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Precious Possessions
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Sweet-scented air streamed into the cockpit as soon as the X-wing's canopy angled upward. For a moment, Luke stayed in his flight seat, almost overcome by fatigue after the long trip and sheer amazement at the lush verdancy unfolding all around him.

Before his inner sight, the frying deserts of Tatooine still burned, and the desolation of the wastelands seemed to cling to him. Perhaps that was why the pacific idyll that sprawled copiously around the landing pad felt wholly unreal, like a fevered dream sprung by the fierce heat over the Dune Sea. Luke rubbed a hand over his eyes. Stars, he was tired. But at the same time, expectation shot chilling adrenaline into his veins. The Resort of Cha Br, was his last chance.

Shutting down all systems, Luke stripped the flightsuit off his civilian clothes and with a muttered reassurance for Artoo climbed from the cockpit. This far on the edge of the Outer Rim, Imperial patrols were scarce, and the planet's natural resources too scant to attract the regime's greed. Besides, Imperial patrols operated under orders of tracking down Rebel assault groups, not lone fighters. Even if the pilot happened to be Luke Skywalker, son of –

He clamped down hard on the thought. This wasn't the time to lower his guard and turn his attention inward, with that fitful suspicion threatening to grow chronic. He'd come here for a simple purpose, and if everything worked out, he'd be gone again before mid-day.

As he wandered away from the landing pad, Luke made himself focus on his immediate surroundings. A stretch of tangling vegetation, carefully planted to shield the port facilities from view, made way to well-tended

gardens on the settlement's outskirts. Going by appearances alone, he might have dropped from hyperspace into the middle of an era untouched by space travel. Between profuse greenery reclined sprawling villas, and timber-built townhouses lined the paved streets as he headed for the town center. Only a few silhouettes moved in the jade and bronze shine of dawn, most of them vendors setting up their stalls along the road that led to the market place.

Ingrained habits of stealth took over before Luke could give it any thought. Blending into all kinds of environments became second nature to every Rebel officer sooner or later, yet too many months had passed since his last assignment, and recent seclusion on Tatooine made him uncomfortably aware of his effort to move inconspicuously.

In the market place, the first rounds of barter had already commenced as the morning brightened. Sleepless citizens drifted between the stalls, their entourage of droids and household servants in tow. Though the populace of Cha Br, was mostly humanoid, Luke noticed an Ithorian who twisted his leathery neck to inspect a selection of glimfruit. Several diminutive Barrodes from Tulmein skittered around a jeweler's cart. Spicy, exotic scents filled the cool morning air.

Luke strolled around the edge of the market place at a controlled tempo. All around the enclosure, two-storeyed houses had been built in stone, their walls overgrown with lush creepers. Star-shaped white blossoms emitted a fragrance so sweet and sharp, it stung in his eyes. He paused, hitching a quick breath. How long since he'd looked at flowering things other than the medical herbs grown in the hydroponics bay of a Rebel frigate? The resplendent tranquility of Cha Br, struck him unprepared, and his chest tightened with unadmitted needs. So beautiful. So alive. Except that it wasn't real.

Tilting his head, Luke sent a glance up into the silvery dome that might have been open sky. Though he knew them to be there, the transparent support structures disappeared in the light that filtered through the vaporous atmosphere above the invisible roof. More than two thirds of the small planet were barren wastes, livened only by the fumes that wafted from volcano craters and bubbling sulfur springs into the methane-rich air. But the colonists who'd traveled so far out from the industrious core of the galaxy, centuries before, had taken the hostile climate as a challenge. Within a decade, they'd constructed several Resorts, settlements sheltered from geothermic activity in deep crags that ran around the equator, domed by lofty clearsteel cupolas. Embedded deep in the rock worked powerful atmosphere generators to supply breathable air while banks of solar reflectors enhanced the weak spill of natural daylight. All organic building materials and vegetation, even fertile soil

had to be imported, to sustain this perfectly styled idyll, but curiosity had attracted rich adventurers from all over, and their affluence turned a bizarre experiment into a prosperous green haven. Within these enclaves thrived strange dream worlds, offering an escape for the most wealthy eccentrics of the galaxy.

"Good day to you, stranger," a voice addressed Luke in slightly stilted Basic. "You're here for the auction, I presume?"

He looked up at a tall, lanky Whiphid, wrapped in dark robes, and nodded. "It hasn't started yet, has it?"

"There's still time." The Whiphid's wide mouth stretched into an amiable smile. "Shall I show you the way?"

Though Luke would have preferred to slip in unnoticed, he could think of no plausible reason to refuse the polite offer. The Whiphid's mane glistened like hoar-frost under the rapidly strengthening light as they crossed the market place.

Together they entered a vaulted timber structure. Daylight fell in broad streaks across the wooden benches arranged around a slightly raised platform. Luke picked up an auction list and chose a place at the back of the hall, close by the exit.

"Anything on it that's of special interest to you?" the Whiphid inquired courteously.

Still scanning the list, Luke made a noncommittal noise. An instant later, his glance fell on the fifteenth item, and his heartbeat picked up speed. 'Atlit crystals, selection of fourteen, minimum bid: 5000, ran the specifications.

"I think I'll just wait and see if something catches my eye," he answered, careful to keep his tone neutral. Those crystals were his sole reason for attending the auction, but admitting as much would most likely prompt more questions than he was willing to answer.

"If your tastes run to fine art, you certainly won't be disappointed." The Whiphid seated himself and smoothed back his whiskers.

Within minutes, the hall filled up, and a buzz of agitated murmurs rose into the high vault. Luke leaned back against the wall and studied the gathering, the omnipresent splendor of jewels, fineries and ornate robes in strange contrast with the rustic furnishings of the place. Although no more than a hundred beings had filed into the hall, he felt crowded and

for long moments wrestled with the temptation to draw on the Force and use it to deflect unwanted attention. It had crept up on him in Anchorhead and Bestine, when after weeks of strict isolation he'd walked among the local farmers and traders who slanted suspicious glances at the figure in the ragged brown cloak.

But nobody was looking his way now. To the motley populace of Cha Br., he was one more traveler in plain black clothes. Not a Rebel hero, a hunted criminal, or a half-trained Jedi.

On impulse, his hand went to the metallic tube he carried in an inside pocket of his overcoat. Cool, solid, perfectly lifeless. Luke almost flinched as his fingers brushed the smooth surface. He'd grown so used to the faint tingle of dormant energy from his lightsaber that even now, five months after the loss, its absence still jarred him.

Not much longer, he told himself, setting his teeth. He'd prove that he possessed at least that one, crucial skill, technical though it was. All he missed was the focusing crystal.

Constructing a new Jedi weapon had confronted him with a myriad little problems and riddles, but he'd solved them all with dogged determination, channeling every thought and feeling into the completion of the task he'd set for himself. He'd handled his father's lightsaber often enough to know the weight and balance and the pattern formed by its control buttons instinctively; he'd even taken it apart once, though with some trepidation, to study its inner mechanisms. And since that day, he'd known that the heart of the lightsaber was a faceted crystal. The one thing that neither Engineering nor Alliance labs could provide.

When he'd returned to Tatooine, two months earlier, Luke had hoped to find a replacement in Ben's house, or at least instructions, notes, anything that would point him to the crystal's origin and reveal its special properties, but there was nothing. And without it, the lightsaber he'd constructed remained a useless assemblage of components and circuits.

A sudden quiet fell all around him and brought Luke back to the present. Protocol droids were carrying artefacts to the stage where a Sullustian auctioneer surveyed the audience and when every conversation had finally trailed off, launched into a laconic greeting.

"You're all eager to see what we've collected to please your exacting tastes," the Sullustian said, "therefore, if everyone is familiar with the procedures, we shall begin right away."

The first object brought to the edge of the platform was a painting by a proto-realist from Meldooine. To Luke, it looked as if someone had left

muddy footprints on a triangular canvas sheet, but the audience evidently possessed better knowledge of the piece's worth. Enthusiastic bids flew back and forth until the painting was eventually sold at the incredible price of 403,000 credits. The auctioneer stroked his heavy jowls and began praising the extraordinary beauty of an ancient vase, excavated in bits and pieces by an audacious group of archeologists on Plinth.

Before too long, Luke's attention began to waver, and his mind zigzagged halfway across the galaxy, from one star system to the next, as he retraced the steps that had taken him here.

He'd started the hunt on the largest mining world of the Outer Rim, but as he grew more desperate, he'd dared to venture as far into the Core as the shipyards of Corellia. A variety of propulsion systems used complex crystals, and the Corellian ship designers employed a host of experts in crystallography. Disguised as a flight tech, he'd visited the vast orbital facilities, now claimed for the Imperial fleet's exclusive use.

There was a bitter irony in the fact, Luke thought, that his first visit to Han's homeworld had been prompted by sheer desperation. He'd never set foot on the planet either, but when he'd looked at Corellia from orbit, mesmerized by the glitter of vast oceans beneath feathery clouds, he could almost feel Han's shadow at his shoulder.

The spurious reassurance lasted only until he viewed the datatape which a nondescript engineer had slipped him in a crowded corridor. Once again, he'd drawn a blank, and the data compiled by Corellian techs had seemed to confirm his worst fears.

Before Palpatine's ascent to power, the crystals traditionally used for lightsabers had been mined on several Core worlds. But once the Emperor started his campaign against the Jedi knighthood, he'd given orders to confiscate all unsold stocks and effectively closed down the mines within the first year of the Purge.

At this point of studying the datatape, Luke had felt defeat creep up on him like a deep frost, and for minutes he'd stared blindly at the small screen. Until he noticed the memo someone had pulled from the crystallographers' files.

Similar properties, it read, have been discovered in the so-called 'atlit stones from Cha Br,. Extent of deposit and mining conditions unknown.

Aware that he was clutching at the most flimsy straw, Luke had run a library search for additional information, but the databanks yielded preciously little. While there seemed to be no organized mining activities

on the Outer Rim world, 'atlit crystals had sometimes been sold at the monthly auctions held for the wealthy colonists' entertainment. All that remained was to determine the scheduled date of the next auction.

Luke tensed when a round of applause greeted the Bothan matron who cradled a pliski statuette in her fleshy arms. The fourteen 'atlit crystals were the next item on the list.

"Now, gentlebeings," the Sullustian started in wooing tones, "we will commend something very rare to your kind attention. They may look like simple glitterstones--"

There, a commotion near the hall's entrance interrupted him and sent murmurs rippling through the audience.

Like everyone else, Luke craned his neck and discovered that the arrival of another wealthy customer had caused the stir. A humanoid of medium height with long, shimmering hair glided gracefully inside, swaying motions accented by the opulent folds of embroidered brocade robes. The rounded face was soft and the skin shading from pink to lavender, but the pronounced jut of the chin suggested that the latecomer was male. While proceeding down one of the aisles without haste, he nodded greetings left and right and spared a gracious smile for the auctioneer who bowed deeply.

His mind entirely on the crystals, Luke took a step forward, impatient for the auction to continue. From the seat in front of him, the Whiphid turned and motioned him to lean closer.

"That's Nev Jenvr," he whispered in conspiratorial tones. "His wealth is practically immeasurable."

"I see," Luke murmured back.

His hands went cold as the Sullustian resumed his speech and called out the minimum bid. Five thousand credits seemed like a rather exaggerated price for a handful of ordinary-looking crystals, but Luke doubted they could capture the interest of such an excessively rich clientele. All the same, he barely stopped himself from offering a bid at once. If he appeared too eager, someone else might be prompted to bid against him just for the competition.

The whispers that rose here and there in the audience seemed to express disinterest, and the Sullustian had just opened his mouth again to encourage offers when a languid voice said, "All right then, I'll have them for ten."

It was Nev Jenvr who'd placed his bid without raising his voice. Luke cleared his throat.

"Eleven," he said guardedly.

"That's the spirit, young man!" the Sullustian boomed. "Eleven thousand from--"

"Twenty," Jenvr stopped him in that same lazy tone.

Luke felt the sweat break out between his shoulderblades. He paused for a breath and convinced himself that the air hadn't really grown any hotter and stuffier over the past minute. "Twenty-five," he said.

This time, Jenvr turned to appraise his competitor, and Luke thought he saw mocking humor sparkle in the wide, dark eyes. "Let's not get provincial," he said amiably. "How does thirty sound?"

While the Sullustian beamed with enthusiasm, Luke made an effort to keep his expression unrevealing. Thirty thousand exceeded the limits of his financial possibilities, but he'd raise the money somehow.

"Thirty-two," Luke countered, his mouth dry, and the words seemed to linger in the leaden air over several seconds. Everyone else seemed to be holding their breath as well.

"Oh, dear." Jenvr sighed and directed his next words at the auctioneer. "Fifty thousand, friend Pedalko, now wrap them up nicely for me, will you?"

Polite applause went up as he rose to claim the crystals, though whispers and a few snickers merged through it. Jenvr gave a cheerful wave of his beringed hand.

And it was over.

Numbed, Luke leaned back and fought a spell of dizzying disbelief. This couldn't be happening. Not after all the months he'd spent searching for the right crystals. There were three more items on the auction list, but he left the hall as soon as the crowd's attention centered on the stage once again.

For a long time, he wandered around town in a daze, peripherally aware of the citizens galling through the streets. No lightsaber, not until the mines in the Core could be reclaimed, or a different source for serviceable crystals could be located. Instinctive protest sent a hot flare through him. He balled his hands tight.

But why is it so important? he heard Leia ask him in the cautious tone she'd so often employed over the past months.

The construction of a new lightsaber ranked low on her list of pressing concerns, headed by the need to find and free Han before the Rebel Alliance's plans for a major offensive reached critical stage. And it wasn't as if they disagreed on priorities, Luke thought. Mildly concerned by his preoccupation, Leia had suggested that he'd become a little obsessed with the lightsaber. Perhaps it served as a focus to heal some of his emotional wounds, she'd implied with gentle circumspection, but he couldn't let those needs assume control over him.

Luke released a slow, deep breath. Leia was right about his crippled self-esteem, more than she could possibly know. But building the new saber wouldn't bring back the ignorant farmboy nor the confident Rebel pilot. It had nothing to do with resuming his life, and everything with who he might become. It would be something entirely his own. And only when he'd accomplished this, he felt, could he face Yoda again.

Sometimes, in his dreams, Luke saw a luminous blade swing towards him. It shone in pale green like lightning that sliced through the jungles of Yavin Four. Each time, when he caught it in his hand, he knew a sense of balance, a cleansing intensity that filled him with a lightheaded gladness. And each time, when he woke up, clear knowledge shadowed the edges of his dream.

Without a new lightsaber, he'd never rescue Han, but this was something he couldn't explain to Leia or anyone else, not even Chewie, whose trust in him seemed virtually unlimited. Though right now, he wasn't doing much to deserve that faith.

Luke paused in his tracks and when he surveyed his surroundings, found himself in a district dominated by sprawling villas and gardens with an ambition to grow into parks. Most of the gates and portals were decorated with intricate wood carvings, but the cultivated quaintness had lost all its charm over the past hour. Luke rubbed a hand over his face and listened into silence, relieved only by the distant trilling of birds.

Not so long ago, time had reeled past in the grip of constant excitements. Now it was an empty stretch, bled dry of possibilities.

He'd failed. Again.

Annoyance warmed the pit of his stomach a moment later. There wasn't any reason to give up before he'd really tried. So Jenvr had outbid him at the

auction without effort, but what would he use the crystals for? Perhaps he'd be willing to resell them, or at least one of them, Luke argued against the paralyzing sense of defeat. A single crystal was all he needed.

His mind made up, Luke stopped a household droid who approached from the opposite direction, pushing a wooden wheelbarrow. He almost smiled at the incongruous sight.

"Excuse me, could you perhaps tell me where Nev Jenvr lives?" Luke asked. The Resort wasn't large, and at the auction, everyone had seemed to know the man.

The droid angled his torso back to appraise him and process his request which took just under a second. "Certainly, sir," he said. "It isn't far, approximately 1,200 meters, if you take the shortcut through Aster Close."

Following his meticulous instructions, Luke reached Jenvr's residence ten minutes later. Through the wrought-iron gate, he could see a villa of palatial proportions, its outline concealed in part by clusters of flowering trees. Luke reached for the brass doorbell without hesitation. Jenvr might not have returned yet, but in that case, he would simply wait. He had nothing else to do anyway.

To his surprise, the large gates swung open within a second. He walked up the gravel path thinking that either Jenvr was particularly unconcerned about his own security or he had a clandestine army of bodyguards and marksmen on the premises.

The protocol droid who opened the door for him resembled Threepio, except for the facial expression, which had been designed to an appearance of low-lidded calculation.

"I'd like to see your master," Luke said, prepared to argue if needs be, but the droid was most accommodating.

"Please step in, sir," a melodious, distinctly feminine voice answered. "Who shall I announce?"

So Jenvr was back. Luke felt subliminal tension crawl up his spine. "Just tell him the man who bid against him at the auction would like to talk to him."

"As you wish."

Left to himself in the hallway, Luke cast a glance around. Between potted plants placed on twirled pillars, the oddest collection of artefacts he'd ever seen filled every niche and arch, complemented by the heavy folds of embroidered draperies and gold-fringed curtains. Vases, statuettes and a handful of abstract objects congregated in every recess, and in some places, floating holo sculptures added their glitters to the glow of polished stone, shimmerplast and gold-leaf. Luke took it all in with growing puzzlement.

Four years ago, as a farmhand on Tatooine, he might have been reduced to open-mouthed gawking by such an imposing display of wealth. But since then, he'd learned enough to tell a Nembu wood-idol from an ordinary groundroot, and judicious collecting from hodgepodge acquisition, even if the intricacies of Meldooiin proto-realism still escaped him. Jenvr's tastes definitely leaned towards the hodgepodge end of the spectrum.

Perhaps, Luke thought, this gaudy mixture had been assembled to make an impression on business partners hailing from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Surely Jenvr's living quarters would be furnished with some more taste and restraint. But when the droid returned and escorted him to a wide parlor in the villa's southern wing, Luke saw at once that he'd been wrong.

If anything, the parlor was even more cluttered, every space of wall taken up by paintings of every size, the lavish furniture thrown together from at least a dozen different styles. In a corner, a small fountain gurgled to itself.

"Let me take your coat, sir," the droid said with a lascivious undertone that would have scandalized Threepio.

"Thank you," Luke murmured absently. Maybe it was the moisture farmer in him, recoiling from such an indiscriminate amassment of trappings, but he couldn't afford letting it distract him any longer.

"Come on in," Jenvr's voice invited from the far side of the parlor where he lounged on a purple sofa of vast proportions. "I'd expected you."

"Really." Luke crossed the room in resolute strides. "Thank you for seeing me," he added, "I appreciate it."

"Not a busy day." Jenvr leaned back comfortably and watched him with an indulgent smile. "Any refreshments?"

"No, thank you." At a gesture from his host, Luke lowered himself into a large armchair that resembled a carnivorous mushroom, his eyes still on Jenvr.

Back at the auction, he'd been too intent on buying the crystals to notice more than Jenvr's general features. Now, a single glance showed that the questionable term 'humanoid' hardly applied. Beyond the unusual skin shade, an even deeper lavender in the muted lighting of the parlor, the small, flat shape of Jenvr's nostrils and the rounded ears that poked through his hair at the top of his head, proclaimed him the member of an alien race Luke had never heard of before. When Jenvr reached for his cup on the table, Luke added an unusual number of extremities to the list. From the concealing folds of ornate robes and wide sleeves, another hand slid forward, while a fourth moved for the decanter. Fleeting, Luke wondered if it was correct to refer to the alien as 'he'; there were transgender races after all. "I'm Luke Skywalker," he introduced himself, searching for an adequate way of presenting his request, "from Tatooine."

"Ah." Jenvr shuddered theatrically. "Terrible place. So... austere."

"It is that, but you learn to live with it." Luke paused for a breath. "I made this trip only for a single reason, and that's what brings me--" He didn't get any further.

"I know why you're here." Jenvr smiled again, long lashes sweeping down over his emerald eyes. "It's not unusual for people to approach me in private after an auction. You've come to talk about the 'atlit crystals, right?"

"That's right." Tension began clogging in the pit of Luke's stomach, but he kept it in check. So far, Jenvr had been sympathetic enough, and the range of his possessions gave Luke hope that parting with a single crystal wouldn't come too hard. Still, it was probably wiser not to ask for it outright. "I hadn't expected anyone else to bid for the crystals," he hedged. "What do you use them for?"

Jenvr shrugged. "I don't know. Is there any real use for them?"

Baffled, Luke stared back at him. "You pay fifty thousand credits for something that's of no use to you?" he asked before he could consider.

"Well, pretty things have a use of their own," Jenvr qualified in a pleasant tone. "They delight the senses and sometimes even keep people off wringing each other's necks. They're not entirely useless, you see."

Forcing startlement aside, Luke tried to adopt a point of view Leia might have called decadent. "You bought the crystals because they appeal to you?"

"I might have, but they're not much to look at, are they?" The alien chuckled, though the sound was more like a throaty purr, surrounding him in a hum of complacency. "Pedalko's certainly right about the resemblance to glitterstones."

Luke shook his head. "Then why did you buy them?"

Instead of answering him, Jenvr clapped two hands together, and the protocol droid reappeared in moments. Her audioreceptors had to be finely tuned.

"Fetch me a print of our 'atlit acquisition list, would you, CeeCee?" Jenvr said. "For three years, I've bought every one of them," he added, turning back to Luke, "and this is the first time someone bothers to challenge my bid. You realize that your intervention cost me forty thousand credits."

"Then let me make up for your loss," Luke said on impulse. "Let me buy one of them back."

"I wouldn't call it a loss. If my little plan works out, it will prove to be a reasonable investment."

Once more, Jenvr had evaded the question. Luke worked on a look of polite interest while his frustration climbed another notch. Before he could repeat his offer, the droid reappeared with a sheaf of printouts.

"See for yourself," Jenvr invited.

Luke pushed out of the confining armchair and studied the prints with less than comprehension. Jenvr was clearly hoarding crystals he'd bought at an average of 300 credits apiece. Nobody else wanted them. They served no apparent use.

"As I said," his hoast continued, "I consider them an investment. They're rare, and that's a fact. One of the mysterious laws of the galactic market dictates that rare commodities always turn out the greatest profit."

"Even if they're of no use?" Luke stacked the printouts on the table to mask his impatience.

"Well, I'll admit it usually works the other way round... but not always." Jenvr gave a sigh, his eyes growing distant. "I remember when mudsnails went into fashion, and all because some baroness on Sullust served them to her illustrious guests at a party. They didn't taste particularly well, in fact, they barely tasted of anything at all, but their price soared in a matter of weeks." His upper left hand rose to smooth back the fine, bright hair that had a tendency to flare around Jenvr's face as if electrified. "Once the topline stock brokers realize I'm investing in 'atlit crystals," he went on, "they're going to wonder why. They mightn't have a clue what to do with the things, but they'll assume I've got a good reason for buying them. Someone might even start researching the crystals' properties for potential usage."

Luke placed the prints back carefully. And then they'll discover what the Corellian engineers found out, he thought uneasily. Should he tell Jenvr what he knew? When he looked back at his host, emerald eyes studied him with a shrewd expression.

"You haven't answered my question," Jenvr remarked. "Is there any use for these stones?"

"If I tell you," Luke asked back, "will you sell one of them to me?" His pulse quickened as he braced himself for the answer.

Jenvr considered him a moment longer. "No," he finally said, his tone reverting to a laconic drawl, "no, I don't think so. I think my little gambit's going to work so much better if they remain a mystery for a little while longer. Unless your information guarantees instant profit."

Hardly, Luke thought with a sinking feeling. Lightsabers had gone out of demand long ago, and if the Empire caught wind of this, Jenvr's stocks would most likely be confiscated. "Look," he said with more force than he'd intended, "I'm not a businessman. I just need one single crystal, and I'm willing to pay for it."

"You had your chance at the auction. Now they're not for sale anymore." The smile still hovered on Jenvr's mouth, but Luke could sense pronounced disinterest right behind it. Most likely, Jenvr's mind was already wandering to the next transaction.

"I'd be willing to pay half of what you paid for all fourteen stones today," Luke offered nonetheless.

"I'm sorry, no." Jenvr clapped his hands again, his expression unruffled and slightly bored. "Enjoy your stay, Mr. Skywalker. Or come back for the next auction, why don't you? CeeCee will show you to the door."

Luke walked away from the estate in long strides. Damn Jenvr for his arrogance, his credit-clouded indifference. There was too much hanging in balance to give up now; the mere thought shot a sting of angry heat into his gut.

Briefly, Luke wondered if he should have chosen a different approach and plead his cause with amplified melodramatics. I'll never be a Jedi without a new lightsaber, and another man's life might depend on it. Pathetic. And if nothing else, the conversation had demonstrated that their reasoning was based on entirely incompatible principles. Appeals to Jenvr's charity weren't likely to make a dent in his business schemes.

Han might have been able to deal with him, Luke thought now, a reluctant smile tugging his mouth as he recalled the way Han could activate his professional charm in two seconds flat and fast-talk his way into the far corners of people's brains. Luke pushed his hands deep into his pockets as he fought off the familiar sweep of anguish. He could almost see Han, leaning back with folded arms, a lopsided grin starting in one corner of his mouth.

So what if this guy won't sell, it's an emergency. Force a few locks and grab one of those crystals. He's rich. He won't even notice.

If there'd been half a chance it could work, Luke admitted to himself, he might have considered that option. Adamant as the Rebel Alliance remained about political ethics, they'd all been forced to apply more flexible morals when it came to procuring badly needed materiel. Unfortunately, breaking into a residence such as Jenvr's required time and specialized skills he didn't possess, and locating his 'atlit stores among vast quantities of sundry paraphernalia might prove an impossibility altogether.

I could make it an exercise in mind control, Luke reflected sardonically, and prove whose son I really am.

A faint chill trailed all the way down his back. Thoughts such as this sometimes crept up on him at random, as if shaped by someone else's mind. Arrogant, spiteful and thoroughly disillusioned. There'd been a time when it filled his mind to overload, an endless spiral winding up tighter and tighter until every feeling was drawn into it. Vader's son.

For a while, that truth had threatened to blot out the world, but reality caught up eventually and moored him with ties of friendship and necessity. There were Leia and Chewie and the shared purpose that forged a greater closeness between them than any battle before. Without this, Luke knew, he might never have found the strength to assimilate the truth about

himself and draw his own conclusions. But he'd come too close to choking on self-pity several months ago, a mistake he wasn't going to repeat.

Luke paused to draw a deep breath and concentrate on the problem at hand while he directed his steps towards the town center.

No matter how much he offered in credits, Jenvr would refuse to sell, but perhaps he could be baited with something else. His collection of trinkets suggested the most eclectic taste, and there was no telling what might capture his fancy. Researching his background and private habits could provide helpful clues, Luke decided and for the first time since that morning felt a stir of optimism.

By a roundabout route, he returned to the market place where business continued in boisterous disarray. While some stalls were closing down, new vendors drifted in with large trays and wooden carts. Supplies, Luke thought incoherently as he watched.

It should have occurred to him hours ago. There were two sides to every deal, and it made far better sense to approach the dealer instead of the buyer. Reluctant as the Sullustian might be to disclose a business secret, perhaps he could be commissioned to procure additional crystals. Wending his way through the crowd, Luke headed for the auction hall.

By the back entrance, a tall PC5 droid supervised the loading of several crates onto an antigrav sled. He assured Luke that Master Pedalko planned to stay for a few more days and would certainly receive him tomorrow.

That response settled several matters at once. He'd have to sleep over, but before he started looking for a place to spend the night, Luke returned to the port facilities. His next check-in call from Lando was due in under six hours, and to receive it here, he needed to register his frequency and get his comlink hooked up with the local comnet.

Solar reflectors painted a golden afternoon glow across the paved streets when he walked back into town one more time. The municipal library had closed its doors two hours ago which meant that reading up on Jenvr's achievements and activities would have to wait until the next morning as well. Luke shrugged to himself. He felt restless and weary at the same time and much too keyed up to call it an early night. Someone of Jenvr's caliber was likely to create endless gossip in a community as small as this. He'd start his inquiries in the portside bars where gossip was always part of the service.

On waking up, Luke had trouble to remember where he was. His back felt vaguely sore, and thick membranes of sleep still swathed his mind. When he blinked his eyes, he found himself fully dressed and slouched in a large armchair opposite the bed. A single glowsphere spilled a pool of yellow light around him. He'd picked the most modest-looking establishment he could find, but even so, the room was luxurious with its handcarved furniture and woven hangings on every wall.

Luke swallowed dryly and tried to muster enough energy to get up for a glass of water. He'd toured the bars and taverns for several hours, forced to drink more than he liked, since no bartender in the galaxy ever told tales without a filled glass in front of his customer.

What he'd managed to find out about Nev Jenvr amounted to a jumble of exaggerated anecdotes that complicated the picture instead of clarifying it. But the bottom line summed up as untold riches and little brains. Jenvr enjoyed a reputation of idiotic luck, which was just another way of saying that nobody had a reasonable explanation for his dramatic financial successes. None of it advanced his half-formed plans, and Luke could only hope that the library would yield more concrete information tomorrow.

When he tried to shift to a more comfortable position, he remembered why he'd fallen asleep in the chair. He'd been waiting for Lando's call.

A quick glance at the chrono informed him that Lando was by now four hours overdue, and even though there'd been delays before, Luke had to suppress a flash of alarm. As one of the hired guards in Jabba's residence on Tatooine, Lando had to be careful. He couldn't risk to blow his cover by making unexplained subspace calls, Luke repeated to himself and felt his irritation rekindle all the same. At least it served to energize him somewhat.

Pushing to his feet, he undressed and went for a shower in a refresher unit that sparkled with titanium and jasper trimmings. A few minutes later, he stretched out on the bed, wrapped in a soft robe. Everything felt remote and completely unreal. The copious luxury that taunted him with memories of Jenvr's refusal and indifference, the security of this anonymous room, even the comfortable drowsiness sprawling through his body.

What am I doing? he thought as he closed his eyes. Where will I go from here?

A dream jerked him back awake after what seemed like mere minutes. Motionless in the dark that seemed to swing and sway around him, Luke listened to the frantic pounding of his heart and tried to make sense of

the terror that lingered in every part of his body. His right hand was balled tight around nothing, and the frying heat of Tatooine's desert still seemed to play over his skin.

No lightsaber, he thought dazedly, there was a fight, and I didn't have it. Where the nightmare came from was ridiculously obvious, but that knowledge faltered before the flood of sights and sounds crashing back into his mind. The blinding intensity of glittering sands, Han stumbling backwards against the skiff's railing as a laserblast caught him in the chest, Chewbacca's ear-splitting howl...

Luke unclenched his hand slowly. I won't let it happen.

The comlink's whistle cut into his efforts to separate dream from reality and unadmitted fears from sensible circumspection. He lunged for it and slapped on the lighting panel at the same time.

"Lando?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yeah, sure, it's me," came the slightly puzzled reply. "Something wrong?"

Luke inhaled deeply. "I fell asleep waiting for your call," he answered. "Any news?"

"Same as always." While Lando's tone didn't reveal more than perfunctory regret, his voice had a strangely hollow ring to it. A transmission problem, Luke wondered, or the place Lando was calling from?

"Jabba's still cruising the Huttese colonies," the other man continued. "Seems like he's determined to visit every relative or business contact in his book before he comes home." The echoic sound seemed to grow more distinct with every word.

"Where are you now?" Luke asked.

"Sounds like I'm calling from the Kessel mines, does it?" Lando chuckled. "I'm on Ryloth, at least a mile underground, but I can hear you fine."

"You're supposed to stay on Tatooine!" Luke snapped.

"Hey, relax," Lando returned in unperturbed, though slightly bemused tones. "Our beloved master Bib Fortuna doesn't expect Jabba back anytime soon. So he sent me on a quick trip to deliver some presents to his family. Cute, huh?"

"Very." Luke swallowed another sharp retort. In his present position, Lando could hardly refuse orders and hope to remain inconspicuous, but it was still unsettling to think that Jabba might arrive in his absence.

"So how're things working out for you?" Lando asked. "Got those crystals?"

"Not yet." In dispassionate tones, Luke gave him an abbreviated rundown of the last day's events.

"What's your local time?" Lando asked when he'd finished.

Luke checked his chrono and realized that he'd slept longer than he'd thought. "Third hour of morning."

Static filled the channel for a few moments, then Lando said, "If you need help, I could be there this afternoon. Got sent to Ryloth all by myself. Fortuna won't notice a quick detour."

On the verge of declining that offer, Luke considered again. Financial gambles formed Lando's primary field of expertise and must have taught him how to talk business sharks like Jenvr into accepting unprecedented deals.

"I'd appreciate that," Luke said stiffly.

If Lando took exception to his cool tone, he didn't show it. "All right," he returned. "I'm out of here shortly, and then it's a seven-hour trip."

"I'll meet you at the port," Luke acknowledged and deactivated the comlink.

He could feel impatience simmer in his veins when he eased back against the cushions. It had been five months since Bespin, five months since Han had been forced into artificial hibernation and Boba Fett escaped into hyperspace with a carbonite slab as his only cargo.

If only they'd been able track the Slave One faster, Luke thought compulsively, then Han might have been freed within a week. But by the time Rebel Intelligence located the bounty hunter, the rendezvous between Fett and Jabba's largest yacht had already taken place on the fringes of the Sardd Nebula.

At this point, Chewbacca and Lando had completed their first reconnaissance tour on Tatooine. Just like Luke and Leia, they counted on

a hit-and-run operation as soon as Jabba returned to his lair, but their cautious optimism was undermined by subsequent reports from Intel. Jabba's yacht had been sighted deep in Huttese space. A rescue attempt was unthinkable under the circumstances: it would take a small fleet to penetrate the bristling defense girdles that protected the Hutts' worlds against Imperial aggressors. So long as Jabba showed no intentions of heading back for the Outer Rim, they could do nothing but wait.

But why is he doing this? Luke asked himself like so many times before. Why now? Jabba had run his operations from Tatooine for years, sporadic visits to his homeworld scattered far and few in between. For once, Luke wanted to believe in sheer coincidence; the thought that Jabba had decided to parade his carbonite trophy before friends and business partners was unbearable.

The moment Luke closed his eyes, he could see Han's face again, frozen into a carbonite grimace. Haunted dreams had delved into the far reaches of memory where the image had buried itself in a split second, without comprehension or recognition, and brought it back to consciousness time and again. In the white corridor of Cloud City, he'd felt only the consuming inner cold and the gravitic pull of an unknown shadow. The floating carbon slab had been merely another incomprehensible fragment of a reality coming apart. Now he knew better.

If I'd followed Boba Fett instead of confronting Vader... Luke cut off the thought with a sharp intake of breath. It was useless to consider missed chances or give in to the redoubled weight of loss and guilt. All he could do now was make sure he wouldn't fail again. Starting today.

In another moment, irritation spilled over into restless energy. There could be no question of going back to sleep. Luke swung his legs over the side of the bed and got up to face the day.

The library was a disappointment. After several hours of skimming the meticulously compiled articles and reports, Luke arrived at the unhappy conclusion that Nev Jenvr was virtually a blank slate before he'd taken up residence in the prospering Resort. The newswires had started to feature his profile only after he'd made his first million, and while Jenvr seemed to enjoy the publicity, he'd always refused to discuss his past and background.

His wealth was owed to speculation on the galactic stock market and, according to a score of baffled experts, a highly unconventional mind. Sometimes he miscalculated, but most of his gambits had been glaringly

successful, inspiring a host of less ingenious imitators. 'The Mysterious Magnate sets yet another startling trend' ran one of the headlines in the stockbrokers' bulletin. While Jenvr's private life hadn't attracted the same degree of attention, he'd become notorious for collecting artefacts, furniture and curios without intellegible pattern or purpose, even though he sometimes managed to turn a current whim into another profitable investment.

When Luke finally switched off the viewscreen, no hint of a secret desire or unfulfilled dream had presented itself. Perhaps the Sullustian auctioneer had a more intimate knowledge of Jenvr's private pursuits, he thought without much conviction.

Brilliant sunshine flooded the streets when Luke walked towards the caf, where Pedalko had agreed to meet him. All around him, Cha Br, sparkled like a fantasy world swept clean and polished overnight. From a sunny terrace between artfully stunted trees, the Sullustian waved to him.

Although he was thick-set and a beginning paunch strained his padded jacket, Pedalko's enthusiastic gestures lent him an air of buoyant agility. Even before Luke could order a drink, the Sullustian had launched into a vivid reiteration of yesterday's auction. "I'd never dared to hope that Lady Oghma would come to appreciate the subtleties of pliski sculpture," he said, "but of course the greatest surprise was your bid against Nev Jenvr."

"Because no one ever took an interest in the crystals before?" Luke asked, momentarily distracted by the server droid trundling up to their table. "Or because no one ever tries to outbid one of the wealthiest businessmen in the Outer Rim?"

"The latter," Pedalko admitted with a rueful smile. "Jenvr always gets what he wants, and the residents no longer try to bid against him. Sometimes I do it myself, since he so obviously enjoys a challenge."

Having placed his order, Luke turned back. "Where do the crystals come from?" he asked bluntly. "I need at least one of them as soon as possible, and I'm willing to double the average price at which you've sold them to Jenvr."

The Sullustian scrunched his fleshy face into a regretful expression. "Much as I'd like to oblige, I'm afraid that will be difficult," he said. "You see, I can't tell you anything about their actual origin. I purchase them from an intermediary who lives on the planet surface, and he in turn obtains them from the natives..."

"Natives?" Luke interrupted. "I thought the planet was uninhabited before colonization."

"That's what everyone thought for many years, but, yes, there are natives. Humanoids who apparently live as nomads..." Pedalko shrugged. "Very little is known about their number or their culture. They collect the 'atlit crystals and occasionally use them to trade for commodities they can't manufacture themselves. But there's no telling when they're going to approach my middleman the next time. Sometimes it takes only a few weeks, sometimes half a year."

It was more or less what he'd feared, but the bleak reality of it still made a cold impact in the pit of Luke's stomach. Even a few weeks would be too long.

"I see," he said colorlessly, just as the droid reappeared with his drink.

"If Jenvr won't resell--" the Sullustian started.

"He won't," Luke answered curtly. There was no point in staying any longer, but he sat with Pedalko for a while, engaging in pleasant, inessential conversation with only a part of his mind. The way it looked, he'd have to rely on Lando's experience and sporadic ingenuity, and he didn't particularly relish that idea.

It still gnawed at his forced composure when Luke made his way to the screened port facilities, later that afternoon. The chief coordinator informed him that an approach vector had already been assigned to a long-distance shuttle hailing from Tatooine. Lando would be here in minutes.

Luke strode from the lounge to wait on the open gallery above the landing platform. All incoming vehicles passed an access chute constructed from interlocking clearsteel components. From a distance, the chute's outline was barely visible, but from straight below, it looked like a gorge forming out of the brilliant sky.

Luke wrapped both hands around the gallery's railing and used the quiet moment to chart his unsettled mood. Now that he'd run out of options, he knew he should be all the more grateful for Lando's offer to help, but the smoldering irritation refused to be brushed off so easily.

The trouble was, he didn't know how far he could trust Lando. Obviously enough, the man was doing his level best to help rescuing Han and make up for his collaboration with Boba Fett and, even though he'd been pressured

into it, Vader's troops. He'd never anticipated that Han would be tortured and abused for Vader's test run of the carbon-freezing process. Forced to make a choice, he'd placed his own security and that of Cloud City's populace before an old and troublesome friendship, and he could hardly be blamed for that.

During their joint escape from Bespin, Luke had made himself accept that reasoning, but the shockwave of what he'd felt on Dagobah kept undermining the brittle constructs of rationality and too often invaded his dreams with echoes of a scream heard only inside his own mind. It wouldn't give him a rest until Han was set free.

And essentially, Lando was still a stranger. Before he'd managed to get hired by Jabba's major domo, he'd reported back to Leia and Luke at fairly regular intervals, in between recon trips to Tatooine and attempts to trace Boba Fett through old contacts among smugglers and freelance grifters. All his mercurial energy was focused on righting his mistake, but he was often nonchalant about it and volatile when it came to devising practicable strategies. As if it's just another gamble, Luke thought irritably.

Then there was his attitude towards Leia. That she'd made quite an impression on him was nothing Lando had ever tried to cover up; in fact he'd flirted with her in public as much as in private, until Leia's unwavering, frosted courtesy finally prompted a temporary retreat. But Lando seemed the type of man who considered a clear No a playful overture. He still courted Leia, although he'd toned his approach down to hazy smiles and elaborate compliments. Leia pretended not to notice, but Luke couldn't help feeling a sting of resentment each time. Lando of all people should know that Leia had made her choice. That she wanted Han, not another addition to her already impressive flock of suitors.

He must know, Luke thought, he just doesn't care. He doesn't feel there's anything wrong about trying to take Han's place.

And that's as good as calling Han dead.

Surely this was how Leia felt about it, too, even if she never permitted herself a show of impulsive emotion. Luke recalled the look on her face, during those long nights she'd spent at his bedside aboard the medical frigate, when weariness frayed her habitual self-control. Anguished disbelief had etched thin lines into the corners of her mouth, and each time her glance drifted restlessly towards the viewport, Luke knew what was on her mind.

I know, Leia. I know what it's like to feel incomplete, he'd told her.

She'd held his eyes for a long time before she'd answered in a flat and lifeless voice, Yes, you do.

Wrenching free of the memory, Luke rubbed the thumb of his left hand over the back of his right. After four months of adjusting to the prosthesis, it still felt like something he wore, never an immediate part of himself. Perhaps that was exactly what Vader had intended by taking his hand, reminding him that one piece after the other could be ripped from his life and replaced by a cloned copy that fooled the eye. The hand made him feel like an impostor sometimes: he no longer was what he seemed.

And who am I to pass judgment? Luke thought with a speculative bitterness. Maybe it's got nothing to do with Lando. Maybe I just can't trust my feelings anymore.

The distinct whine of a sublight drive brought him back to the present. Through the crystalline tube approached a boxy shuttle that must be a serious offense to Lando's aesthetic standards, its underside caked with glazed sand around the vents.

As soon as the runlights winked off, Lando vaulted down from the cockpit and crossed the platform in bouncing strides. "Hey, Luke!" Slowing his pace, he cast an approving glance around. "Nice spot, huh? Been a long time since I stopped over."

"I didn't realize you'd been here before." Luke took the other man's outstretched hand. "Thanks for coming."

"No problem, but I can't stick around too long, or Bib's gonna smell a rat." Lando lifted his shoulders. "I need a drink, and you can tell me everything about our greedy friend meantime, how's that?"

"I wouldn't call it greed," was the first thing Luke said when they'd retired to the privacy of a booth in the portside bar. "He collects for the pleasure of it, I think, not for possession."

"Or the pleasure of possession. Slight difference." Lando stirred his mixed drink with a plastic straw, and several mismatched colors ran together in the glass. "Anything interesting in his files?"

"A lot of people consider him a financial genius," Luke started without enthusiasm. "Besides collecting, speculation seems to be his only passion, and that's what made him rich."

Lando chuckled. "You make it sound like that's something... dishonest."

"Maybe I just don't see the point."

"It takes a lot of guts, you know. Same thing with gambling. If you're afraid of losing everything, you play it safe, but you never make a million that way."

"I don't think Jenvr is the gambling type," Luke said thoughtfully, calling the last day's encounter back to mind. "He seemed very... relaxed."

Lando cocked an eyebrow, inviting further explanations.

"Not like someone who could get a kick out of taking risks," Luke tried to explain while focused on a spot in the middle distance. "He's smart, and he likes to win, but... I don't think he could lose his head over it."

"If it's not the profit or the thrill," Lando asked with a hint of exasperation, "then what do you think he's after? I mean, ultimately."

Luke met his eyes squarely. "If we could figure that out, we'd know how to get the crystals, wouldn't we?"

"I guess so." Lando drained his glass and set it down firmly. "But until we do, we'll just have to improvise."

Only half-listening, Luke dipped his head in a brief nod. "I think," he started again as Lando pushed to his feet, "he likes to be dazzled."

"Oh yeah?" Flawless teeth flashed in a bright grin. "That's good to know, considering we'll have to con him into parting with one of the crystals somehow."

That's not what I meant, Luke thought, but kept it to himself as he followed Lando out into the open.

"Where to now?" he asked, catching the gleam of delight in the other man's eyes. After weeks spent on Tatooine, Lando responded to the Resort like a starved man to a banquet, his glance darting back and forth between flowering trees and the sweeping lines of elegant porches as they walked into town.

"First, I need different clothes." Nose wrinkling, Lando gazed down at his sand-scrubbed leather tunic. "I don't think I'm going to make much of an impression dressed like one of the Weequays preparing for the solstice

raid. I need the right kind of rigging to make up for missing credentials."

"I'm sure we'll find something," Luke returned abstractly. "The town is full of shops and boutiques..."

All of them bound to ask steep prices, he added for himself, tagging along as Lando eyeballed the display of costly fabrics and ornate apparel in shop windows and showcases.

"Shouldn't we make up our minds about a convincing story first?" Luke asked when the other man headed towards the trueglass swing-doors of a particularly palatial emporium.

"Works the other way round for me," Lando returned with a grin. "Once I clap eyes on the right outfit, I know what the story's gonna be."

Was that how he'd fit himself into the role of Baron Administrator on Bespin? Luke wondered as they entered the shop together. That Lando could switch roles that way, literally stepping into someone else's boots, was one of the reasons why he often felt a certain wariness in his company. Like nothing's for real anyway. Two elegantly dressed assistants swept Lando off to the sparsely hung racks, and Luke resigned himself to wait. If Leia had been here, she could have filled the part of fashion adviser; he was hopeless in that capacity. Clothing had never been more than a matter of comfort and practical requirements to him.

It didn't take quite as long as he'd feared. Still trading courtesies with the deferential assistants, Lando re-emerged with a large bag and the look of utter contentment on his face. Luke refused to flinch at the price when he handed his credit chip over and scribbled a signature on the bill.

"Got a place where I can get changed?" Lando asked him.

"The room I've rented." Luke sent another suspicious glance at the bag. "It's not far."

"Call Jenvr while I dress up," Lando suggested. "Tell him you've found someone who can solve the mystery of those crystals for him."

"'Room I've rented' hardly covers it!" Lando rolled his eyes heavenward as he stepped from the refresher unit. "I'd give a lot to spend just one night in a place like this, right about now. I thought the smelly holes

that pass as sleeping quarters in Jabba's so-called palace were bad enough, but they're sheer luxury next to those filthy caves on Ryloth."

Luke made a noncommittal sound to cover his startlement as he studied Lando's array. "Don't you think that's--" he cleared his throat "--a little overdone?"

Lando brushed the silk-lined cape back over his shoulder and watched the ripples of yellow, mauve and pink hues in its shimmering folds. "No," he answered easily, "I think this will work fine. From all you've told me about him, Jenvr is the visual type. He'll be dazzled."

"I hope so," Luke muttered, rising from his chair for a closer look.

"They call the material chameol," Lando said and ran a hand over the shifting patterns in the fabric. "Never seen it before. Clever, huh?"

A dazed look came over his face as he inspected the extravagant cape that sparkled and glimmered at the slightest motion, and Luke grinned almost in spite of himself. The combination of shirt, waistcoat and loose-fitting pants Lando wore with it looked almost plain by comparison. However, each piece had been tailored from exquisite fabrics in matching colors, and an elaborately embroidered sash added the finishing touch.

"Only thing that troubles me," Lando said, lifting a hand to study the cufflinks, "is that it looks brand new. Like I've just walked into a shop and bought it."

Luke shrugged. "That can't be helped, I suppose. Unless you want to go for a roll in the dirt to give it a used look."

"And ruin everything?" Lando rolled his eyes in theatrical exasperation, then rubbed a finger across his moustache. "Wait a second, maybe--"

He broke off to reach for the carryall he'd brought from the shuttle and withdrew a small leather pouch. An assortment of clunkers and trinkets rolled across the onyx sidetable when he emptied it.

"What's this?" Luke asked, sifting through amulets and crude pieces of jewelry fashioned from carved bone fragments, jagged stones and feathers.

"Presents from Bib's family on Ryloth," Lando returned. He picked up a plaited necklace.

From the rough leather strings dangled a slender bone between glittering stone splinters. As he bent nearer, Luke could see that it had been carved

to resemble the shape of an elongated head, slender lekkus curled around the neck.

"Guess this doesn't go very well with the rest," Lando said with a sigh, "but at least it's exotic."

Not about to argue with that assessment, Luke watched him strap on a bracelet before slipping the necklace over his head.

"So, is the main man ready to receive us?" Lando asked.

"He's expecting guests for dinner tonight, but if we make it to his place before sixth hour, he's willing to talk to us."

"Excellent." Lando checked himself over in the wall reflector, grinned at himself, and added, "What are we waiting for?"

"What are we going to tell him?" Luke asked back.

"Don't worry 'bout nothing, old buddy." Lando gave him a wink. "I'll brief you on the way."

"I don't know," Luke said dubiously when Lando had finished. "What if Jenvr inquires about your testing methods?"

"I'm sure I can make his head spin with the right dosage of technical jargon," Lando returned confidently. "He's an expert for the market value and appeal of things, not technical details. If he gets too inquisitive, I'll just make it up as I go along. Trust me, I've pulled this type of stunt a few times before."

Luke sketched a nod. They'd passed from the livelier parts of town to the impervious repose of the residential district. Uneasiness grew on him as they walked towards Jenvr's estate.

"If he buys the story, he'll be forced to sell," Lando added. "It's worth a try."

"Just remember that we won't get a second chance," Luke retorted edgily. Startled by the bite in his voice, Lando threw him a dark sidelong glance, but this was hardly the best of times for an argument. Reluctantly, Luke fumbled for a way of evaporating the discord hanging between them.

"Look," he said on a deep breath, "this isn't just about... building a new lightsaber. This is about Han."

"I know that." Lando paused in his stride to glower at him, but the frown softened into a troubled look before Luke could come up with a vaguely placating reply. "It's not my fault that I'm not Han," Lando said with an uncharacteristic note of resignation.

"I never--" Luke started to object, but a curt gesture stopped him.

"It's the same with Chewie and Leia," Lando said with a small, forced grin. "I can tell by the way you look at me... Like you've given me a test, and now you're all waiting to see how I score. I feel like I'm shuffling around in a pair of boots way too large for me."

"And that's hardly your fault," Luke acknowledged after a pause. The look on Lando's face betrayed the strain of juggling a weight that increased with every passing month. "It's ours. I guess we just miss Han too much."

"Yeah, I can tell," Lando said dryly. "Just make sure he never finds out, or it's gonna blow up his ego to unbearable proportions."

A smile tugged Luke's mouth before he could help it. "There's that," he agreed, strangely relieved. "But if that's the worst that comes of it, I guess I won't mind."

"Me neither." Lando grimaced and shook his head. "Never thought I'd hear myself say that..."

They walked the rest of the distance in silence, but when they reached the wrought-iron gate, Lando slanted him another long, considering glance. "Think you can trust me to handle this right?"

Luke nodded, a cool sprinkle of adrenaline teasing his nerves.

"Good," Lando groused. "Makes me feel so much better."

His eyes widened the moment they stepped into the richly festooned hallway of Jenvr's villa. "Whoa," Lando said under his breath, "the guy's got more money than what's good for him."

While the droid went to announce them to her master, he wandered around, eyebrows arching at some of the more bizarre objects that populated the countless niches.

Luke stayed by the door and struggled for control over another sweep of impatience, the trickle of moments burning in his veins as if he'd breathed methane instead of oxygen. To distract himself, he studied the painted face of a statue guarding the entrance into the southern wing. It would make him uncomfortable, Luke thought, to inhabit a place so cluttered with possessions, but he still wondered what it felt like, to have all you'd ever wanted, all you'd ever dreamed of at your disposal. The security of it, and the temptation.

Within moments, the protocol droid returned. "Follow me please," she purred.

Nev Jenvr was seated in front of a study screen when they entered the parlor. "Welcome," he said distractedly, "I'll be with you in a moment."

At a touch to camouflaged controls, the screen darkened and with a soft hydraulic hiss disappeared behind the wooden panels of an elegantly carved desk. As their host rose from his seat, Luke noticed again the peculiar sway in his motions.

"Lando Calrissian," he repeated the introduction he'd already given over comlink. "Lando works as a jeweler in the Core and specializes in crystals."

Lando performed a short, accurate bow and dimmed his smile to one of professional confidence.

"Interesting," Jenvr said with amiable nonchalance. "Sit down. CeeCee will get us something to drink in a moment."

When he lowered himself into the embrace of brocade cushions on his sofa, Jenvr's robe slid up and for a moment exposed the tip of a muscular tail colored a shade darker than the skin of his face and hands. It explained the gliding walk, and Luke suspected that moving around in an environment designed for humanoid bipeds had to involve something of an effort. Perhaps that difficulty contributed to Jenvr's laid-back attitude.

"It's been a long time since I last traveled to the Core," he said now. "The Imperial style of conducting business doesn't really agree with me."

Lando settled against the sofa's other arm, his extravagant cape falling in dramatic ripples around him. "Tell me all about it," he agreed with a sigh, "but arranging deals over a distance is not an option for me. Understandably, my clients wish to inspect the jewelry before they make their choice, and they usually request my personal presence alongside."

As his glance wandered from one to the other, Luke had to admit that Lando's get-up was a perfect match for Jenvr's equally florid array. Perched on the sofa like two exotic birds, they struck up an animated conversation about current fashion trends in the Core, and by the time CeeCee arrived with assorted refreshments, Luke felt they'd all but forgotten about his presence. Which was just as well. Situations that required dividing attention between idle smalltalk and ulterior designs usually had a stifling effect on him. One minute or two in Lando's place, and he'd grow hopelessly clumsy and stiff, unable to sustain the kind of double thinking Leia had mastered to perfection years ago.

Not the slightest hint of pressure in his voice or gestures, Lando proceeded to wrap their host around his finger, engaging Jenvr in pleasantries which would make an outright refusal that much harder. Luke watched with a touch of pointless envy and wondered if he'd ever catch up on nineteen years worth of practicing social skills that he'd missed by growing up on Tatooine. It was all he could do not to fidget with impatience.

"Now then," Jenvr said eventually, interlacing the short fingers of his lower pair of hands. "Your friend tells me that you've made some startling discoveries when you studied the properties of 'atlit crystals..."

"I have indeed," Lando answered, switching to a more serious tone. "And they're very special."

"Really." Jenvr almost sparkled with curiosity. "I always thought there was something about them... You've used them as ornaments, I take it?"

Lando nodded. "Some years ago, an acquaintance of mine sold me a handful of them. I thought I was doing him a favor at the time. Since they're not very noticeable by themselves, I tried a combination with the Corellian bloodstone. They refract and heighten the color and lend a more playful appeal to the finished piece of jewelry."

"I can imagine," Jenvr replied in the charmed tone of a connoisseur forced to live among the ignorant.

"However," Lando continued, "after I'd kept a particularly classy diadem on display for several weeks, I noticed that the 'atlits had changed. They were starting to cloud up..."

"Some kind of chemical reaction between the stones?"

"That's what I thought. I removed the diadem from my sales collection to study the process more closely."

"And?" Whether or not Jenvr would ultimately fall for Lando's tale, he was clearly fascinated. Luke relaxed cautiously in his chair.

"It was startling," Lando returned with emphasis. "If my business left me more time to engage in research, it might be worth devoting years to explaining this phenomenon." He bounced up from the sofa, the very image of a man excited by his own discovery. An excellent actor, Luke had to give him that.

"The crystals started to 'bloom'," Lando continued emphatically. "One morning when I went to check, the clouds inside the stones had cleared, and violet sparks had appeared in their depth -- a color like amethysts, just more intense. The effect was quite stunning."

"It must be. Unfortunately, mine haven't shown any inclination to metamorphose like that," Jenvr remarked with dry irony. "Have you brought one of those... blooming crystals?"

"No." Right on cue, Lando's expression grew wistful. "The transformation continued, you see. After a few days, the sparks faded, but the crystals began to change form. Briefly put, it looked like a process of accelerated growth. They fractured two weeks later--" he paused for effect "--and I was left with five new crystals in the place of one."

"They multiply," Jenvr concluded, his raised eyebrows disappearing under the fringe of fine, pale hair.

"The process resembles organic cell division," Lando confirmed, "and I've been able to determine all factors involved. Besides the Corellian bloodstone, a few rare minerals can serve as agents, but once the cycle is complete, only one crystal retains the capacity of 'blooming'. I call it the motherstone. Unless you've studied them closely, it's impossible to tell the difference."

"Ah." Jenvr gave a pensive nod. "I suppose you'd be able to tell me if my stones possess the propensity for such an astounding feat, yes?"
"If I could take a look at them..."

Jenvr gestured at a sidetable beneath a heavy, silver-framed mirror. "I have a few of them here. Right there, on the tray..."

Two quick steps took Lando to the small table. He picked up one crystal after the next, held it to the light and made a show of examining each with narrowed eyes and pursed lips. "There might be a motherstone or two among these," he said at last, "but the only way to know for sure is to have them tested in my labs."

"Must be a complicated procedure," Jenvr commented, his tone unrevealing.

"It is, but why bother you with the details?" Lando turned back to him, a winning smile pasted onto his features and several 'atlit stones glittering in his palm. "For a man of my trade, those crystals are a rare challenge, and I'd be happy to offer you a fair price. Once I've had them tested."

"All of them?" A trace of consternation had crept into Jenvr's tone.

"Just a few," Lando corrected blithely, "a small sample would suffice to determine their age and molecular structure. Naturally, I'd offer adequate security, say, a deposit that equals their current market price."

Perhaps it was nothing but a projection of his own nervous anticipation, but Luke thought that Lando's smile was beginning to look a little strained around the edges. Jenvr seemed absorbed in studying the embroidered hem of his robe while he pondered the proposal. As the sudden silence stretched, Luke could have sworn he saw Lando's hand twitch with the temptation to slip one of the crystals into his pocket.

"Ah, ah." Head lifting sharply, Jenvr wagged a finger at him, and Lando gave a guilty start. "Let's not be rash, shall we?"

Damn, Luke thought, and a sinking feeling knotted his insides. It's not working.

Jenvr got to his feet with a peculiar wriggle and crossed over as soon as he'd gained his balance. "And what is this, I wonder..." He tapped the carved bone dangling over Lando's tunic.

"It's, uh, an amulet from Ryloth," Lando fumbled, thrown off stride by that unexpected question. "It's supposed to guarantee... fertility."

For a moment, Luke could have throttled him.

"Fertility?" Jenvr clucked disapprovingly. "I fear you've been misinformed there. This is the famous kelji head, a symbol of faith. Very rare indeed, since they change hands only between the native clans on Ryloth. A professional jeweler would know all about it, of course, but then, that's not what you are."

Lando's face fell. "You guessed all along?"

"Relax, it wasn't anything you said," Jenvr reassured him in an amused drawl. "I contacted the jewelers' guild before you arrived, that's all. It pays to be cautious. Otherwise, I might never have guessed."

"But why let me carry on like that?" Lando blurted.

"I found your story very entertaining, and since you took such troubles to convince me, why be so rude and spoil it for you?" Jenvr tilted his head on one side when he turned to Luke. "You, my friend, didn't exactly give me the impression of someone who'd count an up-scale jeweler among his close acquaintances, I'm afraid."

That's right, Luke thought mutinously while he pushed from his chair. Frustration churned through him and quickened his pulse. I much prefer smugglers and outlaws to snobs.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you both," Jenvr continued, the smugness in his expression making way to a gentler humor. "Let me suggest a trade. An 'atlit crystal for the kelji head. What do you think?"

"Sure," Luke said, too startled to worry about the breathless note in his voice.

"On one condition. Don't tell anyone about it, and when you've used the crystal for whatever it is you need it for, come back and tell me about it. The true story," Jenvr added with a marked glance for Lando. "Deal?"

Still a little rattled by this sudden turn of events, Luke gave a nod which Lando echoed as soon as he'd pulled the necklace over his head. "Take your pick," Jenvr invited.

There were several crystals roughly the right size to fit the lightsaber. Luke selected one of the shimmering stones and stashed it carefully. "Thank you," he said, dry-mouthed at the full impact of amazement hitting home. "It means a lot."

"It's been a pleasure," Jenvr returned with a puckish smile. As soon as the gates to Jenvr's estate closed at their backs, Lando let his breath escape in a whoosh. "Hell, what a guy! I think I'd enjoy working for him." He gave a short laugh. "Can't take any credit for it, but at least you've got what you wanted."

"He liked you," Luke answered. "That counts for something as well." He felt lightheaded in the brassy haze of late afternoon and marshaled his thoughts with an effort as they headed back into town.

"What are you going to tell Fortuna?" he asked Lando.

"Perhaps he won't even notice. It's not like his people handed me a list of every item they're sending him." Lando shrugged. "I'll think of something. He's one suspicious bastard, but not half as clever as Jenvr."

"Sure about that?"

"Bib thinks his homeworld's nothing but a filthy backwater," Lando retorted. "Not much of a chance he'd want to be caught wearing bones and feathers round his neck."

"I guess not." Luke paused, struck by a sudden notion. "I think I'll check up on the kelji head when I get a chance," he added thoughtfully. "I've got a feeling..."

"Like what?"

"Like we've just been had," Luke answered dryly.

For a second, Lando stared at him, then he burst into snorts of laughter. "Oh, brother, you might be right about that! Jenvr's just the type who'd want to prove he can beat you at every kind of game. Kelji head, huh?" Still chuckling, he glanced at his chrono. "Hey, I'd better be off. You coming along, or d'you wanna hang out here and take it easy for another day?"

"Not another hour. I'll start working on the lightsaber right away." One hand slipping into his pocket, Luke visualized the array of circuits and components that would channel unfocused energy into the 'atlit crystal.

"Good." Lando clapped his shoulder. "And then we're all set for a rescue mission that's gonna be legend all over Tatooine."

"So long as it works."

"It will."

Luke nodded. As his fingers closed around the crystal, the strangest feeling swept through his nerves. In a dazzling flash, he could see the lightsaber's blade sizzle in lucent green against burning sands, and a sense of exhilaration passed through him in the space of a heartbeat.

"I know it," he said softly. "I know."

*** End ***

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