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## Resolutions Part 2

by [Martha Wilson](#)

Han was pacing his cell with the intensity of a caged gundark. The Portmaster had kept her promise: the Ishataran security officers hadn't been allowed near him, and the cell was in the Thetaran part of the complex and probably used more for drunk and disorderly than anything else. It was clean, if cool and damp, but hopefully he wouldn't be here long. If he had still been in Ishataran hands, he knew he would have been in multiple restraints at least and probably beaten half to death. So far, one of the Thetaran guards had patted him on the ass, but he had managed to take that as the compliment that it was intended as.

If everything did fall apart at the last moment and Vagran was able to sell him offstation, he knew he could probably manage to hang himself using his belt. If he had the opportunity. If he could bear to do it, knowing he couldn't take Leia with him for getting him into this.

He remembered suddenly how she had burst out from under the ramp to grab Vagran. He had been so sure she would take the opportunity, and never bothered to question the assumption.

He heard someone coming down the corridor and stopped, waiting tensely. But it was only a pair of Thetaran guards. "She back and all ready," one of them said in bad standard, unlocking the cell door.

"Oh, joy," Han said, letting them take him out. The other one kept a hold on his arm going down the corridor, and he hoped it was all she grabbed for, because he was not in the mood to get felt up again without blood being shed.

But this Thetaran was very young and evidently had her mind on higher things. She said, "Human males are different, huh?" apparently hoping for some elucidation on the point.

Han said, "I'm Corellian," as if that explained it.

Being young, she said, "Oh, I see," and tried to look as if she knew what that meant.

They went up in the turbolift and into the Port Authority's main office, a transparisteel-walled bubble hanging out over the main concourse. The terminals and standard-issue desks looked very odd next to the extensive collection of brightly-painted Thetaran ceremonial masks hung on the metal support struts. Vagran and an aide were there. The Portmaster and several of her assistants were there. Leia was there, waiting with the Portmaster. Han stopped moving forward without quite knowing he had, and the Thetaran guard towed him to the desk.

He looked at Leia. She swallowed, cleared her throat and nudged one of the papers forward, and said, "All we have to do is sign this."

He looked at it, then looked somewhere else. Leia, her voice unaccustomedly nervous, said, "And...there's one other thing." She pulled a small cloth-wrapped bundle out of her jacket pocket and started to untie the string around it.

Han took an involuntary step backward and bumped into the young Thetaran guard, who was craning her neck to see.

Leia hadn't noticed. She finished unwrapping the parcel and said, "This is a Thetaran marriage bracelet. All the married Thetaran men wear them. This one is made of bronze and it comes apart if you press on it, right there." Leia demonstrated. She had stopped at a Thetaran-owned jewelry shop the Portmaster had recommended, and picked out this one because she thought the copper in it matched the highlights in Han's hair, but the best interrogator in the Empire would not have been able to force that admission from her. She looked up at him and asked cautiously, "Is that all right?"

Han didn't move to touch it. It was a two inch wide band of decorative metals, beaten to give it a dull sheen. He looked up at the Thetarans, who had all gathered near and were watching intently. They all nodded encouragingly. Han looked at the bracelet again. It was only a minor indignity and he supposed he could live with it. He let out his breath. "Okay."

Vagran swore. "If she's asking his permission it must be obvious to you that they aren't abiding by your law--"

The Portmaster pointed a long finger at him. "You be quiet. Different people have different customs. You, who come from the inner worlds, should know that." She nodded to Leia. "Go on."

Leia tried to hand Han the bracelet, but he knew they didn't get off that easy. He stuck his wrist out. The Portmaster said, "He's right. By Thetaran custom you should put it on him."

Instead of blushing, as Han had expected, Leia looked ill. It took her a full minute to get the bracelet on his wrist, fumbling as if her mind was trying to distance itself from what her hands were doing.

The Portmaster nudged the paper closer to Leia. Vagran said, "Sign the agreement, or let me take my prisoner and go."

Neither Han nor Leia moved to do anything. Finally Leia sighed, took up a stylus, and signed the license. She handed Han the stylus without looking at him. He swallowed in a dry throat and signed it, using the old Corellian alphabet and an alias he intended never to use again.

That seemed to be all that was necessary.

The Thetaran group broke up, to wander back to their duties in the Port Authority and discuss the matter animatedly for the rest of the day. The Portmaster was giving Leia all the copies of everything she needed and Leia was thanking her again. Han noticed she was trembling a little. Apparently being bonded to him, even temporarily and in name only, was a fate worse than death. Leia's carryall lay next to the table, with one of his black flightjackets wrapped around the strap. He picked the jacket up and shrugged into it, his jaw tightening.

The lieutenant Vagran strolled toward them and, when the Portmaster had moved away, said to Leia, "You understand that you had better conduct yourselves as a bonded couple while you're within my jurisdiction, otherwise the Thetarans won't be able to protect you." Leia didn't bother to look at him. Still trying to provoke a reaction, he added, "Do you have family or friends who survived the Destruction of Alderaan, madam? I'm sure they will be interested to hear of this."

*Why the hell is he bringing that up?* Han wondered. Alderaan had been far too cosmopolitan a place to have any hysterical prejudices about Corellians, the way some worlds that had been preyed on by pirates had.

Leia still didn't turn to face him. She was folding the papers and tucking them into one of her vest pockets, buttoning down the flap carefully. Han saw one tear fall from her eye and strike the table soundlessly. Her voice betraying nothing but cool control, she said, "I'm sure they'll understand."

The lieutenant chuckled and turned away. Han stretched out a foot and tripped him.

The lieutenant staggered and managed not to fall. He whipped around, glaring, but the young Thetaran guard was still standing near, leaning on her stunstaff. She gave no sign she had seen what Han had done, if she had, but lifted her heavy brows at the customs officer and said, "Clumsy."

Vagran stared at them grimly, but there was nothing he could do except walk away. Leia finished buttoning her pockets and reached to pick up her bag. Han snatched it off the floor just before her hand could close over the strap and they glared at each other. He slung it over his shoulder, telling her, "I think that's my job now."

Leia swore under her breath, but in Alderaanian, so he couldn't tell if she had said anything worse than "Dammit." She stalked to the turbolift. Han followed, grimly.

\* \* \*

They took a slidewalk down one of the tube sections toward the hub. Galleries lined both sides of the tube, with shops and business of all sorts advertising themselves with flashing LEDs and holos in standard and several other languages. There were inert walkways on either side of the slidewalk, and bridges arching overhead connecting the upper levels, crowded with droids and people, mostly nonhumans. The air smelled of food from the vendors along the lower level, of strange perfumes and spices from the import houses, and there were conflicting strains of music, and the babble of voices in a dozen languages. Leia felt her mood lighten, almost against her will, especially as the slidewalk passed under some sort of business that felt obligated to promote itself with blowers that sprayed fragments of glitterpaper and sparklies down onto the passersby. She turned to Han with a comment and remembered just in time that she wasn't speaking to him, and pretended that she had only meant to stare closely at a passing sidewalk-cleaning droid. Han was leaning on the railing, staring grimly into the distance. He shook his head to dislodge the glitter from his hair.

Leia knew the Vitarin, as one of the largest enclaves on the station, had an entire pod to themselves in the interior. The entrance was in the tube-hub junction, a large, heavy hatchway where several male Vitarin stood guard. They were

bipedal, tall and willowy, covered with a dusting of feathery light white fur over light blue skin. Their faces were long and elegant, their dark eyes large and solemn, and they had manes of white silky hair reaching almost to their waists. They wore short brightly-colored kilts and weapon belts, and all wore comlink headsets and were armed with older model energy guns.

The guards stared curiously at them, but when Leia said she was here for the trade conference and gave them her prearranged alias, they were politely ushered through immediately.

The lock cycled them through, and Leia was startled when she stepped out onto a stone pavement in what was apparently daylight. She hadn't realized the Vitarin's pod was an enviro dome.

The "ground" was covered with green turf, interspersed with stands of lush, blue-green tropical foliage, trees and flowering bushes, and there was the sound of running water somewhere. Stone-paved paths led toward a group of buildings, each long and only three or four stories high, with low pitched roofs and lots of windows, apparently constructed of dark wooden logs. The light was close to an early afternoon level, and came from a spot high overhead in the curving opaque dome, reflected in from the system primary. Leia looked around appreciatively. It was all probably modelled on the Vitarin homeworld, or an idealized version of it. She realized she must have been suffering from a kind of sensory deprivation, from all this time in the cramped quarters of the *Tantavie*; first the light and noisy life of the station, then stepping out into this open space made her feel as if she had been wearing a smothering bag over her head and had just now pulled it off.

An older Vitarin woman dressed in gauzy robes came hurrying toward them, bowed, and gestured for them to follow.

She led them down one of the paths, past a running stream playing over artistically arranged rocks and vines, and into the largest of the log buildings. The floors were gorgeously polished wood, with carved floral motifs running along the walls, and glow globes tuned to simulate candlelight floating inside antique metalwork lamps. As their guide led them down a long corridor, she glanced back over her shoulder and said, in liltingly accented basic, "You are the last delegate to arrive, but the Donya was told about the trouble at the docks, so she expected you would be late."

"Oh, good," Leia said, thinking, *I hope*.

The corridor opened into a large chamber that must be near the center of the structure, filled with Vitarin and a wide variety of nonhumans. A low fountain played in the center and flower garlands decked the high walls. There were some Thetarans, as well as a few ni'Trill and some Gaarans, who also had substantial presences on Freehold and must be here to represent their own interests with

the Vitarin. The others, including a Newasi, a pair of Figaths, and even a Yerandin, had to be from outsystem trading companies. She noted a triad of Ith'ick'thon, and wondered if they were from the same curious group who had witnessed their trouble with Lieutenant Vagran. Their guide signalled for them to wait and went off through the gathering to fetch someone.

Leia risked an unobtrusive look at Han. His expression was guarded and watchful, but he didn't seem openly hostile to anyone but her, which was the best she could hope for. Anyone adept at reading Corellian body language, of course, would have been afraid to get within ten feet of him.

There was one other human here, she realized suddenly. An older man with the badge of the Ishatar Conglomerate on his jacket. He stepped out from behind a large Squida, spotted Leia, and strolled toward her.

Leia smiled, if somewhat thinly, as he stopped in front of her. He lifted his glass in salute and said, "Leia Danthil, of Ascalon Trading, I presume?"

"How did you know?" Leia said dryly, and didn't bother to offer her hand.

He smiled, and didn't bother to answer her question. He said, "I would have thought an Alderanni woman wouldn't stoop to fraternize with her...employees, but perhaps Ascalon Trading finds it difficult to hire its workers under more conventional standards."

Leia's expression didn't alter, but that was only from long practice at remaining composed during events at the Imperial senate, where most of the time she would have liked to have drawn a blaster and shot half the senators. Vagran's orders must have been to stop independent traders from other human-owned companies from arriving at the conference, and of course he had reported to his superiors, one of which was probably this man.

Well, he would be expecting her to stand on her outraged dignity like his stereotypical view of the upper class Alderaanian she obviously still resembled, despite her attempt to appear as a trader. *What the hell*, Leia thought. She reached back and took Han's arm, drawing him up beside her. To her relief, he cooperated. Either that, or she had caught him by surprise; in his current mood she wouldn't have put it past him to stand there as immobile as a rock and make a fool of her. She smiled suggestively up at the Ishataran representative and said, "Ascalon Trading has nothing to do with it. Oh, they don't always find my...." She drew a deep breath "*Proclivities* amusing, but I do such good work for them, they can't quite manage to get rid of me." She widened her eyes, in a way she knew made her appear a little crazy, and blinked earnestly up at him.

Han chose that moment to lean down and do something to her ear. Leia was never sure afterward exactly what it had been, but she did know that it involved

his tongue. At the last moment she managed to turn her startled curse into an amused chuckle.

The Ishataran stared at them, his expression torn between wary disbelief and offended propriety. Fortunately a Vitarin was coming toward Leia, trailed by several attendants, and the Ishataran representative moved away. Leia realized it was the Donya, the head of the Vitarin Enclave, and stepped away from Han, trying to get her mind properly focused.

The Donya was graceful and elegant, her white mane braided with strands of beads, her gauze robe caught at the waist with a belt of beads and polished stones. Leia felt underdressed. She stopped before them, and said, "I am the Donya Esklat Maat'thn of the Rulership of Vitarin. You are Leia Danthil, of the Ascalon Trading Company."

"Yes, Donya. I am grateful for your kind invitation." The Ishatar representative was still lingering within earshot. Leia added, "And this is my husband," *damn, that sounded odd*, "Han."

The Donya looked at Han admiringly. "You are fortunate, Trader Danthil. He is quite lovely."

Leia managed to thank her graciously, though the Gods knew Han's ego was healthy enough on its own and didn't need the boost of being found attractive by gorgeous nonhuman heads of state.

"I look forward to our discussion. We have had contact with few human-owned corporations, except for the conglomerate, and I'm glad that you are here. I heard about your trouble at the port." There was a slight pause of significance. *She's telling me she's knows we're being watched*, Leia thought. "There is to be a banquet in honor of the conference and I ask you to walk into the hall with me." She gestured to one of her attendants. "Nagali will take your bag to your quarters."

Leia thanked her again, the attendant took their carryall, and the Donya linked arms with Leia and they were all suddenly going in to the banqueting room.

Leia managed to make polite conversation, hoping Han was following her and not obviously contemplating any sort of mayhem.

The banqueting hall was in the next chamber. It was long and wide, with a low stone table only a foot or so off the floor occupying much of the space. Around it were two tiers of stone benches, one a couple of feet or so above and behind the other. Above the second bench was a stone walkway for getting around the room. The benches were lined with cushions and furs, and the tables were decorated with flowers and fruit.

The Donya's place was at the top of the room, but she gestured Leia to a seat near her on the left side, close enough to give her some status if not near enough for private conversation. Leia knew any mention of her real reason for being here would have to wait; the room was far too crowded with the traders for any sort of private conversation.

Leia sat down on the cushion at the place indicated, looking around for Han. The main representatives of the delegations were being seated on the lower bench, the rest of their parties on the upper row, and she saw he had settled on the bench directly behind her. *Good, maybe we won't have to talk to each other.* She saw with relief that the Ishataran representative was being seated at the opposite end of the room. Another nonhuman society might have seated all the members of each species together for politeness sake, but the Vitarin were obviously cognizant of the situation.

Servers were moving to put platters on the table with various examples of native Vitarin delicacies. She saw another custom was evidently that the head of the delegation selected items from the table and passed it back to the others. *This is going to be the longest night of my life,* Leia thought. She twisted around to rest an elbow on the upper bench and look up at Han. He was watching the room guardedly, absently turning the Thetaran marriage bracelet around on his wrist as if it was chafing him. She cleared her throat and he looked down at her as if she was a stranger who was bothering him on a public transport. She said, determinedly, "Do you want anything to eat?"

"No."

Leia turned back around. She wasn't hungry either. She would pretend to eat and manage to unobtrusively pocket something for later. With prior experience in diplomatic contacts, she had tossed a few packs of emergency rations from the *Falcon* into her bag.

Leia was seated between a Thetaran woman and a Yerandin trader. The Yerandin had blubbery gray skin and a long proboscis, and three eyes hidden in folds of fat. He leaned toward her and said, "Are you enjoying your stay on Freehold, Trader Danthil?"

"Oh, it's been marvelous so far," Leia said. She picked up a narrow square glass the servers had just filled. It smelled rank, but she knew everything here was safe for mainstream humans. She tasted it and managed not to wince. It was alcoholic, and strong.

"I don't think I've heard of Ascalon Trading before." The Yerandin smiled ingratiatingly and laid a conversational hand on her knee. Leia eyed him grimly; this was just about all she needed right now. But the Yerandin glanced up in Han's direction, started, and hastily withdrew the offending hand. Leia looked

back up at Han, wondering what terrible threat he had managed to convey in that split second, but he was staring off across the room as if he hadn't noted the incident at all.

The Yerandin said, "I see your, ah, companion wears a Thetaran marriage bracelet." She recognized the expression on his gray face as a smile, and not a nice one. "Surely that is an unusual custom for a native of Alderaan to follow."

Leia took a larger swallow of the drink in her glass without thinking, and barely felt it burn down her throat. She was willing to believe the human Vagran had recognized her as Alderaanian, perhaps from her accent, but she wasn't willing to buy that from a Yerandin trader. She eyed him speculatively. He could be working for the Empire, the Sector Authority, or just his own interests. She said, "Well, I have six other husbands on Skiosh IV, but I decided not to bring any of them even though I understand Freehold permits polygamy. I didn't feel I should bring any of my children either." She leaned toward him confidentially. "None of them are old enough to sell yet." *Note to self: never use Danthil alias again.*

Behind her, Han was having to rub the bridge of his nose to conceal his expression.

The Yerandin fluttered his ear stalks, an unconscious gesture of confusion. He said, "Yes, of course," and made a strategic withdrawal.

Han reached down from behind her and took the glass of liquor out of her hand, and Leia decided in her current mood she should probably stick to water.

After that Leia was able to get into a much more amenable conversation with the Thetaran woman on her other side and several other Traders within earshot, mostly about their commercial interests and the fictional Ascalon trading company. After a time, she glanced up at Han and was startled to see that the Donya, making her rounds of the guests, had taken the seat next to him and they were deep in conversation.

As Leia watched the Donya laughed at something Han said, apparently so overcome she had to lean against his shoulder and lay her hand on his thigh to steady herself. *For the love of...* Leia thought sourly, facing forward again. *Why doesn't she just climb into his lap?* From what she knew of the Vitarin culture, the Donya probably thought it an intriguing novelty that Leia had Han here with her at all. The Vitarin weren't matriarchal like the Thetarans; males and females lived in separate but equal societies. The Vitarin men in the Enclave were in charge of other areas of the trading business, and there were strictly controlled times for social interactions between the sexes. Now that she thought about it, as the only young, personable humanoid male present, Han was getting more than his fair share of attention from the Vitarin acting as servers, too. She didn't know why it

should bother her; it was obviously putting Han into a better mood, but for some reason Leia felt terribly awkward until the Donya went on her way.

Everything went well until one of the Thetarans, a very large female with an old knife scar marring her features, leaned around the others to loom over Leia and say, "That's a very fine male you have. How does a little thing like you expect to hold on to him among all of us warriors?"

Leia's eyes narrowed in annoyance. This was one of the problems with honor-bound societies like the Thetarans -- dueling. She wasn't afraid; the aggressive Thetaran outweighed her by about three hundred pounds of mostly muscle, but once you had dealt with Sith Lords, it was hard to find ordinary people frightening. Leia dropped her hand to her blaster and said coldly, "I wouldn't if I were you."

The Thetaran considered her thoughtfully and decided she was serious. She held up a hand and smiled without showing teeth. "Just asking. Perhaps you would consider trading him to me for the night? I would pay well."

*It's a tempting thought, but he'd probably just enjoy it.* Leia said, "Sorry, no. You see, we're on our bridal trip."

The Thetaran seemed to accept that, though she probably hadn't a clue what the words meant. The confrontation over, Leia eased back against her cushions. She supposed she had been to diplomatic events that were more emotionally scarifying than this one, but she couldn't think of any just at the moment.

Han leaned down over her, close enough that she felt his breath on her cheek, and said, "If you're trying to keep my virtue intact for a higher resale value, I have to tell you, you're about twenty years too late."

That was it. "Han, if you don't shut up, I'm going to sell you to a Gisaran brothel." Her voice had been a little louder than his -- one of her Thetaran acquaintances had pressed another glass of the liquor on her -- and the Yerandin stared at them, his little eyes bulging from shock.

Han sneered. "Yeah, promises, promises."

Leia decided later it had been the high point of the evening.

\* \* \*

Late into the Freehold night, after about hundred years had passed, the banquet broke up, and the Vitarin led them and the other outsystem traders out through the grounds to a series of smaller buildings that were the guest quarters. The light from the dome had been dimmed to twilight, and glow globes floated above the path to light their way. Their guide stopped before a small building that was nestled in among the foliage, with a wider branch of the stream behind it, and said, "These are your quarters." The Vitarin glanced around cautiously, making sure the traders passing down the path to the other guest houses were out of earshot, and then whispered, "The Donya will send for you as soon as possible, to speak of the other matter."

As Leia was thanking her, Han stepped into the little house.

He stopped in the doorway, impressed in spite of himself.

The guest house was one large room, with three walls of the heavy logs rising to a high peaked roof, the fourth open to a view of the little canal, screened only by a drape of some gossamer-thin material. There wasn't much in the way of furniture, only a few stools and some richly carved cabinets of priceless wood. And a bed. It was a low platform, piled with cushions and silky patterned covers, with more of the gauzy material suspended from the ceiling, dropping to pool gracefully around it. For added privacy, he supposed, since one wall of the place was open.

He crossed the marquetry floor and brushed aside the curtain that looked out on the canal. There was a permeable field here, he could feel the temperature differential. It was holding in cool air, and maybe keeping out the few insects necessary for the vegetation with subsonics. The far side of the canal was lined with thickly-clustered foliage, though he knew there were guest quarters all through here. Clever landscaping probably gave everybody the illusion of complete privacy. He pulled the comlink off his belt and used the sensor attachment to screen the room for listening devices or holocams, nodding to himself when it came up clean. The Vitarin were playing straight so far, at least.

*Huh.* Han wandered back across the room. *Maybe this isn't going to be as bad as I thought.*

Leia walked into the room, shut the door and leaned back against it, closing her eyes briefly in relief. She was glad of the respite before she spoke to the Donya again. She needed to get her thoughts in order. Then she opened her eyes and looked at the room. And the bed.

Han was currently stretched out on it, spread-eagled. There was only one bed, of course. *Of course*, Leia thought, *they think we're bonded*. She smacked herself in the forehead with the heel of her hand. Her bag had been left on one of the wooden stools and she began to dig through it, looking for her reader and datadisks.

Han rolled over to sit up on one elbow. "I hope you're not planning to take advantage of this situation, Leia."

She muttered something to herself that he didn't quite catch. She looked around. "I don't suppose there's anything like a fresher unit, or would that ruin the ambiance?"

"Check that door."

Leia stepped through the door in the far wall. It was a little stone patio, apparently open overhead but screened on the sides by the heavy flowering vegetation. The main feature was a small pool set into the stone floor. There wasn't even a door to close it off from the main room. She stepped back inside. "That's just fucking great."

Han rolled onto his back again and stared at the vine-carved ceiling beams. *I didn't hear that*, he thought. *She must have said something else*. "So the Ishataran goons are really after us because they bought the Ascalon trading story, not because they know who we are."

Leia glared at him and grabbed for her comlink, and Han rolled his eyes. Sometimes she acted like she didn't think he had the brains to cross the street. "I did that already. It's clean."

"Oh." She subsided, looking tired suddenly. "That Yerandin knew more than he should. He could be Imperial, or just working for the Ishatarans."

"Why do these characters keep bringing up Alderaan? What has that got to do with it?" Han hadn't meant to ask that, but he kept thinking of that one tear. It had bothered him more and more as the awful day had worn on.

Leia was quiet for a moment. "It's because of Alderaan's position on slavery. You must have heard about it. It was never permitted in the system, even when the Empire made it legal again, and there was such pressure to just let it happen...." She shook her head. "That lieutenant Vagran thought I wouldn't agree to the Thetaran marriage because of it. He didn't ever expect us to go through with it."

Han thought that over. He had known that about Alderaan, but it was easy for inner worlds to take the high moral ground about their own citizens. None of them gave a damn about the outer worlds or the backwaters or the nonhuman races

without resources to defend themselves. "I heard about it, but I didn't think anybody took it seriously."

"Of course I take it seriously." Her voice was bitter.

Han took a deep breath. He might have known Leia would take her planet's convictions to heart. She was the most annoying woman he had ever met. And the Ishataran flunkies hadn't known their jabs, directed at the last surviving member of Alderaan's hereditary ruling family, were hitting home so well. He said, "So what's next on the program?"

Leia looked around. There wasn't anything like a chair, so she sat down on the floor with her reader in her lap. It was the first time in several hours that Han had said something that almost didn't sound sarcastic. He had been cooperating so far, sort of, and they couldn't afford to argue any more. She answered cautiously, "I have some more material I need to go over on the Vitarin trading interests so I can get through this without being exposed as a fraud. Intelligence should contact us soon." Leia hesitated. "Am I correct in assuming that we have a truce for the moment?"

Han didn't answer. She continued carefully, "I know this is exceptionally difficult, especially since we haven't known each other very long, and we haven't always gotten along together...."

"You're lucky we don't know each other a whole hell of a lot better by now. On the way back to the Port Authority, the Portmaster told me that the formal Thetaran marriage ceremony, which she would have been happy to arrange for us if we wanted it, usually takes about two hours and involves demonstrating consummation in front of a large crowd of whoever wants to watch, but she was willing to forego all that since she believed you when you said we were already married, and she thought the civil contract was enough to keep Vagran off our backs."

*Oh, my,* Leia thought. She felt herself blushing again. *That would have made an interesting anecdotal aside during my report to the High Council.* Dryly, she said, "That is lucky. If I'd known that, I guess you'd be on your way to Kessel by now."

He lifted his head, one eyebrow cocked, to see if she was serious. She kept her face deadpan, but had the feeling her flushed cheeks were betrayal enough. He let his head fall back without comment, and she said, "I think I'll go through this data, to make sure we don't have any more surprises in store."

"Do that."

Han woke some time later, maybe only an hour or two. He didn't remember falling asleep. The glow globes were out except for one dimmed to the lowest

setting. The dome's environment was set to get cooler during the "night," but one of the blankets had been pulled up over him. He didn't remember doing that, either. He sat up, running his hands through his hair, and looked for Leia.

She was lying on the floor, curled up with one of the bed cushions, and had apparently fallen asleep while reading the datadisks.

Han rolled his eyes. He had once told Luke that he didn't know if he was beginning to like Leia or if he wanted to kill her. He still didn't know. Lately, the urge in both directions had become almost overpowering.

He struggled out of the clinging silks and got to his feet. Gently, he gathered Leia up and lifted her off the cold wooden floor. She murmured something but didn't wake.

He laid her down on the bed and she snuggled into the warmth left by his body heat, still not waking. Leaning over her, he found himself in the middle of a moral struggle. *She has enough problems right now*, he thought finally, and managed just to kiss her lightly on the forehead. She sighed in her sleep, and he took some of the covers from the foot of the bed and went to sleep on the floor.

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Leia didn't even know what woke her. She was sitting bolt upright in the bed, groping for a weapon, before she realized it had been a soft knock. Han was already on his feet, blaster drawn, standing to one side of the door. She heard him ask a low, cautious question and the soft reply in a Vitarin voice. He glanced at her for confirmation and she nodded, "Yes, that's the woman the Donya was supposed to send for us."

Han eased the door open, holstering his blaster when he saw the Vitarin was alone. She peered curiously in, as Leia struggled out of the bed (*Bed?* She wondered, *how did I get up here?*) and grabbed up her blaster belt.

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"When were you first contacted?" Leia asked. They were in the Donya's quarters in the main building, a room with a long window looking down on the garden court. It was furnished much like the guest room, with carved cabinets and stools, and the Vitarin equivalent of a conference table -- a slightly sunken area in the floor, with cushions and fur rugs to sit or recline on.

"It was seven station days ago," the Donya said. There were four other older Vitarin females present, all in charge of different areas of the trading business. Department heads, Leia had mentally classified them. There were several other younger women forming an outer circle, some with lesser positions of authority and some who were barely more than children, here only to watch and learn. She had expected to meet Kifar Itran here, who was the Vitarin's usual contact with the Alliance, but she hadn't arrived yet and the Vitarin weren't sure what was keeping her. Her cover was a small but thriving supply business in the lower port ring, so perhaps she was simply running behind schedule. "This human approached Lianis, who is our broker in the station exchange. He came to her office there, and said that he was most desperate to contact the Alliance, he had information that they would want. She was confused and afraid, and her first thought was that this was some Imperial trick. So she told the human that he was mad, and to leave, and when he refused she called for security."

"That was the right thing to do," Leia said, turning over the implications of this. It was why Intelligence had felt that this wasn't an Imperial trick. *If the Empire knew about the Vitarin, they'd trace the cargos and trade routes, looking for our agents.* They wouldn't walk into the Vitarin broker's office and put them on their guard, on the off chance someone from the Alliance would show up. This felt...amateurish.

Lianis, who was sitting to the Donya's right, let out her breath in relief and relaxed a little.

"Did he come back?" Leia prompted. The Donya was laying the problem before her the way she would have a thorny legal issue for a solicitor. It was reassuring, because it meant the Vitarin were prepared to take her advice.

"Twice," the Donya said. "Lianis's assistants did not allow him to enter our offices."

"What did he look like?" Han asked. He was lounging on the cushions, completely at ease. The younger Vitarin kept gazing at him admiringly. They probably found it odd that a man was present at a meeting like this, but seemed to be enjoying the scandal. Before the meeting had started Leia had grabbed the opportunity for a quick private word with the Donya, hoping to clarify the situation.

"Donya, I wanted to explain--"

"You have our eternal thanks for coming here, Princess. The Alliance has proved that they are staunch friends."

"Yes, thank you, but I wanted to explain about that little mix-up at the port. Captain Solo isn't really my husband--"

"That is no difficulty," the Donya quickly assured her. "Among our people, women of high rank who have no time for the demands of family often take lovers. Of course we live apart from our men, but we understand that humans, and many other species, do these things differently." She looked admiringly at Han, who was standing across the room near the windows, arms folded, looking down at the court. "And he is very attractive."

The other Vitarin had arrived then, and Leia had been forced to give in, thinking, *fine, they think Han is my-- It's not doing any harm.* She was aware, though, that if it had been anyone else but Han it would have been only mildly embarrassing. *We're only going to be here for a few days,* she told herself firmly.

Now the Donya looked at Lianis, the only one who had gotten a good look at the man who seemed to know the Vitarin were helping the Alliance. Lianis said, "A human male, not as large as you, uh...." She floundered at the difficulty of describing a member of an unfamiliar species to another member of that species. Leia sympathized, having once had to describe a ven'Hirashi to another ven'Hirashi. ("He had really long tentacles," she had said. "Does that help?")

"Was his skin lighter or darker?" Han prompted.

"Lighter, but not as light as the Givari."

"And his hair?"

"Much darker." She looked at Leia. "More like you, but not nearly so much of it."

Leia listened while Han asked careful questions, trying to get a better picture of the mysterious man, but the answers weren't very encouraging. "Sounds like a nondescript mainstream human," he said finally.

Leia nodded, preoccupied. "You said you knew where the man was staying?"

"Yes." The Donya gestured again to Lianis. "The second time he came, Lianis called our Shipping office, which is run by the male clan. There is a man there from a part of Vitaris where the people have gray-toned skin and dark hair; he does not look very Vitarin to alien eyes. He came to the broker's office in time to follow the human back to one of the hostels in the hub. We had alerted your agent Kifar by this time, and she said she would try to find out how the human

had come here." The Donya frowned and looked around, as if expecting the Alliance agent to appear. "I am surprised she is not here yet. She is never late."

Leia frowned. There was another contact point on the station, that the Vitarin hadn't been informed about. Leia had been given the location in case she needed to speak to Kifar without the Vitarin present, but now she wondered if Kifar had left a message there for her, if perhaps the agent had discovered something between now and when the *Falcon* had left the fleet that made a meeting with the Vitarin...impolitic. After speaking to the Donya, Leia had to admit that she didn't feel this was a likely possibility, but she wanted to check the drop anyway. "I'll go down to Kifar's business and see if she's discovered anything," Leia said. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Han giving her what could only be referred to as a Look. She ignored it, having no time at the moment to figure out what she had done to him now. "Is there another exit from the Enclave I could use? The main one may be watched."

"Arian will guide you."

As the younger Vitarin led them down a beautifully carved wooden staircase from the Donya's rooms, Leia began, "If I'm not back by--"

"I'm going with you."

Leia pressed her lips together. Only Han could say that in such a way that it sounded like a threat. "It's not necessary," she said, a little stiffly. "I never intended you to participate actively in this. I know things haven't gone exactly as I planned--" She decided to ignore the rude noise Han made. "--but there's no reason to involve you further."

"Yeah, yeah. You go down there alone and you're going to attract a lot of attention. I thought the idea was to keep this quiet?"

"I will not attract--" Leia realized the Vitarin was following the argument with interest, and that Han was right, a small human going down to that area alone would be conspicuous. *And having to shoot my way out of a robbery or assault attempt and explain it to the station authorities wouldn't exactly help the situation, either.* And if it was anyone but Han, she wouldn't have hesitated for a moment. She took a hold of herself. "Fine, come along then, if you want to."

\* \* \*

Leia had found Kifar Itran's contact point, a credit-operated locker in a rental storage facility. It was in the tubeway that led to the lowest level of the docking

ring, the downport. It was darker than in the upper levels of the station, mainly because many of the lumas and utility glow globes were broken. Leia only saw one repair crew working to replace them, so it was a lack of proper maintenance on the station's part that was at least partly responsible. The metal walls were scarred and stained, the droids more run-down, the shops not as busy or well-lit and the passersby walked in groups and hurried. She opened the locker with the code she had been given back on the *Tantavie*, but it was empty. They had stopped by Itran's supply business on the way to the downport, but found it closed and dark.

"No messages?" Han asked, as she came back out of the storage facility.

"No." She hesitated, uncertain. She didn't want to wreck any plans Kifar Itran had already made, but she needed information. "I think I want to go to that hostel the Vitarin traced this man to. Of course, if he has any sense, he won't be there."

"But he'll have had to give a hololD to check in, and that should still be on file," Han said thoughtfully. "You got anything?"

"A codebreaker." The tiny device wasn't as elegant, or as hard to trace, as a droid such as Luke's R2D2 would have been, but a hostel or hotel wouldn't have a shielded terminal and it wouldn't be subject to repeated security sweeps that would reveal the traces of the device's presence. Leia had brought it along just in case she had to remove her image or retina pattern from any standard ID checks at the port, but the Thetarans hadn't required any.

"Let's go."

The hostel was an automated one, without even a droid attendant, built into the wall of the tube. They stopped in the entrance, a semicircular passage with ladders leading up into a narrow conduit, the six levels lined with the closed doors of the rooms. The light was dim, it smelled of dirty laundry and unwashed sentient, and all the bare metal surfaces had a greasy sheen. Leia wrinkled her nose. In the central port on Ratin-Le she had had to hide in a rented cubicle barely large enough to stand up in; she suspected it was the equivalent of a room at the Garden of Kilta compared to this place.

Leia stepped up to the check-in terminal and Han shifted to one side and leaned against the wall, his stance casual. To anyone passing by on the walkway outside, it would look like they were renting a room. *For what purpose, we won't worry about*, Leia thought, fixing the codebreaker over the terminal's direct input port. It took it only a few moments to break in, and with a little encouragement room codes, names, hololDs, and credit information began to scroll across the screen. Leia studied them intently. The high percentage of nonhumans was a blessing; there were only five humans registered in the hostel. Leia called up the hololDs for them and flicked through the faces. One was female, and three of the

others definitely not in the nondescript range. She flicked the display back to the best prospect and recorded his information into the codebreaker. "There he is," she said. The name he had given was "Sirot" and he hadn't listed a planet of origin. The verifications on his holoID were Imperial, but that only meant the ID had been issued in a system within the Empire.

Han looked, and grunted noncommittally. As Leia removed the codebreaker and tucked it back into her jacket, he said, "Which room?"

"Three levels up, four in." She turned to the nearest ladder and started to climb. As they reached the right level, two Voreen left a room just below and hurried for the exit, not showing any interest in them. Leia found the room, then stood lookout while Han worked on the lock. The speed and ease with which he convinced the supposed "security" lock to open was almost shocking. She would have to keep that in mind if she ever had to hide in one of these places. And she would have to get Han to show her how to do that.

Once he had the door open he stepped back and she slipped inside.

She looked around, frowning. The tiny room was empty, the floor decorated with discarded food wrappers. She quickly searched the built-in cabinets and shelves, the pull-out sleeping surface.

"Hurry up, dammit," Han said suddenly. Leia glanced up and heard the clatter of someone climbing down the nearest ladder. If they were lucky, it was a nonhuman who would think all bipeds looked alike. "All right, all right," she called back, with an irritability she didn't have to fake.

Either the passerby thought they belonged here or wasn't interested in reporting a room-rifling to the station authorities, and no alarms sounded. Leia finished her search, swearing under her breath, and stepped out of the room, sealing the door behind her. There were more people moving on the upper levels, and Han made immediately for the ladder as she appeared.

They didn't speak until they were outside the hostel and back on the walk. "There was nothing, just as we thought," Leia said, keeping her voice low. Han's only reaction was to frown suspiciously at a passing droid. Leia felt a flash of irritation, and immediately squelched it. *What do you want him to say?* she asked herself. "He must have spotted the Vitarin who followed him."

Han stopped so suddenly she almost ran into him. He was looking at a holo directory post. "There's five other hostels in this section. You want to check them first?"

It surprised her, that he wasn't ready to give up. For some reason she hadn't expected him to take this seriously. He was watching her impatiently, waiting for her answer. She said, "Yes, let's check those first."

They did the five in that section of the tube and the four further up without success before Leia called a halt. They had covered as much ground as they reasonably could tonight, and the areas around the low-rent hostels were becoming more crowded as the late shifts at the various cargo depots finished.

They were waiting for a passage car that would provide quick transport back to the hub when, looking around, Leia was struck by a sudden thought. She didn't have much experience with downports, besides being chased through one once at gunpoint, but surely not all the businesses along this section of the tube were brothels. She looked at Han, who was leaning on the railing of the transport station with a world-weary air. She said, "Do you think one of these places might have real food?"

He stared at her, and she realized she had surprised him. *Yes, she thought glumly, the princess actually thought of something besides the mission. Well, it's late, my feet hurt, I can't even find my intelligence operative, and I'm hungry.* She waited for the cutting remark, which in her current state she wouldn't be able to think of a suitable cutting reply to.

Instead Han shrugged one shoulder. "Yeah, but not around here. Let's go a little further hubward."

Further up the tube the neighborhood started to look better, and Leia saw several establishments that were obviously actual restaurants. She stopped on the walkway and looked around. The most attractive and well-lit one only catered to silicon-based lifeforms, according to the holo display in front. There was another one that had food suitable for mainstream humans, but it was one of the automated places, that didn't serve anything better than warmed over standard rations. Then she saw a little place buried in an out of the way access corridor that had signs in both basic and standard Corellian that claimed its fare was actually cooked on the premises. "What about there?" she said.

Han frowned at the signs, then shrugged noncommittally.

Inside there was a good-sized room, a little run-down but clean, the glowglobes tuned low. A standard holo display of a starry night sky covered the high ceiling and gave the place a less claustrophobic feel. There were even a few mainstream humans, including some Corellians at the other tables. There were also two Thetaran women who were probably there to ogle the Corellian men, and a group of three Ith'ick'thon, who waved their feelers in welcome as Han and Leia went past. "Hello," Leia murmured, nodding to them, as she and Han took seats at a table in the far corner of the room. Ith'ick'thon shared their experiences

with their podmates through chemical transmission, so what one member of the pod knew, the others knew. These might not be the same lth'ick'thon they had seen at the docking bay or the conference, but if they were part of the same pod, it hardly mattered. Han had bagged the chair that let him keep his back to the wall and face the door, which left Leia with her back to the door and the rest of the room, but it wasn't worth another argument.

There was a pad in the surface of the table where you could key in your credit account number and place your order, but as Leia was looking over the choices an older Corellian woman walked up to their table. She was obviously the proprietor.

She winked conspiratorially at Leia, then said to Han, "So why didn't you pairmate to a good Corellian girl?"

"Cause they told me you were taken, honey," Han replied, apparently without even having to think about it.

*That's all I need*, Leia thought sourly, returning to her menu. *More admirers for him*. She wondered why the woman had assumed they were pairmated. Han was being careful to keep the Thetaran marriage bracelet tucked under his sleeve.

"I thought I knew all the ships in port," the proprietor said. There was an odd note in her voice that made Leia glance up. She saw that the woman's expression was a little worried and wondered at it.

Han shook his head and looked up at her. "I'm on permanent charter to traders, honey, not pirates."

The woman had come over, Leia realized then, to make sure Han wasn't here to make trouble.

"Sorry." The proprietor patted his shoulder apologetically. "I had to check."

As she left, Leia considered Han, whose attention was apparently absorbed by the menu. Degoran, and a few others in the Alliance, had suspected Han of being a pirate too, at first. *Probably still*, she thought dryly. She said, "So you get that from other Corellians too?"

He shrugged noncommittally again. He was doing that a lot tonight, she had noticed. For a moment she thought that was all the answer she was going to get, but then he said, "Dirtsiders think anybody spacer-born is a pirate."

Leia nodded. She had never been able to tell the difference between planet-born and spacer-born Corellians, though apparently the distinction was vital to them.

But then she didn't expect Corellians were able to tell the difference between Alderaanians from the Stargat Islands and those from Central Isriani.

*Those places don't exist anymore.* It had caught her by surprise, and it was a bad moment. She took a deep breath and massaged her temples, thinking *just focus, Leia, come on.* After a moment, she realized Han had noticed, and braced herself for the usual consequences of showing her feelings: concern and questions she couldn't answer.

But Han only pretended more interest in the menu, while worriedly keeping one eye on her.

The food arrived none too soon. It smelled wonderful, but the arrangement seemed complex. Han noticed her bemused expression and condescended enough to explain, "You mix that one together, with that and that."

"Why?" Leia grumbled, just to have something to say. "Why don't they mix it when they cook it?"

"Because. And that goes on top of that."

"The crunchy things go on top of the soup?" she asked in disbelief.

"That's how I'm going to eat it. If you think it's a trick, you can wait and watch me do it."

Leia had to admit that the crunchy things tasted pretty good, even on top of the soup. As she ate, the pounding headache eased and the tension in her shoulders relaxed. The restaurant became quieter, as the earlier diners finished and left, and she had leisure to notice the music that was playing on the sound system.

It was like jizz-wailing in some ways, and in others completely different from it. Leia had always found jizz-wailing repetitive and coarse; this had the same heavy backbeat, but it varied, and the melody played around it with melting clarity and the singing voices were strong and skilled. Leia found herself wondering if she could get a copy of it somewhere; the comp terminal in her quarters on the *Tantavie* had an entertainment setup, not that she had ever used it. *It's been so long since I heard real music; I used to listen to it all the time.* The words were in some Corellian language that she wasn't familiar with, and the slyly ironic tone amused her. She asked Han, "What is this song about?"

He grinned a little, almost reminiscently. "It's about selling drugs to the Imperial occupation troops on Corellis, among other things. It's also about how the provisional government won't do jack about the Imps."

The next song was more serious in tone, though the irony was still there. "What's this one?"

Han frowned thoughtfully. "Let's see. 'It was a good year for fashion, it was a bad year for the music of the soul.' A guy is sitting in a garden, and a demon figure from some old religion comes to talk to him. 'I always liked you boy, 'cause you were never afraid of me.'" Han shook his head. "It's another metaphor for the occupation again, the collaborators, or the people who just tried to pretend it didn't happen."

"Are there any Corellian songs that aren't about the occupation?"

"Not that I've ever heard."

Leia considered Han thoughtfully. No, she didn't know him very well, but maybe she knew him well enough. No matter how tough a facade he might project, she knew he cared deeply about some things. She remembered his reaction, just after the fleet had left the Yavin system, when she had had to tell him that Imperial saboteurs had taken the *Falcon* and that Chewbacca was either dead or a prisoner. Han was capable of caring very deeply indeed.

She had realized lately that when your world was falling apart it was a coping mechanism to find one thing to hold onto that you couldn't live without, and to hold onto that thing for all you were worth. Han was holding onto a battered starship and a Wookiee with an evil sense of humor. Luke was holding onto Han and perhaps herself and, to a lesser extent, R2D2. *And what are you holding onto, Leia?* The Alliance, of course, but that didn't feel quite true. Unbidden, thoughts came to her of how relieved she had been when Han had gotten the *Falcon* back and found Chewbacca, and she knew that he meant to stay with the Alliance for a while. Or how desperately worried she had felt when Luke had gone on his first reconnaissance mission as a member of Red Squadron. She pushed those thoughts away deliberately. Holding onto people was dangerous. People were too easily hurt.

She knew what had destroyed Luke's world. The murder of his aunt and uncle, Kenobi's death at Vader's hands, his old friend Biggs Darklighter killed in the battle for the Yavin base. All the links he had to his past were gone. But she didn't know what had happened to Han. That something had happened, she was very sure, though just why she couldn't have said. Luke claimed to have gotten Han to admit that he had actually had a childhood of some sort, but for her and the rest of the Alliance personnel on the *Tantavie*, Han might not have had any existence at all before he had met Luke and Obi-wan Kenobi in Mos Eisley. She asked him, "Did you grow up in the Corellis system?"

He stared at her. "What?"

Leia resisted the attempt to make her think she had somehow asked him an improper question. "You heard me."

He let out his breath and looked away. "No."

"No?" Leia was so shocked at getting even this much information that she almost boggled.

"I was raised by werewolves on the seventh moon of Aerioli," Han said, returning his attention to the food.

"That explains a lot," Leia said politely. *Well, so much for that.* She poked at her food a little more. Direct questions wouldn't work; maybe the first step was just to get him to talk at all. She said, "I haven't seen Luke in a while. How is his training coming along?"

"He's getting there." Han eyed her for a moment, speculatively. "So the Alliance is going to use Luke as its pet Jedi."

"Obi-wan Kenobi apparently felt that Luke was ready for Jedi training," Leia said, automatically. It was the answer she gave to the doubters in High Command. But she glanced up to find Han regarding her with a skeptical expression.

Before she could bristle, he said, "And Kenobi had nothing but the kid's best interest at heart, as opposed to the people who raised him, who got themselves toasted to death to keep from telling the Imps where he was. It never occurred to you that if this guy Owen Lars, who was raising a Jedi Knight's son, thought it was a bad idea to let Kenobi near him then maybe he had a good reason for it?"

Leia had never thought about it quite that way. She said finally, "Kenobi was very well-respected on Alderaan...."

Han drew breath to speak and stopped abruptly. Leia met his eyes and spoke the thought he was holding back, "And we all know what happened to Alderaan, don't we?" She shook her head. "I know Kenobi contacted my father several times. I knew where he was living on Tatooine, that's why I tried to send the droids to him when the Empire captured Captain Antilles' ship. But...."

"But it was funny he never came to Alderaan to work with the rebellion," Han finished, watching her thoughtfully. "Could've been useful, having a full-fledged Jedi Knight around."

"Perhaps Kenobi thought it was more important to guard Luke, one of the last known members of a Jedi family," Leia said, though as a hypothesis she didn't quite believe it herself.

"Perhaps your father told him if he ever saw him within spitting distance of the Alliance he'd blow his head off."

Leia looked up sharply. "What makes you say that?"

Han looked wary. "Nothing."

Leia rolled her eyes in exasperation. Han had gotten that tight, closed expression that meant all attempts at communication were about to cease abruptly. "For the love of... Han, I'm not going to blame anyone for their opinion. Was it Rieekan? I know he feels this way too."

Han eyed her suspiciously, then said, grudgingly, "Maybe."

Leia pressed her lips together. Han was awfully good at getting information out of other people, considering how evasive he was in answering any questions about himself. She had also had time to notice that Han had been speaking to her with no self-consciousness, no deference, and that she had been revelling in it. It was the way he always spoke to her. So many of the people on the *Tantavie* treated her with an unnecessary reverence that made her feel like she was in a straightjacket. Especially since she knew it was due more to Alderaan's destruction than her own position or accomplishments. Han was one of the few people who would tell her when she said something stupid. Maybe that was why she felt so drawn to him, despite their disagreements. She just wished he liked her a little more. "All right, so neither of us particularly enjoys being told what to think, and Kenobi was very good at that." She added, without thinking about it, "My father was pretty damn good at it too, so I can't imagine why the two of them didn't get along better."

Han's lips twitched.

It wasn't until an hour after they left the restaurant that Leia realized she didn't know any more about Han now than she had before. She shook her head at herself and gave it up. She had no business prying, anyway.

\* \* \*

Though at one point Leia felt it likely that she would turn up at the opening session of the trading conference with dripping hair and one boot, she did manage to make it on time and in reasonably presentable condition. She would

have made better time if she hadn't been distracted by the array of soaps and hair lotions in the bathing area; she had been sorely tempted to sneak a few bottles into her bag to take back with her.

The conference was really a competition between the delegates, and compete they did. The Donya, anxious for an update on the situation, called Leia in for a quick private meeting after the first session. The other delegates took this as a sign of preference for Ascalon and the competition became fierce. Leia would have enjoyed it, if she hadn't had so many other things on her mind. And if some of the delegates hadn't been overly persistent in their attempts to either suborn or outmaneuver her. Often it was the Yerandin, breathing down Leia's neck and straining her patience and tact to the utmost.

And she was worried about Han. After the formal breakfast for the delegates, they had decided Han would try to contact Kifar Itran at her supply business. That had seemed a good idea this morning, but as the day wore on with no word from him she worried more and more about Vagran and Ishataran Security. Itran's supply business was in the port ring and would be included in the Ishataran security sweeps, and she certainly didn't trust them to keep to their contracted patrol routes. Han had shrugged this off, while draped decoratively across the bed, pointing out that he had been in less crowded places with more people after him and had no problems.

She knew he meant it to be reassuring, but it hadn't been.

When Han strolled up to her in the courtyard during a break in the late afternoon session, her relief expressed itself as annoyance. "Where have you been?"

Han stared at her. "Where do think?"

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry," she said, knowing she didn't sound very sorry. *Leia, a modicum of self-control would be nice.* "Did you find Itran?"

Han shook his head. "She never opened the place today."

Leia frowned. "Did you--"

"I waited a couple of hours, but she never showed up. I checked that locker again too; your message was still there and nothing from her. There was a food vendor across the corridor from her business, and he said she didn't open up yesterday, either. He says she's never kept the place closed this long before, and her customers are beginning to go to other suppliers. He's worried."

Han's expression suggested that he thought the concerned vendor had reason to worry. Leia said, "We need to find out where she lives--"

"When she didn't show up at the business, I came back here, found what's-her-name, the little one who's the Donya's assistant. She knew where Itran lived, so I went there. She has an apartment in the urban section of tube eight. Nobody home."

"Maybe she was ill and couldn't come to the door--"

"Well, yeah, I thought of that, so I went in. She wasn't there. The place hasn't been cleaned out, so she hasn't taken off or anything. The food in the cold unit was still good, so she hasn't been gone long either, no more than a couple of days at most."

No point in asking Han how he had gotten in to Kifar's apartment. "She's in trouble," Leia said. What if Kifar and the other operatives were wrong, what if Leia's instinct was false, and the Empire was involved? If the Empire even suspected the Vitarin were shipping goods to the Alliance, they were all dead. *But there is no Imperial presence in the system, and if the Empire had Kifar Itran, it would already have moved in.* Unless the Vitarin were cooperating with the Empire. *But I just don't think that's the case.* She knew that it was possible to suborn anyone, that the Empire was quite capable of forcing cooperation by taking hostages or any other means, but the Vitarin just seemed too...normal. "We need to find this man--" She stopped abruptly. Her comlink was set to vibrate instead of sounding an audible alarm, and she had just felt it shiver on her belt. From Han's expression she could tell he had just done the same. They exchanged a look. The comlinks were set to detect directional listening devices.

"It's going fairly well, actually," Leia said, as if continuing a commonplace conversation about the conference. She kept up a stream of inanities while Han surreptitiously adjusted the settings on his comlink, trying to get a direction on the source of the listening device. He succeeded, and inclined his head toward the opposite corner of the court. Leia managed a casual glance in that direction, and was unsurprised to see the Yerandin, who seemed to be fiddling with something in a bag at his belt. *What an amateur,* Leia thought in disgust.

Still talking, she moved toward the wall, Han following her, until the fountain was between them and the Yerandin. Han checked his comlink again and said, "We're okay, he's lost the fix."

The Yerandin was angling for another position to eavesdrop on them with his listening device. Leia and Han casually strolled around the fountain, blocking him again. Han said, "If he keeps that up I'm going to insert that directional bug into him through the first orifice I find."

Leia shook her head. She really didn't think the Yerandin was working for the Empire; the more she saw of him, the more she thought he was just an overzealous and unscrupulous businessman, in the pay of the Ishataran

Conglomerate. She rubbed her forehead. She had had a headache all day. At least all the delegates at the conference seemed to find her cover convincing, and the Yerandin seemed to have helped that along by discussing her with the others. "Do you know, that Ruurian delegate for the Sitarel Corporation told me he thinks I'm horrid. That was the word he used, horrid."

"Yeah," Han said, smiling reminiscently. "When you were talking to the Disellian this morning, the Ruurian snuck up to me and offered to help if I wanted to escape from you. I told him I couldn't 'cause I knew if I beat it you'd just sell all our kids to Gisaran brothels, and I'd feel like a jerk if I ran out on all your other indentured husbands back home. I told him I really appreciated the offer, though."

Leia looked up, just in time to see the little insectoid Ruurian, standing across the court, glare at her in disgusted contempt and turn huffily away. "Thank you, Han. Thank you very, very, very much." She told herself to hold on to her temper. *He could make this much more difficult than he already has.*

Siavi, the Donya's assistant, was hurrying across the court toward them. "The human, he has called the broker's office again," she said breathlessly, as Leia took her arm and steered her around the fountain so the Yerandin's listening device wouldn't pick her up. Leia saw the Donya had entered the court, and was making her way across it, stopping to speak to the different groups of delegates along the way. Siavi continued, "He wants to meet with Lianis. She put him off, but he said he would call again."

Leia thought quickly. She didn't like to move without Itran, but there was no help for that. "Tell Lianis to arrange a meeting at the office for 0100 tonight."

Siavi's white brows drew together and she looked worried. Leia continued, "Tell Lianis not to be there. We want to get a look at this man and follow him back to where he's staying." If the man had somehow captured Kifar, he might lead them right to her.

"Ah, I see." Siavi was relieved. "I'll call Lianis at once."

As she hurried away, Han gave Leia an enigmatic look and turned to go.

"Wait," Leia said, then found herself hesitating. Han had stopped. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"To get some sleep. Is that okay, honey?"

Leia smiled, tightly. She suspected that with that tone in his voice Han could start a fight in a colony of pacifist Bisanan Nuns, given enough time. She said, "Yes, darling."

The Donya moved up beside her, cool and elegant in a blue robe several shades darker than her skin tone, her hair braided with strings of delicate crystal. She was watching Han walk away. Or actually, Leia suspected, she was watching the lithe sway of Han's hips as he walked away. Leia might fault her for that, if she hadn't been watching the same thing herself. *So I'm not a full-fledged hypocrite, she thought, just an acting one.*

Han rounded the corner at the far end of the court, and both women glanced at each other. The Donya smiled and said, "He is a little difficult, hmm?" Leia's last exchange with Han hadn't been a loud one, and everyone else had been out of earshot, but the body language must have been eloquent.

"He is extremely difficult," Leia said, grimly. Then shook her head and added ruefully, "I'm not exactly easy, myself."

The Donya made a graceful gesture with her hand, the Vitarin equivalent of a shrug. "Restful men can be very comforting sometimes," she said. "But difficult ones are better in the bed."

Leia smiled back, thinking *I wonder how she would react if I said "I wouldn't know."* Probably stare blankly at her, or fall on the floor laughing. *No, more likely she'd take me aside and gently recommend some sort of therapy.* Leia thought she could guess what sort of therapy the Donya would recommend, too.

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