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The Start of Something Big  
by Marcia Brin

(An Alterniverse Cycle Story)

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The ship dropped out of hyperspace about three astronomical units from Devan and drifted lazily at sublight speed toward the planet. Its beaked prow and graceful, bird-like lines identified it as an Alderaani vessel, while the soaring eagle painted on its side further declared it to be a ship of the Royal House. Royalty, in the august person of no less than the Crown Princess Leia Organa, heir to the Matriarchate of Alderaan, was, in fact, in residence.

She was not traveling in her capacity as a Republic Senator but rather as the future monarch of Alderaan and Head of the Family. The Matriarchate traced its line almost ten thousand years, making it thousands of years older than the Republic. During this long history, various branches had split off and colonized new worlds, and the hydra grew. Calling itself simply "the Family," it now ruled one thousand suns, plus numerous other worlds with less than fully autonomous status, such as newly-founded colonies and mining outposts.

The Alderaani Matriarchate, however, was recognized throughout the Family as the founding line. and its Queen Regnant, considered to be the Family Head. Leia was accorded that honor, though she was still six months away from ascending the throne.

Throughout its history, Alderaan had preferred peace, but had been staunch in its defense, and its cultured, eminently reasonable society had placed a premium on maturity, self-control and life-experience in its rulers. Therefore, no one was permitted to ascend to the position of Queen Regnant until she reached the age of twenty-five. Should the prior Queen pass away

before her eldest daughter had reached her majority, a Viceroy, or regent, would be selected by the Council of Advisors, if the deceased monarch had not left an indication of her wishes in this matter. Customarily, either the Prince Consort, father of the Crown Princess, or her eldest aunt, would be appointed.

Still, while understanding the value of maturity and experience, the Alderaanians also appreciated youthful vigor and strength in their monarchs. It was not uncommon, when the eldest daughter reached thirty, for the reigning Queen to abdicate in her favor, taking the titles of Queen-matriarch and First Chairwoman (the latter position being the head of the Council of Advisors.)

Sitting alone in her suite, watching the orb of Devan grow larger, Leia remembered her mother, a small, delicate woman, whose health had been seriously compromised by a childhood illness. Yet in her quiet, gentle way, she had ruled with strength and purpose. The frailty of her body had, at too early an age, turned a small chill into a fatal sickness, and Leia had lost her mother almost ten years ago. The Princess had mourned her deeply and, even today, could not think of her without pain.

The Council had not hesitated to appoint Leia's father Viceroy. Though the Princess had inherited her diminutive size from her mother, she had received vigorous good health from Bail Organa. She smiled as she conjured up his image; she adored her father. So did all of Alderaan. He was no pamperer of royal cubs, though, and when she ascended to the throne, she would be ready. After her graduation from Central University at age twenty-two, he had urged her to enter the Senate, knowing that the experience she would receive there would be invaluable. He had been right; she had learned much. So had the Senate -- about her.

Her youth had misled many in that august body into believing that she would be easily handled. That mistaken impression did not last long. Her colleagues had rapidly developed a healthy respect and admiration for her keen intelligence, wit, ability to grasp -- and swiftly understand thoroughly -- the most complex issues, unswerving integrity, unflagging energy, concern for the Republic and the welfare of its citizens -- and for her tongue, all silver persuasion in negotiation, all scathing brilliance in debate. One unfortunate Senator, who had been thoroughly defeated in a verbal battle, had dubbed her "the velvet dragon," and the name had stuck.

Leia was glad the journey was almost over. The previous day had been one of continuous celebration and she was tired. Palpatine Day honored the defeat of the greatest threat the Republic had known in centuries. A renegade Senator had, over twenty years ago, almost succeeded in his plan of

overthrowing the Republic and having himself declared Emperor, after destroying the Jedi Knights. But, the (then) young Jedi approached by the Senator had refused to be corrupted and had alerted his Order. The threat had been swiftly dealt with, including a purge of the military leaders secretly sworn to follow Palpatine, and Harl Skywalker had been commended by both the Republic and his order.

Right now, though, Leia believed a serious new threat was rising, and she was unhappy that the Family Conference was being held now; she hated being pulled away from the Senate at this time. She sat on two narens\*, Defense/Security (which she chaired) and the newly-formed Senate Panel on Crime and Criminal Activities. It was the latter naren that garnered the krayt's share of her attention now. There had always been criminal organizations, but they had generally been local powers. Now, a very large, secret and powerful organization was growing. What was worse was that it appeared to be highly connected with, fingers that seemed to reach into the central government itself. Rumors claimed that the Guild, as it was known, owned a world or, at least, said world's ruler, and could maintain its headquarters there in safety.

It was mostly as a result of Leia's efforts that the naren was looking into the activities of the Guild. Many of the Senators on the panel seemed almost afraid to tackle the powerful organization. And some of them... Well, Leia kept her suspicions quiet, but she was beginning to wonder just how far, indeed, those fingers had reached.

Well, she thought, time to put it out of her mind. For one week, she would concern herself only with matters that involved the Family. Many of those at the gathering she would know only by name, others she was eagerly looking forward to seeing again.

To be truthful, it had surprised her that Torm was hosting the Family. A Conference was called every five years on a different world, due to the expense involved. There were many that had never yet been the host world, and she had been sure that Torm would always find a way to avoid taking the Conference. Cousin Torm was notoriously frugal ... hell, he was cheap! And the bill for one thousand planetary representatives and their entourages was usually very hefty.

Yet, Torm had volunteered, earlier in the year, to take on the conference, when Queen Talia of Treon had suffered a debilitating and, apparently, chronic illness, and had requested permission to withdraw Treon as the host world. Torm had claimed that he wished to show off the beauties of Devan and, more importantly, give lie to the rumors that he was not conducting his Viceroyship properly. He had been appointed viceroy for his infant daughter when his wife, Queen Marlia, had died in childbirth. Not only was his conduct being questioned: there were also whispers that he

did not plan to relinquish his stewardship when his daughter reached her majority in six years.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the gentle chime of the intercom. Captain Hanel apologized for disturbing her, then indicated that they were in orbit around Devan and that her shuttle was prepared to depart at her earliest convenience. Thanking him, she requested that he alert her secretary, and then began to put the finishing touches to her packing.

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She sighed gratefully as she sank into the bath. Pitor be praised, it was finally over! It had actually gone very smoothly, considering that Torm had had very little time to prepare, but the silence, now that the rest of the Conference had departed, was very welcome. She also would have left, except that Torm had asked her to stay another few days. He had (he said) heard of her, father's interest in T'loran craftwork, and he'd arranged for a trader he knew to bring some items to the palace; Leia should select at Torm's expense, anything she thought her father would like. Her father (Torm explained) had supported him for the Viceroyship when others had been opposed to his selection. She had really wanted to leave, but two extra day's stay was not all that much and she so much wanted to bring her father something. Never any time for himself, she had thought, and had agreed to stay.

Actually, one of the reasons she would have preferred to go was Torm himself. Something about him raised her hackles. True, he had been a perfect host: genial, hearty, generous. But as the week wore on, she began to believe that it was all a pose, that something behind the facade was cold and hard. This was reinforced by the behavior of her Devanian counterpart. Crown Princess Sharla. it was bad enough that she was shy and withdrawn - an indication that there had, in fact, been something remiss in her training. All of the women in the Family, especially the Heirs, were raised with future leadership in mind. They were expected to be rulers and diplomats, driving forces in their societies.

Yet, every indication showed that Sharla would be unable to rule without Torm's guidance. Even worse, she actually appeared to be afraid of him, flinching whenever he raised his voice and constantly watching him warily, as if trying to decide which way to jump. Leia had become increasingly disturbed by the situation.

She stepped from the bath, slipped into her robe and opened the double doors to the terrace. Her nostrils were immediately filled with the myriad scents rising from the many-acre garden. It was a beautiful night, crisp and clear, and the garden was terribly inviting. On a sudden impulse, she hunted through her clothes for the dark brown flightsuit she had brought,

and slipped into it. It felt good to get out of all those formal dresses she had had to wear during the past week. After quickly pulling on high matching boots, she was ready.

It was late, and the semi-darkened corridor was empty. Though she had to admit that Torm had not stinted his guests, the lavish Conference had been surrounded by evidence of his 'frugality.' Lights were dimmed as soon as possible or turned off immediately if a room was empty for more than five minutes, and the servants had been very careful of waste. Too much so, in her opinion. She had the feeling that they, too, were afraid of Torm, which did not increase her liking for him.

Well, it was just too bad. Her light was staying on. At the age of five, she had been the victim of a prank by two older (and thoroughly detestable) cousins of the male persuasion, and nearly scared out of her wits coming into a dark room. Since then, though she turned the lights off when she slept, she hated to walk into an unlighted room. Torm would just have to be generous for a few more nights.

Despite the lateness of the hour, she was not concerned about taking her walk, even if she intended to leave the palace grounds, which she did not. There seemed to be very little crime in Devan's capitol. At first she had been impressed but, as the week passed, she became convinced that it was less the contentment of the citizens than the ubiquitousness of the police force. Maybe she was becoming paranoid, but there was something... ominous about Torm's police. Of course, even they had not been able to eliminate the usual dives and fringe criminal element that surrounds every spaceport in the galaxy.

As she stepped into the garden, she was assailed by the exotic scents. That had been another surprise. Devan had never been among the wealthier worlds of the Family. Having few marketable resources, but Torm seemed to be literally rolling in credits. Many of the plants in the garden, for example, were extremely rare, and must have been enormously expensive to purchase and transport. She had begun to wonder if Torm had an alternate and, perhaps, slightly shady source of funds.

Thoughts for another time; tonight was for relaxing and enjoying the beauty of the night and garden. Leia happily wandered through the carefully tended acreage for some time, eventually coming back to the palace. Still reluctant to return to her room, she lay down in the grass near a bed of analora flowers (her favorites) hidden from the main walkway by a row of bushes, and contentedly chewed on a blade of grass. From where she lay, she could see her lighted suite.

She had quite lost track of time, possibly even napping, when the sound of voices brought her back to full consciousness. The voice belonged to several men who seemed to be moving quite stealthily toward the palace.

"There," one gruff voice said. "That lit window is the one we want."

That 'lit' window? Her room?

"But it means she's awake," a second voice complained.

"So?" the first voice shrugged. "You afraid of one little girl?"

Little girl, indeed, she thought indignantly, and silently moved closer to the bushes. A new voice interrupted. "You think we'll meet any guards?"

"Will it make a difference if we do? The Boss runs this place, too. Besides, he pulled them off, just in case we meet some eager new recruit who doesn't know the score. Now, let's go -- and don't foul it up. The Boss wants her dead. and he doesn't tolerate mistakes."

Dead! She sank back. stunned. A surge of panic welled up. but she stomped on it. She had never given in to fear before, and she would not start now. But, an assassination attempt? Engineered by...Torm? But why? True, she did suspect Torm of some shady dealings, but she had never voiced her suspicions and besides, she was not a member of the Patrol. The only criminal organization she was at all concerned with was the Guild... the Guild? Torm? Gods, the rumors about the Guild running a world were true -- and Devan was the world.

Pieces began to fall into place. Frugal Torm's offer to take the Conference now made sense: to get her to Devan. She was the driving force behind the Senate naren and with her gone, he might be able to divert its attention. How he would explain her death, she could not figure out, but she was sure he would think of something.

Speaking of 'thinking of something,' she had better do some of that herself. Returning to the palace was out of the question. There wasn't anyone there who could, or would, help her, anyway. There had been no reason for her secretary to stay, when he could be back on the ship putting a week's worth of notes and dictation into some coherent form, so he had left. As for the people on her cruiser, they would not even begin to worry for a few days yet.

She had to find a way to get a message to Captain Hanel. But. how? Torm would have the entire police force looking for her, as well as Guild members. And she knew enough about human nature not to be particularly hopeful that any of

the citizens, even those not associated with the Guild, would shield her from duly-appointed officers of the law. Except... except those people who made a habit of circumventing the law. She thoughtfully chewed her lip and looked in the direction of the spaceport. Knowing that the fringe area that ringed it would be filled with criminals, prostitutes (male and female) smugglers and various assorted scum. And, the ships in the port would have radios. A small smile flickered across her face. Torm could have kept all that low-life off Devan simply by letting the rumor circulate that the Guild wanted it that way, but he knew that it would be suspicious to be too crime free. Casting a wary glance toward the palace, she slipped out the rear exit of the garden and headed for the spaceport.

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It took her about a half-hour at a swift dogtrot to reach her destination. She knew the hue and cry would be raised very soon. When her would-be assassins failed to find her in her room, they would do a quick search and then alert Torm. A search of the grounds would follow... and then, the 'dogs' would be loosed.

Music from a half-dozen cantinas did battle for her attention. She finally chose the one that appeared to be the largest and most crowded. Safety in numbers, hopefully. Upon entering, she almost gagged from an overpowering combination of Chakroot smoke, liquor odors and the stench from a variety of different (and obviously unwashed) races. She wrinkled her nose fastidiously and shuddered slightly at the thought that, to get to a radio, she was going to have to hook up with someone here, at least as far as his ship. At the moment, she wished that she had had more contact with this subterranean level of society in the past.

She shouldered gingerly through the crowd and found an out-of-the-way corner. Let's be honest, she thought, you don't have the foggiest idea how to find the right person. Just then, the door to the cantina opened and two law enforcers entered. It was not a casual visit, they eyed the crowd with purpose. She had a few extra minutes. She had never appeared before Torm less than formally dressed and elegantly coifed. The first time around, they would probably overlook a woman in a flightsuit, whose long, dark hair tumbled over her shoulders. Especially if she was with one of the denizens of the cantina. No more time. Mentally crossing her fingers, she headed for the nearest booth with a single occupant and sat down.

Her first reaction was: gods, he's clean! Her second was to divide her mind into two parts, one to watch the police and the other to dispassionately assess her new acquaintance. Or, at least, that was her intention. Unfortunately, her mind had other ideas, and she found a third

part assessing him, not so dispassionately. Hey, that part burbled happily, a real looker!

The two more responsible divisions of her thought processes frowned mentally at their frivolous counterpart, but were forced to admit the truth of the remark. Though he was sitting, long legs stretched underneath the table to rest on the opposite bench, she judged his height to be about six feet, maybe an inch or two more. Those legs were encased in knee-high black boots with a definite military cast, like his trousers, which were dark blue with red striping. The rest of his outfit was definitely non-military, including a wicked-looking blaster resting in a hand-tooled holster with a large silver buckle. Chestnut hair, parted in the middle, framed an attractive, alert face containing a pair of intelligent, if somewhat cynical, hazel eyes.

Those eyes were watching her rather warily, and his right hand was resting casually, but menacingly, on the butt of his gun.

Moving to forestall any precipitous action on his part, she smiled coolly at him.

"Hi."

The wary look in his eyes gave way to sardonic amusement. "My, what an inventive opening line." The voice was as cool as the rest of him. and held a mocking note.

Her lips twitched, acknowledging the hit. He definitely was not stupid; she would have to move carefully. What to tell him? Ideas chased each other across her mind. Perhaps, just off a tramp freighter looking for some R & R?

His next words sank that thought. "Slumming? Isn't it lively enough for you uptown?"

She raised her eyebrows, outwardly calm, while her mind raced furiously.

"You didn't think I'd really believe you normally reside in this hive of scum and villainy?" he asked sardonically.

She made her decision: actually, this would suit her as well as anything else, and she called up images of all those useless children of wealth she had met. Spoiled, Pampered. vain, self-centered and selfish, shallow, jaded. Especially jaded. Always searching feverishly for a new thrill, a new jolt. Never realizing that it was the lack of purpose that left their lives empty.

Leaning back, she smiled at him languidly. "Daddy's parties are always such a bore. The same tiresome people. I decided to find someone... less tiresome." She stretched provocatively, as she traced an invisible pattern on the table with one finger.

He acknowledged the stretch with a flick of his eyes, and let them travel, deliberately and appraisingly, the length of her diminutive frame. 'The wariness was completely gone now-- his expression made it clear that he found nothing suspicious in the idea that a female on the prow would come on to him. Why that smug, arrogant, conceited bastard! She was going to enjoy taking him down a peg.

"Well," he said, mockingly. "you'll certainly find what you're looking for here. Maybe more than you're looking for. I presume you came with some specific requirements in mind?"

She couldn't resist the opening. "Actually, the only real criterion is cleanliness," she replied, as she inspected him carefully and obviously.

Somewhat to her surprise. she saw his shoulders shaking in silent laughter and an approving gleam in his eye. Well, well. he has a sense of humor and, for all his arrogance, doesn't always take himself seriously. He immediately rose a notch in her estimation. Too bad. actually, that she would have to pass on the evening's festivities.

Why? demanded that frivolous third of her mind, which had remained relatively quiet the last few minutes. You'll have to wait until the ship sends someone, anyway... Alderaanis had always considered sex to be part of the experience of life, and that something denied a person becomes an obsession. So, the Heirs to the Matriarchate were expected to sow some wild oats. Until their coronation, that is. After that, it was expected that they would become more responsible. if they did not go so far as to marry immediately, it was assumed that they would at least become discreet.

Leia had garnered her share of experience but, lately, between her duties to the Matriarchate and her duties to the Republic, she had had little time for anything but work. And he was damned attractive, if irritatingly arrogant. She settled back and smiled at him, waiting for him to make the next move.

He accepted the challenge with amusement. "Hardly the place for a cozy evening," indicating the cantina with a nod of his head. "Perhaps, you'd like to take a tour of my ship and see my... holographic etchings?" The last with a faint, but definite, sardonic note.

"My, what an inventive line," she paraphrased. He grinned in response.

Movement caught her eye: one of the law enforcers was scanning her portion of the room. Time to go. Maintaining an outward calm, she indicated acceptance of his offer. He threw a handful of coins on the table, rose, swept her a sardonic bow and offered her his arm, which she took with equal arrogance. They walked past the law enforcer, who barely gave the couple a glance. The gamble had paid off, but she knew that she would never pass close inspection, if they were stopped.

As they reached the cantina door, he turned to her. "By the way, the name is Solo. Han Solo."

"Leia," she replied.

"Oh," he drew out the word in mock sympathy, "poor baby. Didn't Daddy tell you what your last name was?"

She admired her fingernails to hide her laughter. He had quite a tongue, a trait she admired, having a rather notable one herself. Still, she had no intention of telling him more at this point. Shrugging her shoulders languidly, she moved past him and out into the street. The night lacked a few hours 'til dawn. It was as crisp and clean as before, but the air was no longer sweet with the scent of exotic flowers, the gentle breeze instead carrying an unpleasant mixture of cantina odors and those peculiar to a spaceport. The sky was a canopy of velvet blue-black, studded with shimmering diamonds. Its clean peace contrasted sharply with the filth of the 'Port belt. Yet, she knew that what was around her was not a patch on the black rot that was the heart of this world, a heart that beat inside the gleaming walls of the palace.

She managed to maintain an air of unconcern, though she was, in fact, quite tense, expecting them to be stopped by a law enforcer at any time. She kept a sharp eye on the shadowed alleys and, when she believed his attention was elsewhere, she would glance quickly backwards toward the cantina. They neared the landing field and its hangars, and she began to believe that they would make it.

That was when she saw the blockade.

It was stretched around the 'port and heavily manned. Someone had realized that she would head for here. She felt her heart sink; she would never get past them. They had to get away before they were seen!

Smiling up at him, she pulled lightly at his arm. "It really is a beautiful night. Why don't we take a walk, first?"

He gave her a strange, unreadable expression but, to her surprise, agreed without any questions. They turned down the nearest side street and walked in silence for a couple blocks. Then, suddenly, he grabbed her by the shoulders and pulling her into an adjacent alley, glared at her fiercely.

"Okay, sweetheart, what say you start telling me the truth?"

Innocently, she gazed back at him. "I can't possibly imagine--"

"Knock it off, sister. From the minute we left the cantina, you've been jumping at shadows and looking over your shoulder. And, then, this sudden desire to take a walk -- after seeing the police barrier. Spill it, why are they after you?"

Damn it, he certainly was observant. And angry. She would have to tell him at least part of the truth.

"All right. I got somebody uptown mad at me -- and he's important enough to get the enforcers on me. It wasn't anything criminal," she added.

He brushed that away as a matter of no consequence. (Aha! I didn't think he ran legal cargo.) "Why did you hook up with me?"

She sighed. "I figured they wouldn't be looking for a couple and I wanted your ship's radio. I have friends in a vessel orbiting Devan."

"So, you were just using me?" he asked, angrily.

"You weren't above 'using' a socialite on the prowl, when that's what you thought I was," she flared back, then continued in a more conciliatory fashion. "Look, you're a businessman; I'm willing to pay to get a message out to my ship. There's no reason why we can't make a deal," she paused. "A thousand credits for a message."

His eyes widened. "A thousand credits? I presume your 'friends' would have to pay?"

She nodded.

"What do you want the message to say?"

She breathed a small sigh of relief. "The ship, the Wings of Alderaan, is captained by a man named Hanel. Tell him that Leia is--"

"Still no last name?"

"--is in trouble. I'll keep moving; he had a life probe set with my readings. He should be able to find me."

"I'll be back as quickly as I can." He turned and disappeared into the darkness.

As the minutes passed, she found herself getting restless and began to wander down the alley.

Peering into a smaller side alley, she almost shouted with glee. A skimmer! If it was operational, she could get out of the city: Captain Hanel could trace her anywhere. She wasn't a great pilot, but she was capable enough.

So deep was she in thought that she almost missed the sound of his return. Trouble. He could never have gotten to his ship and relayed the message in that short an amount of time. As if reading her thoughts, he shook his head.

"No way, lady. They're not letting anyone near their ships. Someone figured out that you might try just what you did."

She nodded. "I was afraid of that. Look, there's a skimmer over there. We could head for another city. They won't be expecting me to be able to get out of this city."

"We?" he asked incredulously. "Listen, sister, our deal was for a message on my ship's radio. I never agreed to become a bodyguard." He started to turn away, then abruptly turned back. "Look. I learned the hard way, you look out for Number One. I do -- by doing what I do best, run cargo. My ship's for hire, if the fee is right. What I don't do is play Jedi. That's a quick trip to an early grave. You got that-?"

To his surprise, she did not rage at him. "Yes, Captain, I understand perfectly," she said with enormous dignity, her voice so filled with scorn, however, that it cut like a vibroblade. "Go back to your profits and your drinking, and your taking care of Number one. It is what you're best at."

He watched her with the same unreadable expression he had worn before. "What did you take that he wants go badly?"

"I told you, I'm not a criminal, I... learned something that someone does not want to get out."

"Then he wants you dead?"

Yes, damn you, yes! Nodding, she turned away. She had faced and surmounted serious problems before, but she had never been alone and hunted by an entire world. While Leia was not a coward, she knew that the difference between courage and cowardice was not the absence of fear -- only the insane felt no fear --but that a courageous person did not allow it to run her life.

"Well, maybe I could fly you to the nearest city: I know Devan fairly well."

He said it offhandedly, casually, but Leia, trained to observe people, heard a subtle note behind his words that surprised her. Well, well, well. Not as cynical or mercenary as he pretended to be -- or tried to convince himself he was.

"Thank you," she replied, quietly accepting his offer.

It took him no time at all to hot-wire the skimmer and, with a gentle purr, it headed sky-ward. Leia had suggested setting course for a farther city, assuming that, if Torm decided that she had left the capitol, he would also believe that she would try for the nearest city. Much to her surprise, he had agreed without argument.

The city for which they were heading -- Pilar -- lay about three hours journey by skimmer from the Devanian capitol, beyond a mountain range and past a small jungle. The first two hours passed without incident.

Then, they were in trouble.

The skimmer dipped slightly, as a whole section of lights on the instrument panel suddenly went dark.

"Damn!" Solo exclaimed. "We've lost our navigational equipment. And it's still dark -- with a mountain range out there! Remind me not to let you pick my next spaceship."

"There wasn't exactly an enormous selection!"

He peered into the darkness, then suddenly swerved the skimmer rapidly to the right, then the left, then held it sideways. Unprepared, Leia hit the wall hard.

"How's that for some fancy seat--of-the-pants flying?" he crowed.

She glared at him, but never got the chance to reply. With a loud noise, something blew on the panel and the skimmer headed downward at a

precipitous angle. He struggled with the controls a moment, then threw a quick glance at her over his shoulder.

"Brace yourself, we're going to hit!"

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The first thing she noticed upon regaining consciousness was that the sky was lightening. Dawn, soon, she thought. The next thing that came to her attention was the fact that she ached all over -- and that part of the skimmer had fallen on her. Trying to shift out from under the weight, she winced from what appeared to be a thousand bruises.

"Ouch, damn it! I must have hit every inch of wall in this stupid ship," she announced

"Don't worry," came a groggy voice behind her, "the only way you'll notice is if you landed on your mouth."

"The trouble with you, flyboy," she snarled. "is that you not only fly by the seat of your pants, you think by them!"

He shoved a section of the wall panel aside. "Can we continue this display of mutual admiration later? It's a long walk from here to civilization."

They searched the remains of the skimmer; there wasn't much they could use: a couple blankets, a medi-kit, concentrates and an empty flask ( "For water, if we find any," he had said, rather discouragingly.) And a compass. They had come down in the jungle, and without something to navigate by, they would never locate Pilar.

Dawn had finally broken by the time they set off in the direction pointed out by their (they hoped) trusty compass. Han had quite a number of inches on her -- and, after awhile, she began to believe they were all in his legs. She knew he was setting his ferocious pace deliberately, probably angry both at her (for getting him into this) and himself (for going along with it,) but she was damned if she would give him any satisfaction. Gritting her teeth, she grimly fought to keep up.

It seemed an eternity before the path they were following opened abruptly into a small glade through which a stream bubbled happily. Water! They both rushed to it but, for a moment, she couldn't drink,, she was breathing too hard. Her struggle to keep up had more than winded her; she had a sharp stitch in her side.

"Here, drink this."

He was holding the flask out to her. As she reached for it, she caught his eyes. There was ill-concealed concern and guilt in them. He looked away, muttering something about setting too fast a pace. It was as much of an apology as he could make, and she accepted it.

As he settled on a fallen log, she wearily sat down on the ground. Feeling his eyes on her, she glanced up.

"Okay, sweetheart," he said, "I think it's time you told me a little more about the trouble you're in, seeing as how I'm in the middle of it, too. Who's after you, and why?"

"Look, it's not really impor--" She stopped. There was a hard expression on his face; he wanted the information and he intended to get it. "You're right. You are entitled to know. Torm is the one--"

"Torm? Not the Viceroy?" he asked, startled.

"-- is the one that wants me dead," she ignored his interruption. "I was getting in his way. It seems he's one of the high mucky-mucks in..." she hesitated, then continued, "the Guild."

He almost fell off his perch. "THE GUILD?" he squeaked. Dumbfounded, he stared at her, then continued in a more normal voice, "You have me running interference for you with the Guild?" Taking the flask from her hand, he took a long drink of water (muttering something about wishing it were a stronger brew.) Then, "Gods, why me? What have I ever done?"

For a minute, there was silence. Then as anger replaced incredulity, he glared at her and asked sarcastically, "Forgive my curiosity, but in there anything else you forgot to tell me?"

She sighed. Might as well; it didn't make any difference now. "I'm Leia Organa, Heir to the Matriarchate of Alderaan and a Senator of the Republic... and, if you don't close your mouth, you'll probably end up swallowing a feast's worth of the absolutely charming bugs that are flying around here."

Closing his eyes as if in pain, he shook his head in disbelief. A silence descended that neither ventured to break, each wrapped in his/her thoughts. Finally, he stood up and dusted himself off.

"Devan never gets cold; makes you forget it's winter, now," he said, scanning the sky. "Night comes early and stays late. We don't have that

much daylight, so we'd better get moving." He didn't mention the Guild again.

He was right: there turned out to be only two hours of light left. It had been spent mostly in silence. He had set a reasonable pace this time, but the terrain had made things difficult. Fallen trees slowed them up as they clambered over, and an occasional downed giant forced them to go around. Sometimes, the path ended, and they had to fight their way through jungle underbrush until a new one started.

Leia absolutely refused any special assistance, and tackled the jungle with as much determination as he did. By the time they made camp for the night, he was looking at her with dawning respect.

The spot they had chosen was near water in a glade surrounded by mnet trees, whose fruit was well-known for its refreshing taste and on which they dined. Leia was glad the nights on Devan remained warm the year round; they could not afford a fire. It was agreed that they would split the watch, with Han taking the first one (She did not argue that point. Her eyelids felt as if someone were sitting on them. )

Leia awoke with a start. It had been a bad dream, which was not surprising under the circumstances. She checked her watch idly, wondering how long she had left before her watch was to start. Damn! An hour past the time she was to have been awakened.

Angrily, she rose to her feet. The women of the Matriarchate were trained to believe that no one could do it all, that seeking help from people qualified to give it was not only not a disgrace, but was also a vital trait for a ruler to learn, if she was to rule properly. That was why an advisory council had been created. But, accepting or seeking help was one thing, allowing someone to decide for you was another. Leia was not a child who needed guidance, but an adult who expected to shoulder equal responsibilities as much as she expected to enjoy equal rights. He may have meant well, but she would not let him decide what was right for her. In fact, as she had gotten him involved much more deeply than she had ever intended to, it was her obligation to carry the burden, not his.

Rather to her surprise, he said nothing during her angry monologue, just sat and listened quietly, his expression hidden in the shadows. Then he nodded and rose to his feet.

"You're right. It won't happen again." Stretching, he yawned. "See you in the morning."

Interesting. She had believed he would oppose the idea of a totally equal relationship. Men in that seemingly macho mold usually did. There was obviously considerably more to the Corellian than he showed to the world.

She had expected him to be a sprawler, in line with the restless vitality he brought to his waking moments, but he actually slept rather tidily. Why, I'll bet he's a cuddler, she thought and grinned mentally. If they survived this increasingly complicated escapade, she just might find out.

Morning dawned crisp and clear. It was going to be a beautiful day. They breakfasted on the golden fruit, and stuffed more into their packs. While concentrates provided almost everything a human needed to keep going, they could not quench the desire to eat. Then, both of them splashed themselves quickly at the stream (Leia promised herself a hot bath when this was over) checked the compass and started off.

They had no warning. One minute they were walking peacefully along a well-marked trail, the next, a large, dark body was hurtling at Han from the branches above. Years of surviving in a human jungle had honed his instincts to an incredible edge, and that was all that saved his life. At the last second, he dodged to the right and the creature struck his left side, rather than landing directly on his shoulders. Massive claws raked down his shoulder and arm as he fell hard onto his right side, numbing his arm.

Galvanized by fear for his life, Leia frantically looked around for something she could use as a weapon. Her gaze lit on a fallen branch. For all that it was stout and strong, she knew that it would be poor protection at best. But she grabbed it anyway, and began to wield it like a club.

The animal, preparing to go for Solo's throat, whirled to meet the more immediate threat. Shifting the branch in her hands, she used it to keep the creature at bay, though she was continually giving ground. She knew that she would soon be backed against a wall of underbrush.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun -- and with the roar of a blaster. The creature died without a sound; she realized that it had not uttered one throughout the entire incident. Now that she could get a look at it, it was an impressive beast, almost fifteen feet from mouth to tail and approximately six hundred pounds of muscle, claw and fang.

Solo was staggering to his feet, his right hand holding his left arm. Blood seeped between his fingers. "That was really crazy," he said, quietly. "You could have been killed."

She sighed. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Perhaps it was the release caused by relief -- it was not really that funny a remark -- but they both began to laugh hysterically. It was several minutes before either one of them could catch their breath. As she brushed the tears from her eyes, she noticed that he was wincing even as he laughed, and she searched around for the medi-kit.

Working as gently as she could, she cleaned the wounds and applied the synthe-flesh. "You were lucky," she noted. "The claw marks aren't very deep. The synthe-flesh should be enough to heal them."

It seemed as though the morning's narrow escape had broken down the remaining barriers between them. She was not sure who had started talking first but, before long, both were opening up about their lives. She learned of his hard youth -- a story that explained much about his attitudes -- and the knife-edge on which his adulthood was balanced. He spoke of his lady -- his ship -- and his partner, Chewie. Her trained ear caught what he did not say as much as what he did. His love for his friend rang clear, though he worked at concealing it. Most of all, she recognized a genuine freedom fighter, a round peg who refused to be pushed into a square hole no matter how hard society tried, and who fought back the only way he could.

There was a lot more to him than he would let people see.

In turn, Leia spoke of the loss of her mother and the gap it had left in her life, and of how close she had grown with her father, as a result. And, how she wished that she could relax more and learn to delegate the unimportant tasks. It was not that she did not love what she was doing or that she shrank from hard work: Alderaani royalty for millennia had been raised to expect a lifetime of labor in the service of their people, their planet and the Republic.

The problem was that she felt uncomfortable giving even the smallest tasks to someone else; she ended up worrying so much that it was easier to do it herself. ("That's ridiculous," he had snorted. "if you don't think they're capable, they shouldn't be working for you. And, if you do, then, let 'em do their jobs!") He was right, of course, and she had always felt guilty that she did not seem to trust her subordinates (which she did,) but she could not seem to let go. No doubt about it: she was a workaholic.

Trouble was, she wished she were not. In general, her social life was limited to official functions and her friends were mostly her father's contemporaries, not hers. She had always found that she had little in common with most of the people her age that she had met through the years, especially the offspring of the

wealthy and the nobility. Generally, they were spoiled and useless, parasites on the labor of others. Unlike Alderaani royalty, they were allowed to drift purposelessly. She felt sorry for them, for their aimlessness, but it was not strong enough to get her to socialize with them.

What surprised her most was that she was telling him any of this. Since her mother's death, she had confided only in her father. Yet here was an (almost) total stranger -- and she was giving him her life story. It was strange how relaxed she felt in his company, the first time she could ever recall feeling quite like this.

--- Whoops, a Voice sniggered in the back of her mind, you're failing for him!

--- Don't be ridiculous, she replied angrily. I've known him less than thirty-two Standard timeparts.

--- Runs in the family, came the retort. Your parents knew each other less than a week before they decided to marry.

She stopped arguing with herself, beginning to feel that the Voice was getting the upper hand. Could it be right? Was she really falling in love with, with... an arrogant, hard-nosed Corellian smuggler?

--- well (that damned voice again!) you know that the Matriarchate has always encouraged its members to look outside the Family for their mates, in order to bring vigorous new blood into the line. And he certainly is vigorous!

--- Oh, shut up! she snapped grumpily.

The Voice subsided with the distant sound of sarcastic laughter.

Watching him for a few minutes, she realized that he, too, was surprised. He had spent most of his life concealing himself from the Galaxy, carefully building a defensive wall around his innermost thoughts and feelings. Now, suddenly, he was spilling his guts to someone he had just met, and she could tell that he was as puzzled by his behavior as she was by hers. Could it be that he was --- ? She caught herself, but not before experiencing a curious lurch deep inside. This is ridiculous, she thought grimly, and refused to entertain the idea again.

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It was almost two hours shy of night when they stumbled across it. They barely kept from walking right into it, an action that would have swiftly ended the escapade. Crouching in nearby underbrush, they studied it.

There was no doubt that it was a Guild outpost, if for no other reason that that the criminal organization would not allow a rival on a world it owned. It was surprisingly poorly guarded, but then, the Guild had nothing to fear on Devan.

They sat in silence for some time before she began to speak. She was staring at the outpost, refusing to look at him. "We've been exceptionally fortunate, but I think we're about to run out of luck." She hesitated, still not meeting his eyes. "Han, we have to split up."

Hurrying on over his protest, she continued, "The Senate must be alerted to Torm and the Guild. Traveling separately, we have twice the chance of getting through. Especially as they won't be looking for you: in fact, they have no idea that I'm with anyone else. Hopefully, even if they run across you, it won't mean anything to them. If you do get to Pilar--"

"Damn it," he exploded at last, "that's crazy! Especially considering how hard you worked to get me to come along in the first place. Well, no way."

Startled by his vehemence, she quickly looked up and caught an expression in his eyes, a split second before he got his shield back in place, that made her suddenly feel very good, despite the trouble she was in. She had a crazy, almost overwhelming, desire to reach out and stroke the hair that fell over his forehead. Instead, she just held his eyes with her own. "Han, you know I'm right. Don't make it more difficult. Please."

There was no response from him for a moment, then he nodded his head. Sighing with relief, she handed him her ring. "You'll need this to help convince Captain Hanel."

He studied the ring carefully, then gave her his. "To convince Chewie," he said with a smile. "Remember, it's the Millennium Falcon."

He started to move away, then he reached out. She was never quite sure what happened next but she found herself in his arms, responding passionately to a kiss that was half ferocious intensity and half incredible tenderness.

They broke apart, both breathless. with a strangled "damn!" he turned away and started off. She watched him leave, desperately wanting to call him back, still feeling the touch of his lips on hers and the strength of his

arms around her. But she said nothing and eventually she turned and moved away in her own direction.

Unlike Alderaanis, Corellians were a gloomy people whose pessimistic philosophy was well-known. One famous Corellian proverb reminds the galaxy that no matter how bad things seem to be, they will always get worse. Leia had always found the gloom-and-doom outlook amusing -- she was also about to find out that it was accurate.

A few more yards would have gotten her safely past the outpost, but she was not to have them. Her foot almost came down on the tail of a claval, one of the smaller wild cats inhabiting Devan. Startled, it jumped, and then charged through the underbrush making an enormous racket. She froze and hunched down in the bushes, but it was too late. Two of the guards had heard the noise and decided to investigate. There was no chance of getting away, and no way to avoid discovery, if she stayed.

A distant movement caught her eye. Han! She wondered briefly if he had lingered to make sure she had gotten away. Whether he had or not she was sure (she did not quite know why) that he knew she was in trouble. He stood suddenly, then, as abruptly, moved back into the jungle. It would have been incredibly stupid -- if it had not been intentional.

Oh, no, Han, she cried silently, don't! But, even had he been able to hear her cry, it was too late. His movement had had the desired effect; an alarm was raised and a contingent of guards, accompanied by robo-hunters, raced into the jungle after him. She knew that she should use this breathing space to get away, but she found that she could not leave.

Time seemed to drag by, but at last, came the sounds of the guards returning. Forcing herself to look, she saw what she had feared most: a limp form slung over the shoulder of a guard. Her vision suddenly blurred. Damn! she swore, as she brushed away the tears, this is no time to fall apart!

She sat staring at the gate through which they had carried him. Why aren't you leaving? a part of her mind asked. Isn't this the reason why you split up, so that if one of you got caught, the other could still get the message through? So why aren't you leaving?

Because she could not. She had been listening to that argument ever since the hunt for Han had begun. Or rather, ignoring it. A silent apology to her duty crossed her mind, but right now, the Guild, Torm, the message, the Senate all faded to insignificance beside the simple fact that they were going to hurt him. They did not suspect him of being associated with her as yet, but they would want to know what he was doing near their

installation. He, on the other hand, would try to buy her as much time as possible. The thought of what he would undergo hurt so much. She found it hard to breathe.

No. There was no way she could leave. She might get killed, but she had to try to rescue him. Checking the sky, she estimated that it would be another half-hour or so before it was dark -- there was nothing that could be done until then.

Except to be mightily grateful that the Guild was so arrogantly confident in its owned world. Security was abominably lax (if it had not been for that damned craval, both Han and she would have made it past the guards,) and there did not appear to be any alarm or destruct mechanisms placed around the wall. She had watched one of Devan's predator birds, easily thirty or forty pounds alight on the top of the barrier. If there had been any special electronic devices to worry about, the bird would most surely have set them off.

Still, to be certain. she had decided to use a giant of a tree, whose branches reached over the wall, to help effect her entrance. There would be a drop of about twenty-five feet on the other side, but she was not overly concerned. The Matriarchate was a firm believer in 'a healthy mind in a healthy body' and Leia had had rigorous physical training from childhood, including several years of k'urk'ur, an ancient Alderaani martial art. Though peace-loving by nature, Alderaanis did not believe in allowing anyone to step on them. She had a feeling that the k'urk'ur would come in handy.

Just as she was ready to start climbing the tree, a roar made her seek shelter in the underbrush. A few seconds later, the powerful lights circling a ship's frame lit up the jungle like daylight, as the vessel passed several yards overhead and settled down in the courtyard to one side of the building. Great, she thought. Our way out, if we can reach it.

Silently, she climbed the tree, wriggled out on the branch and dropped to the ground inside the wall. Voices across the courtyard caused her to freeze, but when she realized they were not coming closer, she moved forward again. Ahead of her was an open doorway with light streaming through, and she crept up to it quietly.

It opened into a storage area. and she quickly slipped behind some of the boxes. The voices belonged to two men, one obviously a watchman. She'd bet that his little office had a lay-out of the place; she could use that. Straining to hear the conversation, she caught enough to know that the other man was going to leave a little early and that no one should be stopping by before morning.

Perfect. The man leaving would not be missed for some time, and she did not have to worry about unexpected visitors. By the time he reached her, he would be out of the watchman's line of sight and far enough away that, if she was quick and careful, the guard should never know that anything had happened. She would have let him leave, but she needed his gun.

He never knew what hit him. So swift and accurate was the attack that he never had the chance to utter a sound before he fell. As she struggled to drag him behind the boxes, she wished she were built more along the Amazonian lines of her cousin Jayna who would not have had the slightest difficulty in hauling this damned heavy son of a bitch anywhere! She took a second to catch her breath, and then began to close in on the night watchman.

The hard muzzle of a gun against his spine brought the cheerful tune he was humming to an abrupt end. Grabbing his chair, she quickly swung it around, so that he could not reach any alarm buttons.

"About an hour ago, a prisoner was brought in. All I want to know is where they took him."

"I - I don't know. I swear!"

Shrugging, she raised the gun. "Then. you're of no further use to me."

His fear was so strong, she could taste it. "No, wait! They've got him in an interrogation cell."

"Where?"

"Over there," he answered, pointing to a spot on the map of the installation that was hanging on his wall.

Fantastic! The cell was located on the same side of the outpost as the ship that had just landed. Maybe their luck was beginning to change. Setting the gun on 'stun' with her thumb, she knocked him out and rolled his body into a corner of the room out of sight of anyone casually looking into the storage area from the doorway.

She encountered no one on her careful journey to the interrogation cell. It gave her a bad feeling; she was not sure if she was being set up or if it was another example of the Guild's over-confidence. As she approached Han's cell, she noticed a door to the outside. If it was open, it would be safer to use than trying to retrace her steps. She hesitated, but now was the time to find out if it was unlocked. The door began to open as soon as

she touched the button, that was all she needed to know, and she quickly closed it before it was one-third of the way up.

His cell was around the corner. Stopping outside the door, she drew a deep breath. There was no way of knowing how many people might be inside. You're scared to death, she thought wryly. Then, tightening her grip on the gun, she opened the door and rushed in.

The room was empty -- except for one still form lying on a table in the center. Averting her eyes from the various instruments around the room, hating to think of what they were for, she hurried to his aide. He was unconscious, but they had hurt him. There was a terrible pain stamped on his face that even unconsciousness had not been able to erase. She was surprised at how young and vulnerable he looked with his defenses down. What she wanted most was to cradle him in her arms and smooth that look of pain away.

Not now, though. He had to roused enough to walk, with as much help as she could give him. Racing to the medi-cabinet, she scanned the bottles. DMC. Perfect. A very strong stimulant. Grabbing the bottle and a syringe, she set about bringing him to consciousness. A soft moan announced his return to awareness.

"Easy, Han," she soothed, her hand gently stroking his forehead.

He looked at her in dazed amazement. "L-Leia-?"

She nodded.

It took a minute. Then ferociously, despite his weakness. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I couldn't leave you."

"WHAT! I thought that was the whole point at splitting up! I'm lying here letting those bastards make footprints in my guts to buy you time, and you don't even leave!"

He was really getting agitated. Afraid he might hurt himself, she grabbed his hands and held them tightly.

"Han, please," she begged, "Later. You can yell at me later. All you want. But, we have to get out of here now. Come on. Let's see if you can stand."

It wasn't easy but, between the two of them, they got him up and moving out of the cell. When they reached the corner, she let him lean against

the wall, and went forward to scout around it. She jerked her head back quickly.

Damn! she swore silently, where the hell did they come from? They were three men standing buy the door swapping jokes. Not guards. There were no uniforms or weapons. she had no idea what to do next. The two of them could not stand out here in the corridor much longer. Han had to lie down soon, or he was going to fall down. Shifting the gun, she prepared to try to take then out, when the party broke up. Two of them drifted away, leaving one man by the door. He was quickly dispatched, as soon as the others were out of sight.

She propelled Han toward the door and then out into the courtyard. It was still there, that beautiful hunk of metal! And its ramp was open! Han was starting to lean heavily on her: there was no way he could last much longer, and she tried to quicken the pace.

Then suddenly they were in trouble. Several figures appeared between them and the ship. One man, catching sight of the two of them, started to reach for his weapon. Secrecy was no longer possible and, kicking the gun over to full power, she opened fire. Her barrage was extremely accurate, seemingly fueled by her sense of urgency.

In the midst of the confusion, Han's voice could be heard. "Looks like you managed to cutoff our only escape route."

She found herself laughing and, without withdrawing her gaze from the fight, called back, "Maybe you'd like it better back in your cell, Your Smartness."

The battle ended abruptly, but she knew it was only a temporary respite. The entire installation was alerted now. They reached the bottom of the ramp, just as more guards poured into the courtyard. Han pulled himself from her grasp and avoided the hand that grabbed for him.

"I'm in your way. Don't worry. I'll make it." He grasped a ramp support and half dragged, half crawled into the ship.

She laid down a heavy fire pattern to give him time, and then raced up the ramp, jabbing at the closing mechanism as she went by. Now, if the Guild wanted to stop them, they would have to bring out the big weapons; handguns were useless against the ship's hull. And, she was going to make sure that they did not get a chance to use those big guns.

Han had collapsed on the floor near the control panel. As much as she wished to check him out, there was no time. She slapped the panel into

life, and sighed gratefully as the engine ignited with a gratifying roar. Seconds later, the vessel was streaking for the stars.

Leia threw back her head and let loose a blood-curdling cry of triumph.

Roused by the scream, Han raised his head. "Who died?" he asked woozily.

"Not us, sweetheart," she crowed. "Wings of Alderaan, here we come!"

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The wrench descended on his thumb and, cursing fluently, he flung it away. Damn! All he wanted was to finish the repairs on the Falcon and get the hell out of here. If Chewie had been helping, he could have had it finished by now. But, the Wookiee had disgustedly informed him that he (Han) had been impossible to live with these last few days and he (Chewie) was no longer going to bother to try. Drawing himself up with enormous dignity, the Falcon's first mate had stalked into the deepest recesses of the ship. Han knew that Chewie was right, but he couldn't help it.

He was absolutely miserable.

It was only a week since they had escaped from the Guild. After three days, he had been discharged from the med-center and had been at loose ends ever since, except for a few sessions with members of the Senate and the Patrol. He had not really seen Leia, but it was largely his own fault. He was avoiding her.

There was not way he could stand to watch everyone bowing and scraping, calling her 'Your Highness' and 'Madame Senator' in tones of deepest respect, without being reminded that his crazy idea about the two of them was exactly that: crazy. Suddenly she seemed be standing on the far side of an abyss a thousand light-years wide. A princess and a smuggler! What the hell had happened to his brains?

A shaft of pain lanced through him. Despairingly, he stared at the distant wall. You had to do it, didn't you, damned moron? Fell in love, you stupid jackass. I thought you knew better. You did know better! Never let anyone get too close. And worse, when you finally do, who do you pick? Someone totally out of your world... Well, damn it, that's just fine. Who need her? There are plenty of women in the galaxy and --

-- and, gods. it hurts.

To his horror, he suddenly found that he could not see. Damn it, no! Not that, too! He struggled to keep the tears back, but failed and, leaning

his forehead against the cool metal of the Falcon, wept silently. Even as a child, he had never cried. It was a luxury the harshness of his early life had not permitted him. Now, he could not seem to stop.

Eventually, he brought his emotions under control and, grabbing the recently discarded wrench, began to work savagely on the necessary repair.

"Are you trying to fix it or wreck it?" came a cool voice behind him.

There was only a momentary hesitation on his part, then he continued what he had been doing, ignoring her, his eyes locked on the metal before him.

"I hear you're leaving." Her voice gave no indication that she had seen anything out of the ordinary. "Of course, I had to hear it from someone else; you've been noticeably difficult to get hold of lately."

"I've had other things to do." He was amazed at how natural his voice sounded.

"You know, it's generally a lot easier to talk to someone's front. Would it be particularly burdensome if I asked you to turn around?" she asked, sarcastically. Yet, he believed he almost caught a strained note beneath the sarcasm.

She was a vision in white, wearing a high-necked gown that reached the floor, of a material that seemed to catch and hold the light. Her hair, that he had seen falling in dark waves about her shoulders, was piled elegantly on the top of her head and held by a circlet ablaze with diamonds. If he had needed anything more to confirm the gap between them, he had it in front of him.

They stared at each other for a moment, before she began to speak. "Are you going back to... smuggling?"

He shrugged. "It's what I know, what I do." Then, defiantly, "I won't apologize for it, either."

"I'm not asking you to. But, have you ever considered putting those same talents to work on the right side of the law?"

He eyed her questioningly. "What are you talking about?"

She seemed uncharacteristically uncertain, then she plowed ahead. "There's a very special, very secret corps of the Patrol called the Lightning Corps that's, well, composed of members with unusual talents and backgrounds. Some, in fact, are former. um..."

"Crooks?" he inquired, helpfully.

She glared at him. "Yes, crooks. The Corps does special undercover work -- unusual assignments. not routine Patrol action -- and -- "

"Look," he cut her off, "are you crazy? Me, a law enforcer? And, if that wasn't bad enough, can you see me 'yes siring' and 'no siring.' Following rules and regulations ... the whole idea is ridiculous."

"The Corps isn't set up that way. There are no ranks, except for the Commander. Everyone else in on an equal level. Corps units range from one person up to teams of four -- in your case, a team of two, obviously. You spend much of your time in some of the toughest sectors of the Republic. All members get A-5 clearance --"

He looked surprise. That was top level security clearance. Only a handful of people carried it.

"--and, out there, you're the boss. Anyone under the jurisdiction of the Republic in obligated to follow your orders, should you break cover." She watched him closely. "And, as a cover, you can still play at being Han Solo, smuggler supreme."

When he said nothing, but just stared at the floor, deep in thought, she continued, "The only people you have to deal with are the Corps' Commander, the Republic President and the Senators who are on the naren on Criminal Activities. I hope it won't bother you, but you'd have to stay around, and -- you may have to work with some of those Senators... very closely."

Stunned, he quickly raised his eyes, but she was gone, shimmering under the lights, seemingly floating across the hangar floor, her laughter drifting back to him. Along with her last words.

Very closely. Very closely. For the first time in a week, he felt like laughing, felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Gods, she didn't want him to leave! Maybe...maybe that damn gap hadn't been there; he'd put it there. Well then, he could damn well take it away!

Leaving? Like hell he was!

Tossing the wrench aside, he raced for the open ramp and bounded up it. "Hey, Chewie, " he bellowed, "How'd you like to join the good guys?"

end

\*naren - Senate committee, originally a pre-standard term meaning 'enclave.'

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