was opening in the earth only a few meters from F'aalfa, and a hellish glow from its depths bespoke lava rising to the surface. It wouldn't be long before the Paradise King and his ship were engulfed.

Han dropped his flitter so abruptly that Jorj yelled in fear. As he set down near the black flitter, he saw F'aalfa's pale face, rigid with pain, open in amazement; then Han popped the canopy, hopped out and raced to the King.

"C'mon, kid! " he snapped. "We're gettin' outta here! "

Gripping his injured arm with his right hand, F'aalfa started stumbling toward the waiting flitter, but halted. "Don't be crazy; those things can't carry three. You'll crash for sure."

"You're skinny and Jorj's small, you'll fit. Han emphasized his order with a shove. Now shut up and move."

The ground was alive beneath his boot soles and it was all he could do to stay erect. A seismic convulsion threw them against the side of the flitter. Then Jorj's hands were dragging at F'aalfa, hauling him into the cockpit. Han vaulted in after him, landing atop both of the others. F'aalfa was right; they'd never fit.

A sheet of lava erupted from the widening crevasse, its heat scorching the hairs on his arms and head. The hell with it. He slammed the canopy closed, in the process giving F'aalfa a good crack, and hit the controls. The overloaded flitter groaned into the air just as the ground gave way beneath it and that hellish liquid rock swept over the place where it had rested.

There was no time even to catch a breath. Just ahead rose a curtain of lava, stretching from side to side as far as his eye could see and far too high for the overburdened flitter to vault.

In the spotter seat F'aalfa and Jorj, tumbled together, were silent--resigned, Han suspected, to a fiery fate. He wasn't too sure they weren't right.

"Y'know," he said, "that lava doesn't look too thick. We might be able to fly right through it." His only response was a double groan.

He debated circling until the curtain fell--in this malleable world it was bound to happen eventually--but realized that they would probably run into something equally unpleasant, something that their overweight craft could not dodge. Better the evil you know . . . , he reflected.

Han took a deep breath and sent out a prayer to all the Corellian gods he'd neglected in the past few years. He also added a benison or two to a few other deities he'd heard of; if ever there was a time to be ecumenical, this was it. Then he plunged the flitter into the fiery curtain.

Blinded by the lava, Han could only hang onto the controls with desperate strength as the ship pitched, thrown about on gusts of molten rock. Then,

suddenly, the lava was gone and the flitter, scorched and hot to the touch, was flying in open air.

Beneath was an ocean: calm, a very ordinary blue, and the most welcome sight that had ever greeted Han's eyes. They had passed through the flux.

And far, far ahead, a bit of silver winked in sunlight that was fading to red. Dusk was nearly upon them.

Han pushed the flitter to its limits and beyond, but he knew it wouldn't be enough. Stannis of Ocho would make the finish line with time to spare, but he doubted that he and his passengers would limp in before dark.

"Captain--" Jorj's voice was tentative. "Captain, if you set me down here, you might be able to catch her. You can send a groundcar back to pick me up."

"He's right," F'aalfa added. "Drop me, too. Gods, one of us should get that money."

Han's heat-scorched face crinkled slowly into a grin. "Hell, no. We're all in this together. We may get back a little late, but we'll get back."

A hundred thousand credits makes a tidy load, Han thought as the prize, encased in several jeweled caskets, was handed over to the new Paradise King--or, rather, Queen. Stannis of Ocho looked queenly indeed with her silver hair unbound, her sky-blue jumpsuit open to just beyond the point of respectability. Han sighed. She was one fine-looking woman, all right, and now a rich one as well. And he was facing a showdown with Chewie, who had sent a message that he was en route back to town. The Wookiee would give him hell for betting their emergency fund, Han knew, and an irate Wookiee was nothing to sneer at. He winced at the thought.

"That's a lotta woman," said F'aalfa. His left arm was encased in a pressure brace; under the bombardment of its healing rays, the shattered bone had already started to knit.

"Yeah." Han's voice was almost Wistful. Almost. He could admire her hair and her body and her lovely face, but now her cold beauty seemed just that -- cold. She seemed not to care that so many had died to ensure her victory; she had collected her prize calmly and with grace, but with no acknowledgment of the casualties.

"Hey, Solo." F'aalfa's voice was uncertain. When Han turned to face him, the younger man lowered his head and, scuffing at the dirt with the toe of his boot, murmured, "I just wanna say I'm really sorry about tryin' to ram you. Habit, I guess. Everybody does it."

"Yeah." Han shook off his serious mood. "Hell, it was the Run, right? Anythin' goes." He laughed suddenly, with surprise and true joy, the laugh of a survivor. "It sure did!"

F'aalfa laughed, too, and slung his good arm around the Corellian's shoulders. "Hey, Han, how about a drink,'"

"You buyin'?"

"We I. . . ." F'aalfa checked the pockets of his jumpsuit and came up with empty hands. "I'm a little short right now . . ."

Behind them, a voice chirped "I'll be delighted to stand for a round or two. "

"Jorj! Where've you been?"

"Talking with Stannis, Captain Solo. She wants me to create a holo-feature about her. Do you know that she has won several other high-stakes races? At any rate, she has hired me as her personal holo consultant. She has even agreed to buy me a new recorder--the top of the line! And she gave me an advance on my salary." His grin was broad enough to split his face in two, Han thought with amusement.

"Well," Han said, "Since you're the one with the money, seems only fair that you buy the drinks. Hell, ask your boss to join us when she's finished playin' the fame game."

Arm in arm, the three men started off through the last crowds of a fading Festival. As they turned a corner, Han's voice came floating back, "And if you wanna see somethin' interestin', stick around. I got a partner I'd like you to meet..."

END

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