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SOLO'S DEFLATING COME-UPPANCE

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There were times when Leia Organa wondered why she'd ever chosen a political career. Well, not that she'd had much choice. And it was worse now that she was a member of a military High Command Council. She looked across the long table where Generals Dodonna and Rieekan were arguing. Maybe she could resign, take up a job in the Hoth Base's Engineering Pool. Something! Anything! Rieekan was losing the battle. He'd never stood a chance with Mon Mothma's courier-delivered sealed orders backing Dodonna. Mothma - a woman! How could she! Leia shook her head, decided she'd had enough of the shouting.

"I'll go," she announced loudly. Both men turned and gaped at her. "I don't have to like it, but ..." she sighed, "if Mothma really believes this Pact with Am'zonian will save Rebel lives ..."

"It will," Dodonna said emphatically. Leia gritted her teeth and tried to smile politely as the aging General went on to state all the particulars of Am'zonian's strategic importance. For the fourth time that morning.

Rieekan, bless him, cut his fellow General short with a concise list of practical questions concerning personnel, timing and other factors needed to get this mission up and running. He consulted with Leia concerning a likely pilot and ship, and finally they concluded that since there were no female pilots familiar with the system, it would have to be one of the men. The problem then being to find one least likely to rouse the volatile all-female Am'zonian warrior government to violence. They were extremely sensitive to points of honour regarding a non-bonded male stepping foot on their planet. Leia felt sorry for whomever was chosen but was relieved when Rieekan suggested Commander Callew - middle-aged, greying, definitely unattractive, and most pedantic about matters of

protocol. His temperament reminded Leia of Threepio. Which in turn reminded her they'd need to take the droid as well to provide fluent communication - and a thorough knowledge of the complex Am'zonian culture.

Leia rubbed her hand over her aching brow. Two Threepios! It was going to be a long, unpleasantly tedious mission. But at least this time she'd managed to avoid having Captain Solo escort her. She flinched as the tension headache worsened at the very idea of Solo on Am'zonian! War with the Empire would seem a picnic by comparison to the mess Solo's swaggering arrogance could cause among the fierce warrior women! Am'zonian men were little better than slaves, regarded as of use for no more than breeding and to serve as domestic labour.

Leia's eyes rounded at that image and her lips twitched with a wicked smile. What a shame she couldn't afford to offend the Am'zonians!

* * *

The pilots' canteen close by the hangar bays was always full of raucous voices and laughter, but today, as Commanders Antilles and Skywalker entered, they found one man had centre stage and everyone else was hushed to listen to him.

"But I'm a married man!" Callew wailed for the second time. "My wife will kill me!" The men gathered about him were less than sympathetic. They offered several less than helpful suggestions, then, laughing loudly, turned away and went back to their meals. Desperately, Callew turned on the newcomers. He grabbed at Antilles' arm. "Ya gotta help me, Wedge!"

Antilles pulled his arm free and tried not to grin as he stepped around his fellow pilot. "No way! Sorry. I've heard some real strange things about those warrior women!"

Luke, who had not heard the details about this latest mission, was immediately curious. "Warrior women?" he asked.

Callew's eyes narrowed as he regarded Skywalker. Where was he from? Some backwater world no one ever visited? Oh yeah, Tatooine! The perfect target for a con job! "Very beautiful, half-naked warrior women!" he put in smoothly. "Most men'd give their right arms to have a permit to go there! It's just my wife, y'know, and ..." he began trying to guide Skywalker to sit down with him at an empty table.

Wedge pulled Skywalker away and shook an admonishing forefinger at Callew. "Not nice, Cally!" he turned back to Luke. "Am'zonians, Luke! Haven't you ever heard of them!?" Skywalker blushed and shook his head.

Wedge looked back at Callew. "Sorry, pal, the Princess wants you to pilot. Orders are orders, ya gotta go."

Callew scowled. "Not if I can avoid her till the war ends!"

"Fat chance!" Wedge laughed.

There was a loud electric screech as the PA came on line. Everyone flinched and covered their ears, wishing the techs would get round to fixing that line. Finally the Deck Officer's voice came through, loud and clear. "Commander Antilles, return to your craft."

"Damn," Wedge muttered, "there goes lunch! I knew that Artoo unit'd never follow my specs! See you guys later!"

Luke nodded, then turned back to Callew. Mention of Leia Organa had him more interested than ever. "The Princess wants you to pilot?"

"Yeah," Callew sighed miserably. "To Am'zonia." The cunning expression returned to his face. "So, you never heard of the place, huh? C'mon, let's get some chow and I'll tell you all about it!"

Some minutes later, laden with a meal tray, Luke slid into a seat beside the greying pilot and asked, "Why would your wife object to you accepting this mission?"

"Well, like I was saying," Callew tried not to smile, "those women are so incredibly beautiful, and they go about bare-breasted when they're not busy fighting one another ..." There was a choking sound and Callew saw that Skywalker was having great difficulty swallowing his food. He pushed a mug of water to the youngster and waited until Skywalker had recovered. "I hear you're an excellent pilot, hero of The Death Star, 'n all." Skywalker looked embarrassed all over again, avoiding Callew's eyes by returning to his meal. "You'd have to be a better pilot than me. If I filled you in on the specs for the Am'zonia system, well, I mean, you could really save my neck, if you'd ..." he paused.

"Go for you?" Luke asked over his chewing. Callew nodded eagerly. "Sure, but only if the Big-Brass okay it."

Callew's sallow face was suffused with pure joy. He leaned across the table and slapped Skywalker's arm in heartfelt gratitude. "Thanks, son!" he beamed. "I owe ya one! Don't worry about the Brass, I'll let 'em know I've squared you away for the navigation and such."

* * *

And so it was that two days later Luke Skywalker found himself confronted by Leia Organa's furiously burning dark eyes as she came marching toward her transport, Threepio in tow, then stopped dead as she recognised him. The fury built to inferno strength as she discovered Commander Callew had somehow, illicitly, switched places with young, blonde, inexperienced, and very cute, Skywalker. The Am'zonian warriors would never believe she hadn't bonded him! She'd never disentangle that mess before they began fighting over him themselves!

Leia didn't tell Luke any of that, she simply snapped, "Threepio, go get Commander Callew! Now!"

The droid knew better than to hesitate when she used that tone. He hurried away in a scraping of metallic feet, muttering "Oh dear, oh dear, my circuits were not made for all this rushing about!"

Luke swallowed hard and dared to step closer to the Princess who had turned away from him, her arms folded tight across her chest and her foot tapping like a detonator set to explode. "I thought you'd be pleased to see me," he said in a wounded tone. Silence. Leia's back stiffened further and her foot tapped faster. "I flew you to Altonia okay, didn't I? Well, I mean, I know Han insisted that he was the one who found that..."

"That's not the point!" Leia snapped, interrupting. "Piloting has nothing to do with it. As Callew knows full well!"

"But ..." Luke flinched and looked down at his boots. "Cally gave me all the specs for this mission. He thought I could handle it and ..."

"He said that!?" Leia shouted angrily. "And I thought I could trust him! He's no better than Solo! He knows perfectly well how much danger a ... a ... someone like you would face on this mission!"

There was a clomping or footsteps behind them, and Han Solo appeared from behind the shuttle, yawning and stretching as he made his way from the Falcon to the Base Canteen. "Oh, it's you two makin' all the noise," he drawled. "I mighta known. Keep it down would ya, most respectable people are still in their beds at this unholy hour."

"Which would explain why you're awake!" Leia immediately snapped at him.

Solo merely gave her the lopsided, cocky smile that always made her blood pressure climb. "And a very good morning to you too, Your Snippetiness." He yawned again and leaned back against the shuttle's

hull. "I did say most respectable people," he turned his hand over and examined his nails, "I, of course, am the sole exception ..."

"Ha!" Leia snorted. Luke smiled.

"... and," Solo continued smoothly, "I would still be in my nice warm bed if I hadn't seen a storm approaching on the horizon. And heard it too."

Luke took the bait. "What storm?" He turned instinctively toward the hangar doors which still closed, blocked any view of morning weather.

"This storm." Solo impishly delivered his punchline, inclining his head toward Leia Organa. "Tiny but intense!"

Luke blushed but he couldn't help thinking that Leia's eyes did seem to be flashing with lightning bolts as she reacted to that comment and glared up at the tall smuggler Captain. Solo, unaware of his peril, simply grinned down at her and opted to provoke her even further.

"I'm sure I heard my name taken in vain in the midst of one of those thunderclaps," he said. "Now surely Your Tempestuousness, you can't mean there's someone on this iceball who can get you all steamed as well as I?"

Leia blinked, then frowned, trying to remember what she'd been saying when Solo had shown up. Then she wondered why she was bothering. "You may have time for these inanities, Captain," she snapped, "but Commander Skywalker and I have a mission waiting!"

Solo's eyebrows climbed and his mouth twitched as he repeated, "Inanities?!" But Skywalker said at the same time:

"Then I can go?" his blue eyes brightened hopefully.

"No!!" Leia whirled back to him.

"Mistress Leia! Mistress Leia!" Threepio could be heard babbling in semi-hysteria as he hurried toward them. "Oh, this is terrible!"

Leia gritted her teeth, rubbed a hand over her aching brow and turned to confront the droid, who almost overbalanced as he came to a sliding halt before her. "Threepio!!" she growled, "could you for one just tell me the bad news without making a song and dance out of it!?" She heard Solo chuckle behind her and seriously considered pulling her blaster and shooting him in the foot.

"Song and dance, Mistress?" Threepio asked in puzzlement. "Why I have only had the most rudimentary of training in that ..."

"Auugh!" Leia screamed. She turned about and made to bang her head against the shuttle's metallic hull, thought better of it and cushioned her face against her arm.

Solo patted her on the back, then made tsking noises as she slapped at him. He turned to Threepio. "She's having a hard day, Goldenrod. I'd just tell her the news and get the hell out of here if I were you."

Threepio's eyes seemed somehow to widen in fear as he looked up at Solo. "Er, yes," he mumbled. "Your Highness," he reported stiffly, "I'm afraid Commander Callew is not on planet at present. He swapped shifts with Captain Janssen and is now on patrol with Gold Squadron."

Solo and Skywalker turned in time to see Leia Organa's small, gloved fist pound the shuttle.

"Now, now, let's not damage Rebel equipment, Highnessess," Solo took her hand and tried to rub it. She took a swing at him but he side-stepped, lifting both hands in a gesture of appeasement. "C'mon, you couldn't seriously want Callew to pilot for ya! He's almost as fussy as Tin-Britches here!"

If Threepio had had a jaw it would have been hanging agape as he reacted to that title. He recovered to move closer to Leia and put a consoling hand to her shoulder. "Perhaps it would be best if the mission could be postponed?"

"Postponed?!" Leia laughed somewhat hysterically. "Postponed!? Threepio you know better than that! Remember who we're dealing with!"

"Oh dear," the droid moaned. "I forgot. Oh, this is terrible."

"Hey, what's the problem," Solo put in. "Seems to me Luke's all geared up and ready to help out. Right, kid?"

Luke opened his mouth to confirm that, but got no further as Leia turned to Solo and shouted shrilly, "Do you know what you're saying!? Luke can't go! It's too dangerous! He'd never come back!"

"Oh, come on," Solo protested, "it can't be that bad. He took on the Death Star and came out a hero, remember?"

"That's right," Luke dared to speak up. "And this mission's a milkrun, all the guys say so. There's no Imperial action anywhere near Am'zonia."

Solo's jaw dropped. He stared from Luke to Leia. "Am'zonia!! You can't take the kid to Am'zonia!"

"I'm not a kid!" Luke objected.

"Tell that to those ... those ... cradlesnatchers!" Solo told him.

"Cradlesnatchers?!" Luke looked all the more incensed.

"I'm glad to see you understand the situation at last, Solo," Leia said sarcastically. "If you'd only let me explain ..."

Solo snapped his fingers. "That's why you wanted Commander Virtuous Callew to go with you!"

"Right," Leia nodded. "I don't know how he managed to wriggle out of this but I swear I'll have him demoted to cook's assistant! We'll have to scrub this mission now. So much for any alliance with Am'zonia."

"Aww, that's a shame," Solo agreed absently, his mind working furiously as he tried to come up with a solution.

Recognising that expression, Leia warned, "Don't even think it! If Luke can't go you certainly wouldn't be any safer!"

"Why, Your Royalness," Solo said warmly, "I never knew you cared!"

"Will someone please tell me what's going on here?!" Luke pleaded. "Why would it be so dangerous for either of us to go? I don't get it!"

"Oh, but you would if you went!" Solo smirked.

"That's enough!" Leia snapped. "The mission is cancelled, that's all there is to it! Scrapped, aborted, blown!"

"Not true," Solo grabbed at her as she made to leave. "I got an idea!"

"No," she insisted, shaking him off and continuing to march out of the hanger. "It's best this whole thing dies a clean death."

"Aww, c'mon," Solo followed at her heels, "at least hear me out."

"Yeah," Luke backed him up, "the shuttle's all fueled and ready to go and you'd rather go see Dodonna."

That brought the Princess to a sudden halt. Solo gave Luke a wink by way of congratulations. "The kid's right, Princess," he argued, "hey, we three smuggled those plans out from under Vader's nose on the Death Star, we can handle one little mission to Am'zonian!"

Leia sighed heavily enough to send a cloud billowing in the frost ice hangar air. "I just know I'm going to regret this." She turned about to face the two men and noted Solo was trying desperately not to grin. "So what's your plan, hotshot?"

"Oh, it's simple," Solo began.

Leia lifted a hand, interrupting him. "Don't say it, please, don't say it!"

"What?" he looked at her, all wide-eyed innocence and she stifled the urge to scream in pure frustration.

"Trust me," Luke said for her, his lips twitching merriment as he looked up at his tall smuggler friend. "She hates it when you say 'trust me'."

"Oh?" Solo thought that over, then shrugged. "I can't imagine why. Look, Highness, my plan'll work out fine, but I need all the details from you first."

"I don't know," she said slowly ... it's classified."

Solo snorted. "I'll bet it is!"

Luke frowned at him. "You already know why, don't you!" Solo nodded. "This isn't fair! I'm the only one who doesn't know what's going on!"

Leia was watching Solo carefully. "You've been to Am'zonian, Solo? You couldn't have! I mean, they wouldn't let you ..."

He turned to give her a slow, sly smile. "You think not, Your Worship?"

Leia's hands went to her hips. "You couldn't have!!!" she challenged.

"Maybe, maybe not, but I sure know more about the place than Luke does!" Solo draped an arm about Skywalker's shoulders. "I can tell him all about it, seein' as how you've been sworn to secrecy. The fact is the Falcon will get you there faster than any of these Rebel hulks. Luke can go along as your official escort ... and Goldendome can do all the talking - and I'll watch your backs! Especially Luke's!" he smiled down at Leia. "What could be better than that?"

"Oh, just about anything!" Leia told him sweetly.

"Anything except Dodonna, right?" he countered.

Leia threw up her hands. "All right, all right, you win! We'll go with you, but this plan of yours better be good!"

"I promise you, you'll love it!" Solo brought his arm down in a gracious sweep, indicating Leia should precede him to the Falcon. She had taken only one step forward when he added, "Trust me."

Two sleepy-headed refuellers approaching a group of X-wings were startled by Leia's exasperated cry of AUGH!!!

* * *

Ten standard hours later the Millennium Falcon was cleared for landing in a field in dense jungle outside Am'zonian City. Just as the plasi-crete squares surrounded by towering purple□coloured trees could hardly be termed docking bays, nor was Am'zonian City strictly speaking a city. To Leia, watching curiously over Solo's shoulder as they made a fly-over, it looked like little more than an overgrown village. The clans and tribes of Am'zonian were chiefly nomadic hunters and herdswomen who gathered here only for Festival Days and whenever important inter-tribal decisions needed to be settled.

Those decisions usually involved the near-continuous raiding and minor wars which Leia had been assured would be held in abeyance for the duration of her visit. She certainly hoped so - she already had enough problems. It had taken her the entire flight□time to convince Solo his plan needed major modification, including the fact that he was not to accompany her off-ship. She was still uncertain about taking Luke along, but it was true she would have little or no bargaining power without him.

Now, studying the sharp, angry movements of Solo's hands as he made the necessary flightboard changes for landing, she decided she should make ready to leave the Falcon as quickly as possible. "I'm going to sit with Luke and Threepio," she said, standing and heading for the common room.

"Ha!" Solo snorted, "you mean you're gonna make sure he doesn't try to stow himself somewhere you can't find him! I'm telling ya, the plan was fine the way I laid it out, but oh no, you had to ..." he stopped short as he realised Leia was no longer in the cockpit. "Women!" he complained to Chewbacca, "always thinking they know better! I'm the one who's been here before!"

The Wookiee turned to give his partner a brightly accusing stare.

Solo had to look away. "Yeah, well, so I didn't tell her I've never actually been beyond the landing field. I only let her think I've been to the city so she'd let me go along! She'd be safer with me and you know it!"

Safer from the tribeswomen perhaps, Chewbacca rumbled. *But not safe from you!* he chortled and snuffled at his joke.

"Laugh it up!" Solo scowled. "I have only the most honourable of intentions!"

Chewbacca let out a disbelieving bark that rattled the entire cockpit. *Don't bother trying to fleece me, Solo! We both know you've been itching to try your luck with the natives ever since you first laid eyes on them - from this side of the viewport! We could never have made any runs here if not for the fact that that Am'zonians think there's an all-Wookiee crew on the Falcon. They always treat me with the utmost courtesy ...*

"And are real happy to get the - special - goods we bring in."

Chewbacca nodded. *But if they knew you were with me there would have been a riot.*

"True, true," Solo said smugly. "Women just lose all control when they see someone so spectacularly good-lookin'!"

That exaggerated opinion is going to be the end of you someday, Solo! How many times must I tell you ...

"Please, not again!" Solo pleaded, flipping toggles as he guided the Falcon down between the border of trees.

Chewbacca ignored him. *You are as reckless as a cub in a garra-fruit patch!* Beside him, he noted Solo's mouth working as he imitated the oft heard rebuke. *And never more true than when we visit Am'zonian. How

would it look to Skywalker and the Princess if they returned to find you tied to your bunk!*

Solo's head jerked and his eyes widened in panic. "You wouldn't! Not again! I stayed put the last two times with (?) no trouble!"

Only because I tied you down that first time you tried to go out there and impress the locals with your boyish charm.

"Yeah well," Solo grouched, looking embarrassed as he turned back to his flightboard. "That was different. I was only a kid then, as green as Skywalker is now." He grunted. "But he gets to go! Figures!"

And he isn't happy about it! Chewbacca growled. *That's what makes the difference! He worships the Princess, you know he'd do anything to be close to her. He won't be making eyes at every maiden he sees.*

"Ha!" Solo said sourly. "If I know Luke - and I do! - he won't dare take his eyes off his feet! What a waste!"

Skywalker will make a perfect haksu, Chewbacca concluded. *No maiden would ever believe you were Leia's love-slave.*

Solo sighed forlornly and repeated, "What a waste!" He completed the sequence for engine shut-down and immediately got to his feet. "I gotta talk her out of this!"

Chewbacca lifted his hands to his head, grabbed at his fur and let out an exasperated howl.

* * *

Busy trying to cajole Luke into leaving the relative safety of his seat at the holo-chess table, Leia was startled as Solo suddenly appeared at her side.

"I tell ya I got a bad feeling about this," the Corellian protested. Then he did a double-take as he noted Leia's altered appearance, though he couldn't see much for the hooded cloak she had wrapped about herself. "You got your hair down under there, haven't you! Aww, c'mon, don't I even get a peek!" She glared at him and took a step back.

"You know very well the Am'zonians expect us to dress as they do!" she snapped.

"Yeah, well," he drawled. "I'll bet you didn't copy the style in every little detail!"

Leia blushed bright red, knowing precisely what he meant. "I am not presenting myself as a Maiden, Solo! That was the only part of your plan I liked!"

Solo smirked and leaned back against the bulkhead. "And here I didn't think a woman could change outfits in anything less than an hour. You sure move fast! But I see Luke's still in uniform!"

"Can't I go like this?" Skywalker immediately pleaded, looking up at the Princess. "Couldn't you tell them you order me to cover up?"

"But, Master Luke," Threepio put in, "that is not local custom. The Tribal Council would be most offended and thus Her Highness would have far less chance of establishing ..."

"If you'd only stick to the original plan," Solo ignored the droid and said to Lea, "nobody would feel embarrassed."

"A deal is a deal, Solo," Leia told him sharply, "Isn't that your favourite saying? You'll get your exorbitant fee as independent pilot only if you stick to the terms of the deal and obey Alliance Mission Command Procedure."

"Meaning you," Solo said unhappily.

"Meaning me," she nodded. "Come on, Luke," she grabbed at his arm.

Watching as Skywalker was very reluctantly dragged from his seat, Solo commented, "It was a great plan and now you've gone and sabotaged it. Go ahead and get yourselves in a whole mess of trouble, see if I care! Just don't expect me to come running to your rescue."

Leia ignored him as she concentrated on Skywalker. "It's no use putting off the inevitable, Luke. You want to escort me, you have to play the part."

"I know, I know," Luke said sullenly. "But that was before I saw ..." he waved a hand at the open cabin door across the room.

"No buts," she gave him a shove toward the cabin. "Go and change. I left the necessary ... outfit ... all laid out for you."

Solo snorted. "One piece! Not much bigger than my hand! Musta taken some ... Owwww!" He grabbed at his foot after freeing it from beneath Leia's stamping boot□heel.

Luke gave Solo a look that said he deserved it, then sighed dispiritedly, squared his shoulders, and marched into the cabin, locking the door behind him.

"You'll probably need a weld-torch to get him out of there again," Solo smirked. Leia advanced on him menacingly and he backed off, raising his hands placatingly. "This is cruel, y'know. There's absolutely no reason why he can't stay here and I could ..."

"No!" Leia snapped, an edge of panic in the word.

Solo bit at his lip as he tried to hold back a grin. "You could at least take me too. Lotsa Am'zonian women have more than one haksas."

"I am NOT Am'zonian!!" Leia yelled.

"But you're supposed to act like one to keep 'em happy and win that Treaty, right?"

"I do not need two ... two ..." she spluttered.

"Sex-slaves?" Solo finished helpfully.

She glared pure murder back at him. "Two haksas would not win that Treaty for me any faster."

"Oh? Is that so! Look," Solo swaggered across to the holo-chess table, slid into the seat and leaned back, putting his hands behind his head. Unknown to Leia, he had just done a quick check to make sure Chewbacca was nowhere in hearing. "I been here before, remember? I know for a fact that the more - haksi -" he emphasised correct use of the plural, ".. a lady has the more status she holds with the tribes. Queen Liratess has over a dozen!"

Leia turned her back on Solo and stood watching the cabin door. She wondered what could be taking Luke so long. "And I told you I will not tolerate you prancing around pretending to be my ... my ..."

"Sex-slave?"

Artgh!" Leia ground out. "I told you why your plan can't work! If you've been here before, smuggling contraceptives or whatever it was, then they'll recognise you and know you couldn't be my haksa!"

"Yeah, well," Solo grumbled. He hadn't thought of that when he'd bragged about his previous visits. "They've let me in the city before without all this Honour routine. They'll let me in again." He flicked a hurried glance over his shoulder to make sure Chewbacca was still busy on watch in the cockpit.

Leia turned to him, her expression almost hidden in the dark shadows of the hooded cloak, but exasperation obvious in every line of her stance. How he wished he could see what she was wearing - or not wearing! - under all that thick blanket-like material! "How many times do I have to explain!?" she said. "It's not the same this time. You are not here as a smuggler, therefore the contract is not the same. You are travelling with me, therefore ..."

"Yeah, yeah," Solo cut her off.

Threepio spoke up. "Mistress Leia is merely trying to protect you, Captain Solo. You have not studied all the cultural implications. The Am'zonians would be grossly offended if they were to learn of the presence of a free man on their world. Her Highness would have no gishan, no status with which to negotiate ..."

Solo wasn't listening, he was busy gaping as Skywalker sheepishly made his appearance.

"Don't say one word!" Luke warned him, but didn't look in his direction.

Solo swallowed and found his voice. "Wouldn't dream of it. You look great, kid, really, honest. The Maidens will all be envious as hell!" He noted Leia was standing transfixed and desperately wished he could see her face! "That should earn you plenty of gishan, Your Worship!"

"I'm glad that you approve of my plan at last, Captain," Leia managed to say, but her voice sounded uncharacteristically weak and shaken.

Solo could understand that, even if he wasn't a woman. Luke had certainly managed to hide his ... attributes ... under all that Rebel gear. If the women back at Base could only see him now! Standing there, suntanned bare chest rippling with muscle - all that saber practice no doubt, and the skin colour hadn't faded from all those years under

Tatooine's punishing suns. And below that impressive chest was Luke's only garment, a thin iridescent orange-coloured skin-tight wrap pulled about his hips. It wasn't much by way of a wardrobe, but it was very highly valued by the haksas, sign of their increased status. A non-bonded male, or jiksel, must go completely naked, but a haksas need show himself only to his owner, his kinso. Solo noted Skywalker was blushing so furiously that his face glowed even more brightly than the loin-wrap.

"I never said I approved," Solo tried to reclaim his argument, "I was trying to point out that this," he waved a hand at Luke, "is all the more reason you should take me alone as your second haksas."

"I do not follow your reasoning, Captain," Leia said with cool dismissal. "Come along, Threepio, Luke, they'll be waiting for us."

"Tamsee," Luke corrected miserably. "You can't use my name out there. You call me Tamsee, remember?"

"I know that!" Leia said irritably. "It's such a ... a degrading term! I didn't want to use it any sooner than necessary."

"Degrading!?!!" Solo snorted. "Oh, you're gonna do wonders as a negotiator with that kind of judgmental attitude!"

Leia pulled her cloak about her and headed toward the outer hatchway.

Solo jumped to his feet and hurried after her. "Wait! Please, ya gotta listen to me! Okay, so Goldenrod has all the stats on this place, but I've been here before! I tell ya there'll be trouble when the Maidens see a lowly off-worlder with such a fancy haksas. This won't work unless you take me instead of Luke. I know how to handle them and I can disguise myself so they won't recognise me. C'mon, you know how war-happy this lot are! Goin' out there without someone with local knowledge is asking for trouble!"

"You're being so melodramatic, Solo," Leia pushed past him. "Threepio has all the local knowledge we need. We are here as Alliance representatives, guaranteed safe passage. If any harm comes to us they'll have the Rebel Fleet down on them, they know that."

"Guaranteed safe passage!" Solo shouted after her. "Oh fine! And I suppose your status as diplomatic courier on a mercy mission saved you from Vader, huh!?"

That comment had Leia hesitate, but only for a second, and before Solo could press his advantage, a long furry arm had snagged him from behind

and dragged him back inside. The hatchway slid shut, cutting off his view of the group approaching from the far side of the landing field. "Dammit, Chewie!" he turned to his partner. "I tell ya, I got a bad feeling about this! They're walking into trouble, I just know it!"

The Wookiee looked down at him consideringly for a moment, then nodded slow agreement. *Perhaps it would be best if I follow along behind them. There is no reason why I could not be their pilot, and I would want to negotiate future supply runs while all the tribes are gathered in one place.*

Solo grinned with sheer relief. "Great idea, partner! I don't know why I didn't think of it myself! You better hurry if you wanna be part of the official group going back into the City."

Chewbacca frowned down at him, recognising something in Solo's scent that hinted at scheming. *I have your word you will not leave the Falcon?*

Solo blinked, but then smiled quickly and said, "Of course, of course! Now go on or you'll lose them!" He slapped at the hatch release.

Chewbacca checked his bowcaster and stepped outside, casting one last wary glance back at his friend before he broke into a jog and called to Leia's group to wait for him. Solo was right about one thing, there was definitely a bad feeling to this whole set-up.

* * *

Left all alone and very unhappy about it, Solo stomped into the cockpit, slumped into his seat, put his feet up on the flight-board, and stared moodily at the purplish vegetation surrounding his ship. Like prison walls. Cursed Wookiee! Making him give his word! Chewie knew that was the one thing that would hold him as sure as steel binders. A Corellian never broke his word. But there had to be a way around it, he just needed time to find it.

Thus engrossed in his scheming, Han didn't notice the solitary female figure who emerged hesitantly from the jungle border. Keeping to the deep tree-shadows, she began a slow circuit about the Falcon. Solo noticed her only when she crossed into his field of vision. "What the hell?" he muttered, bringing his feet down so as to peer more closely through the viewport. The young woman's bare breasts immediately marked her as a Maiden, and her green-striped very brief leather-look skirt indicated she was a member of the dominant tribe, The Queen's Tribe. The lack of a

headdress or any other adornments meant she must be very young and as yet untried in combat.

There was a sudden commotion from the further side of the jungle border and a group of four much more elaborately dressed, red-skirted women charged forward, brandishing knives and spears. The youngster, who had been absorbed in gazing at the Falcon, ducked for cover back into the trees and began sprinting toward the City. The others didn't give chase but stood waiting, reminding Solo of the predatory cats of Myascha. Sure enough, they'd set a trap. The youngster soon reappeared, looking breathless and desperately afraid. Close on her heels came two more red-skirted warriors.

"Hey!" Solo said angrily, "Where's the Honour in those odds!"

There was no escape route for the young Maiden who began backing toward the Falcon, then stood her ground, drawing a knife from her belt. Three of the older, stronger women began advancing on her, their own knives flashing. They moved slowly, casually, nasty sneers on their garishly war-painted faces, enjoying their victim's terror. The Maiden may be terrified, but she was also courageous. Refusing to break and run, she called a loud, determined battle cry. The red-skirts merely laughed, their sisters calling jeering encouragement from the sidelines. All three attackers threw their knives at the same time. The Maiden did well to dodge two, but the last caught her in the side, and she went down on one knee.

"Enough!" Solo snarled. Reaching out he hit the toggle that activated the cannon under the Falcon's belly. It swivelled, then Solo loosed a dazzling blast immediately over the attackers' heads. They jumped back, startled, then when nothing further happened, advanced again. Solo lowered his aim, and the bolts impacted almost at their sandalled feet, sending clods of soil flying. That finished them, they turned and ran. "Typical bullies," Solo declared, "cowards!" The victory of the moment was spoiled as he looked back at the Maiden and saw she had collapsed and was lying unmoving on the thick blue grass. "Damn!" he cursed, wondering if that knife had been poisoned, or perhaps hit an artery.

Completely forgetting his promise to Chewbacca, he grabbed at the med-kit, and charged outside.

By sunset, Leia Organa was beginning to relax. Queen Liratess had been a most gracious host, and the Tribal Council, made up exclusively of veteran warrior women, were not the type to indulge in bureaucratic-style

time-wasting. The details of the Treaty had been settled and agreed to much faster than Leia expected. Now there was only the usual socialising to be done with and she'd be free to return to Base, mission accomplished. She and Luke had been invited to complete a tour of inspection of the City, then partake of an elaborate Honour Feast. The food being prepared smelled tantalisingly good, and it seemed there was to be entertainment too.

The heat and tension of the day was fading, and best of all, Luke had not died of embarrassment, but in fact was also apparently beginning to enjoy himself. He was certainly getting plenty of admiring looks from the Maidens! Threepio assured Leia that she and Luke had been afforded the greatest of all possible Honours when Queen Liratess herself had offered to buy Luke as her own chief haksa. Leia had gracefully declined, much to the relief of those dozen handsome men already lounging everywhere about the Queen's lodge.

It seemed the royal haksi had little work to do, menial tasks were reserved for the jiksi, the yet to be bonded young men. Totally naked, they bustled about everywhere, often approaching Leia and Luke to bow low and present a tray laden with some delicacy or other. Leia's neck was getting stiff from the effort of keeping her eyes dead level straight ahead, and she was sure Luke had the same problem avoiding looking at the Maidens bare-breasted beauty. Chewbacca, who never could understand human attitudes concerning nudity, had no such problems. He remained with Leia's group only a short while before going off to catch up with his old trading friends and discuss the next smuggling run.

Now, outside the Lodge, as the Queen and her entourage escorted the offworlders up and down the earth-packed paths between rows of thatched huts, Leia found it easier to find other focus for her eyes. The ache in her neck eased as she turned about, asking questions about daily life and necessary supply. Threepio translated busily, seeming to enjoy the chance to finally display his expertise as a protocol droid. Coming to the end of this particular path, they halted before what must be the second largest lodge in the City.

Threepio translated as the Queen explained, but Leia could guess that this must be the quarters for the most prestigious of the warrior clans. Certainly the two green-skirted Maidens on guard by the door seemed particularly proud, their golden headdresses and jewellery gleaming in the lowering sunlight. "And this ..." Threepio explained, "is the gathering place of the Akkiva, the Maidens of the Royal Guard. It is here that the most sacred rites will be performed tonight. You are invited, Your Highness, but I'm afraid Master ... Tamsee may not attend. It is for

women only, and then a rather exclusive group made up of those of highest status. It is a great honour, Mistress Leia, you should be proud!"

Leia smiled and nodded her thanks to the Queen who was being carried at her side on a litter borne by four of her chief haksi. Leia had also been offered a litter, but had said she preferred to walk so as to better see the sights. "What sacred rites?" Leia asked Threepio.

"Why?" the droid managed to look surprised. "This is the most Holy night of all their year! Didn't I explain that as we travelled here?"

"Probably," Leia tried to maintain her smile and still convey her annoyance at Threepio's rambling. "But Solo had all my attention."

"Oh dear," Threepio complained. "It really is quite important. Tonight's Festival is in honour of their goddess of fertility."

"Fertility!?" Luke exclaimed, overhearing and looking nervous all over again. The two guards were watching him with smouldering hunger in their gold-grey eyes.

"Oh it's quite all right, Master Tamsee," Threepio assured, "You will not be involved. As I was saying, only women are permitted entry. Well, and one man, of course."

"That being?" Leia prompted, noting the Queen was indicating she should step inside.

"Why they call him asgarti, The Chosen One. The very best of all their jiksi. He would need to be their most virile, and I would imagine would must have a high degree of stamina."

Leia decided she had a very bad feeling about this. "And why is that?" she asked. She nodded at the guards, left Luke waiting outside, and stepped into the shadowy interior of the hut.

"Well," Threepio explained cheerfully behind her, "because he must impregnate many women in one night, of course. More than a dozen Maidens will have been chosen to increase the population next spring. The asgarti is usually a man from another tribe, someone who has much to offer the gene pool. Thus the problem of inbreeding is ..."

Involved in his explanation, Threepio didn't notice when Leia came to a sudden stop, standing as rigid as a statue. He bumped up against her, then apologised and stepped round her only to immediately freeze into the same posture of absolute shock. "Oh my!" he exclaimed. "Captain Solo!"

Sure enough, there in the centre of the Lodge on a raised dais about whose edges burned several ornamental torches, the Corellian lay propped on one elbow, looking utterly content as several bare-breasted Maidens popped sweet berries into his mouth. And he was as naked as the day he was born! Leia took particular note of those berries, and the torches, and all other such trivial detail. Anything other than focus on Solo's gleaming, oil-covered body and the way the flickering torchlight sent rippling pools of gold to flow over firm muscles and broad shoulders at his least movement.

Right then, Solo moved very quickly indeed, grabbing at one of the bright-coloured tapestry-covered cushions so as to cover himself. About him the Maidens blinked in surprise, then giggled girlishly, assuming this was some kind of new game. As fast as they snatched the cushion away, Solo grabbed up another one.

"Your Royalness!" Solo greeted, trying to find his cocky grin but not quite managing it, "fancy meeting you here!" There was stony silence from Leia, so he added nervously, "Ahh, how goes the Treaty negotiations?"

"I do not believe this!" Leia exclaimed, finding her voice at last. She turned her back hurriedly as the Maidens claimed the last cushion. "I just don't believe it! How did you get in here? Chewbacca said you gave him your word you wouldn't leave the Falcon!"

"It's not my fault!" Solo told her. She made a sound of sarcastic disbelief and he pleaded, "Honest! I swear, it's not my fault! They .."

Further explanations were cut short as Queen Liratess entered, on foot as she left her men outside. She accepted the salutes of her warrior guard, then gave them what must have been an 'at ease' command, for they resumed their attempts to entertain the asgarti who insisted on playing games with the cushions! The Queen stared at Solo with a mixture of awe and open, bright-eyed interest. Finally she dragged her eyes away from him, having done a thorough inspection, then turned to look at Leia. She frowned and asked a question of Threepio.

The droid for once seemed unable to speak, so aghast was he by this development. Then he recovered as the Queen impatiently repeated her question. "Umm, ahh," Threepio stuttered. "The Queen wishes to know why you will not look upon The Chosen One, a man of exquisite beauty, made in the likeness of the gods themselves, surely sent to the tribe by them ..."

"Enough!" Leia snapped. She refused to turn around, and tried desperately to think of an explanation but could come up with none.

Behind her, Solo chuckled, then offered, "Tell her you're afraid you'll be blinded by my magnificence!"

"WHAT!?!!" Leia choked out.

"Why yes, that will do nicely," Threepio decided, and before Leia could stop him, he gave than answer to the Queen. She smiled and laughed, then came forward to grasp Leia's arm in agreement. One of the Maidens stepped free of the group about Solo, spoke in a subdued tone to the Queen, then led her off to one side.

Wanting to get away from Solo, Leia followed, and found a young woman lying on a pallet in the corner of the lodge. There was an out-of-place-looking, modern-day pressure bandage taped to her side but she still looked somewhat pale. "What happened to her?" Leia asked Threepio.

The droid listened to the conversation about him, then reported excitedly, "Why she is one of the Queen's younger daughters! She was attacked by a rival tribe out in the jungle, close by the Falcon! It seems Captain Solo saved her life! That is why they brought him here! He has been greatly honoured, Your Highness! He has been Chosen to replace the man who would normally have participated in the Fertility ritual tonight!"

"I could have guessed all that for myself," Leia said sourly. "Fine! I hope he enjoys himself! He probably won't be able to walk come morning! Well, I won't be waiting for him to recover! I'm leaving at daybreak! Oh, and you can tell Queen Liratess that I most definitely will not be watching this ... this ... disgusting orgy!"

"Disgusting orgy!?" Threepio repeated in shock. "Surely Your Highness you do not want me to say that? There could be no greater offence given than to refuse this Honour! The Treaty would be lost for certain! Why there may even be hostilities aimed ..."

'All right, all right!" Leia snapped at him. "Shut up and let me think!"

"But, Mistress Leia ..." Threepio dared, "there's something else you really should know."

"What!?" she snarled. "It had better be good news!"

"Well, no, not quite," Threepio stammered. "That is, I mean, perhaps. You often tell me you hope you will never have to see Captain Solo again."

'Oh, I couldn't be so lucky!" Leia put in savagely.

"Oh, well then," Threepio brightened. "This is good news then! I am so relieved!"

"Threepio!" Leia made to put her hands to his throat in pure frustration, then realised the futility of it all. She rubbed her own brow instead and said very quietly, "Just tell me!"

"Captain Solo will be unable to leave this world ever again, I am afraid. You see, the Maidens have claimed him as their jiksel."

"WHAT!" Leia gaped.

"And even if he was given permission to leave long enough to fly us home, I doubt he would be feeling up to it."

"Too bad!" Leia snapped with a complete lack of sympathy. "He better show up on time and ready to fly or he won't get one single solitary credit of that outrageous pilot's fee he's expecting us to pay him!"

"But," Threepio lifted his arms, startled by the vehemence of his Mistress' tone. "I really don't think Captain Solo will be at all interested in money after tonight."

"Captain Solo!?" Leia laughed sarcastically. "Not interested in money!? Surely you jest! Sooner say Palpatine will give up his throne!"

"Oh, yes, I suppose you are right, Mistress," Threepio agreed. "I am not completely knowledgeable about human chemistry. I am no doubt wrong in assuming castration would alter him so much."

Leia swallowed hard, choked and began coughing. Queen Liratess and the guardswoman turned to her, slapped her on the back, and when that didn't help, fetched water for her. Finally, she was able to breathe again. Her distress had even attracted Solo's attention, though he couldn't quite break free from his adoring Maidens.

"Are you okay over there, Your Holiness?" he called. "Something go down the wrong way? Come over here and try some of these berries, they're much easier to digest."

Leia wiped the tears from her eyes, drew a deep breath, and managed to squeak, "Did I hear you right, Threepio? Did you say castration?"

"Why, yes, Your Highness, I explained all this when I informed you of Am'Zonian culture. Oh, that's right, you weren't listening. Let me revise then." Threepio was pleased to note that this time he most certainly did have his Mistress' full attention. Why he was sure she had not so much as blinked as she watched him. "You see, before the Fertility ritual is ... umm ... consummated ... the Chosen One is consecrated to the goddess, thus ensuring the offspring will be perfect in form. And because his seed is sacred, it can be used only on this one night, the holiest night of the Am'Zonian year. So, when ... the ritual is concluded, the Maidens give him a cup of wine, drugged wine, and while he sleeps, they ..."

"Castrate him!" Leia concluded.

"Exactly!" Threepio was pleased by her quick understanding.

Leia stood staring at the droid for a long moment, then said, "Solo doesn't know about this, does he?"

"Why," Threepio considered, "I would imagine not, Your Highness. He took even less note of my lecture than did you."

A slow wicked smile traced itself over Leia's lips. "Not to worry, I'll tell him." She paused. "When I'm good and ready!"

"As you wish, Mistress Leia. But, what am I to tell the Queen concerning your decision about not being present for tonight's ritual?"

Leia patted his arm. "I'll be here, trust me, I'll be here."

* * *

Two hours later Leia was finding it very difficult to keep a straight face. Solo exhibited increasing signs of nervous strain, completely discomfited by her continuing presence. He no longer had to worry about keeping himself covered - in preparation for stage one of the ritual, the consecration ceremony, he had been formally draped in a long, multi-coloured robe and matching feathered headdress. His nervousness increased as the moment he'd have to perform drew nearer, and the Princess seemed set to honour the invitation she'd been given to watch. He flicked another puzzled, strained glance her way, and she gave him a friendly wave and an evilly innocent smile.

Solo's eyes widened in surprise of her apparent casual attitude. He looked like he wanted nothing more than to get close enough to throw her out the door. But he could not escape the eager group who surrounded him. At least one Maiden constantly sought physical contact with him, vying to win favour so that she might be given the prestige of being his first choice. Thus the Maidens fussed over him, rearranging his headdress, or stroking his arms and shoulders, some even daring to brush his face with kisses - though such intimate contact was supposed to be forbidden until after the consecration.

Most of the Maidens had been sipping wine all afternoon, and their constant giggling and ever bolder flirtatiousness, rather than relaxing Solo, was beginning to irritate him. Every time he thought about returning a Maiden's attention, he caught Leia's eyes following him. She was studying him closer than any bounty hunter he'd ever known! What was she up to? Why hadn't she left? Surely she would leave soon?

Leia had managed to continue her thorough surveillance even though she'd spent a good deal of time talking to the Queen. Earlier, Liratess had approached Solo to express her gratitude for his rescue of her daughter. She had asked several questions via Threepio, and Solo in turn, tried to gain more information about both the Fertility Rites and his status as honoured jksel. It seemed they didn't intend to let him free any time soon, though he tried to explain he had obligations elsewhere. The Queen simply gave him an indulgent smile, and a soft kiss.

He couldn't know that Leia had taken the first opportunity, scheming with Liratess immediately Threepio had told her the exact nature of the ritual. The Am'Zonian Queen had been surprised and dismayed when finally she'd been convinced that Solo would react very differently to the ceremony's outcome than would a native asgarti. But as Leia explained her plan, the Queen laughed hearty agreement and was eager to take part - she too was tired of the arrogance of the more handsome of her haksi.

Leia knew Solo's wouldn't be too worried about being held as a slave, he'd assume - in his usual cocky manner - that he and Chewbacca would have little difficulty escaping to the Falcon. Solo had been told the ritual would officially begin at moonrise. Now, as twilight deepened into full dark beyond the open Lodge door, Leia moved in for the kill. Laughing over a Maiden's joke, she got to her feet and went to refill her wine cup from the bowl close by the dais. As she had expected, Solo grabbed a chance to talk to her.

"So, Your Royalness," he said nervously, "you'll be leavin' now, right?"

"Wrong," she looked calmly up at him. "I can't risk losing that Treaty. I wouldn't dream of offending Liratess by leaving early. Surely you're not embarrassed?!"

"No! Uh, no, of course not!" The feathers on his headdress fluttered as he shook his head in an overly-fervent denial.

"Good," Leia patted his hand and made to move away again. "Give it your best shot, do Corellia proud." She paused and looked back over her shoulder, catching his stricken expression before he hurriedly reclaimed his smile. "Oh, by the way, if you're counting on Chewie getting you out of here come morning, forget it. Luke sent a message back with the Maiden who escorted him to the Falcon. Chewbacca had gone back there and was making so much noise that Luke had trouble getting the Maiden to go inside. It seems he's really, really mad at you. Something about breaking your word?" Solo paled and gulped, and Leia had to bite back her grin. "He was doing a lot of yelling. Luke couldn't understand all of it, but he said it was mostly about you learning a lesson and the garra fruit being covered in thorns." She shrugged. "Whatever that means. Well, enjoy yourself, I'm going to get a front row seat for the consecration ceremony. It's almost moonrise." She winked at him. "You look real flashy in that fancy cloak and matching hat."

"Very funny!" he scowled. "Look, ya can't seriously be plannin' on leavin' me here!"

"Why ever not?" she feigned surprise. "Isn't this every Corellian male's idea of paradise? Besides, you won't be keen on moving come morning, Solo. Threepio has been making sympathetic noises all day, he's worried about your health." She turned to the droid who stood close by. "Aren't you, Threepio?"

"Why yes, Captain Solo!" Threepio's round golden eyes glowed in the gloom as he looked up at the man, "I would advise that you at least ascertain the cleanliness of these peoples' surgical equipment. Well, that is, I imagine they will use those awful knives they all wear. Do make sure they clean them properly before they cut you."

Solo, who as usual had grown impatient before the first sentence was ended, choked and spluttered on the wine a Maiden fed him. "Cut me?!" he yelled. "Who said anything about cutting?!" He looked anxiously to Leia. "Some kind of tatoo, is it? The mark of a jiksel? I never noticed any on the men around here."

"Oh no, Captain," Threepio assured, "not a tatoo. You will not be ranked as a lowly jiksel tomorrow. You will be given the place of honour

as asgarti. Only one asgarti is made each year ..." He was distracted as Leia grabbed him by the arm and turned him to see what was happening by the door. "There, you see," he told Solo, "the previous years' asgartin are gathering outside to escort you to the consecration ceremony."

Sure enough the Maidens began ushering Solo down from the dais.

"Don't bother to check those men for tatoos, Solo," Leia told him as he passed by, "but you will notice they're all overweight. Oh, and they have the most lovely singing voices, falsetto voices. Watch carefully when they take their cloaks off, you will notice something you consider of vital importance is missing." The Queen called to her, and Leia smiled and made to follow but was snagged and dragged backward as Solo took her arm.

"You're kidding!?" he squeaked, his expression close to panic.

"You don't have to take my word, you'll soon see for yourself."

* * *

It was at the half-way point of the consecration ceremony in a cleared circle of jungle by the light of a full moon and brightly burning torches that Solo got that chance. As he was annointed The Chosen One of The Goddess, and knelt to accept a sheath of maize symbolising fertility, the other asgartin gathered about and removed their cloaks. Solo let out a strangled gasp as he got a good look at their genitalia. Then he swayed, dropped the maize, and instinctively covered his groin. His face flushed, then drained to stark white, and he looked close to passing out.

The Queen, who forewarned, had expected this reaction, played along perfectly, expressing concern as she asked Threepio to enquire as to what had so upset her honoured asgarti.

Solo remained kneeling and made a lot of odd spluttering and squeaking noises before managing to repeat the one garbled phrase, "they've been, ... they've been ..." Seeming unable to find further words, he waved a hand toward the encircling men.

Putting the plan into action, Liratess signalled Leia to come closer and tend to her offworlder companion. Leia broke a large leaf from a nearby plant and began fanning Solo. She leaned down to whisper in his ear, "I told you so!"

Solo stared up at her, then staggered to his feet. "Well why didn't you say so before!?" he yelled. Frantic, he looked about for signs of an escape route but found none. "Ya gotta get me outa here!"

Somehow, Leia managed to pretend surprise. "Now?"

He looked back at her, nodding his head rapidly.

She patted his arm, and the Maidens moved in, began ushering them both back toward the Lodge, ceremonial spears drawn. "Come now, Solo," Leia said, "how many times have you explained to me just how perfect you are for this position! You've been waiting for this moment all day! You wouldn't want to deprive the Maidens of such expertise. I'll just sit back and watch as you enjoy yourself. Then I'll say goodbye."

He glared at her so murderously that Liratess, watching, waved at a Maiden who immediately put herself between Solo and Leia.

"You've got to be kidding!?" Solo leaned forward to speak to her from behind the Maiden.

"Does it look like I'm kidding?" Leia countered. "Even if I wanted to deprive you of your fun, how could I?"

"Fine," he set his jaw determinedly. "No problem, I'll come up with my own escape plan."

"Good luck," Leia said. "It looks very tricky if you ask me. All The Chosen Maidens' Sisters and every other woman of the tribe will be standing guard in a circle about the Lodge all night."

Solo blinked, flicked a glance at the razor-honed spears surrounding him, then squared his shoulders. "Better for a man to die in battle than ... than ... you know."

"Oh I'm sure they wouldn't think of harming you to the extent that you couldn't ... perform. They'll just surround you and take you back where you belong."

Solo gave another glare. "You're enjoying this, aren't you!?"

Leia turned and smiled sweetly up at him. "Yes," she admitted. She walked on, waited until they'd reached the Lodge door, then told Solo, "I just might have an escape plan already figured. If you ask me nicely."

Han sighed as he stooped low to enter the doorway. "Okay, okay, cut the crap. What's your price?"

"No pilot's fee for this mission," she said quickly, "and most importantly, no more bragging!"

Solo examined the windowless Lodge as he was guided toward the dais. "Deal. So, what's the plan?"

Leia waited until she'd taken up her place of honour, seated on some cushions close by the dais. She looked up at Solo, then turned quickly away as she saw he was being disrobed. "Listen carefully, Fly Boy," she told him, "and do exactly as I say. Choose the Queen's daughter, the one you rescued, first. And be ready to move when the torches go out."

She heard him give a gusty sigh of sheer relief and grinned to herself - no more bragging!

"Got it," Solo said. "She's gonna smuggle me out? How?"

"Be patient," Leia called up to him. "And prepare to marvel at an escape expert at work."

* * *

"Oww!" Solo exclaimed as he stepped on something sharp on the jungle floor. He hadn't had time to put on his boots. He limped on, cursing the darkness, but very grateful for his guide, and all the help he'd received from her sisters during his hurried escape. He'd been amazed to discover that the dais was hollow and opened onto a tunnel that led into the jungle. He wondered what other uses it had been put to in the past. He'd had time to pull on his shirt and trousers and sling his blaster holster over his shoulder, no more.

"I'm glad to see you're healing up so quickly," he told the Maiden at his side, able to see the gleam of white of the pressure bandage still taped to her side. She said nothing, though he now knew she could understand - and speak - a little Basic Transglin. Apparently she was the one who'd been studying all those booktapes he and Chewbacca had smuggled in along with the other requested goods. "So, you wanna be a spacer too, huh? Travel among the stars? Good choice. Is that why you're helping me?"

He heard her newly-won medals-of-valor earrings jingle as she shook her head. "You save me," she told him. "Now me save you."

"Yeah!" he snorted. "You got that right! I hope your Maiden friends won't be too upset when they find the swap we made back there. I cannot figure out how any man could actually want to be ... to be ..."

"Asgarti?" she prompted. "Great honor. Sacred seed."

"Oh sure," he said disbelievingly. "That guy actually thanked me for letting him take my place!"

"He much angry when Akkivva tell him to go when I bring you to Lodge this high sun."

"Well," Solo sighed. "I sure hope he enjoys himself tonight! Of course the truth is your Maidens won't be properly ... satisfied now. Not without me. What a cryin' shame! They'll never know what they're missing!"

"Solo!"

Han fumbled for his blaster dangling from his shoulder and cursed as a small, white-clothed figure appeared from amid the bushes to his right. "Dammit!" he cursed. "Don't do that!"

"Never mind that," Leia said angrily, "I should call the Maidens to take you back there! You promised - no more bragging!"

He lifted both hands by way of appeasement. "The deal was no more bragging - in your hearing. How was I supposed to know you were hiding there?"

"I wasn't hiding," Leia said primly, resuming her march. "I was just waiting for you to catch up. I took the direct route seeing as I didn't have to sneak out!"

Solo opened his mouth to retaliate, then decided he'd do well to shut up - at least until he was safe and sound back inside the Falcon. Or as safe as possible given that there was one very angry Wookiee waiting to dismember him. How do you get yourself into these things?!" he thought sourly, following at Leia's back.

* * *

Inside the Falcon, Solo made a dash for the safety of his cabin, claiming he wanted privacy to finish dressing.

"Privacy?!" Leia gaped, "after going round naked for most of the day, he wants privacy!?" She noted Berida, the Queen's daughter, was staring wide-eyed at the Falcon's interior. "Yes," Leia said with a smile, "it is pretty awful, isn't it!? Come on, I'll show you round."

Where is he?! Chewbacca roared as he entered the common room.

Berida flinched a little, but wasn't too afraid. She'd met Chewbacca on each of his smuggling runs to Am'Zonia and had become rather fond of him. But she'd never before seen him in a temper.

"Now, Chewie," Leia berated, "where's your manners? Aren't you going to welcome Berida on board?" The Wookiee rumbled something she didn't understand.

Threepio translated. "He says to tell you that you are indeed most welcome, little warrior, and he is very happy that you have at last won your dream." Berida went to him and hugged the Wookiee's arm. He patted her head, then repeated his earlier question. "Captain Solo is in his cabin," Threepio answered.

The Wookiee growled and moved in that direction but Leia blocked his path. "I hate to have to say this," she said. "But it really wasn't his fault. He saved Berida's life, and ..."

He interrupted, and Threepio said, "He is telling you he already knows. Master Luke told him. He just wants to give Solo a little scare first."

Leia grinned up at the giant. "Good idea, Chewie. But I think he's already had the biggest scare of his life!"

The Wookiee chortled merry agreement, then rumbled something else, his blue eyes sparkling.

"Oh yes, please do!" Threepio declared even before he translated for Leia. "Chewbacca says he has some news for Solo that should also give him cause to reconsider his bragging. The Lady Berida has confessed she is most relieved to learn that Luke is not truly your haksa, Highness. She finds his blonde hair and blue eyes most wonderfully attractive. Dark hair is common-place on Am'Zonia. Berida is hoping that as time passes, Luke may consider becoming her haksa - or whatever is his own world's equivalent.

Berida blushed. Leia could only roll her eyes heavenward. She'd taken care of Solo's ego - at least for now - but it seemed Skywalker's may soon need similar treatment!

The End

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