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## TRUE OPPONENTS

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Jelsin's drinking den was the best one in Kedling; the bottle on the table was the best in Jelsin's; the smile on Lando Calrissian's face was the smoothest, slickest in his repertoire. The combination made Han Solo feel very suspicious.

Han's Clan-Solo squint deepened as he regarded the former owner of the Millennium Falcon. "If it's just a fast run to Monity with a passenger and droid parts, why the high fee?"

Lando gave an exasperated sigh. "Stop being so suspicious. The whole planet of Monity belongs to Vazel Timero, the billionaire. He has his hunting preserve there. He wants droid parts for his estate at Perso space- port and he wants them now."

Han sneered as he picked up his glass, "Vazel Timero has fleets of ships."

"Sure. All of them Class A freighters. He isn't going to divert one of those big ships for a load of droid parts and an employee." A dreamy expression crossed Lando's darkly handsome face. "Even for this particular employee."

Han sipped his drink. That wasn't the first time Lando had alluded to the passenger in a fashion that aroused Han's interests Yet all he knew for sure was she was female

"Well, will you take the run? Yea or nay. Look, I'm doing you a favor offering it to you, Han. I still get the finder's fee no matter who ships the cargo."

Since losing the Falcon to Han, one of Lando's sources of income was as a broker, getting people in a bind together with Independents not adverse to risky runs. Han had a tidy sum from the business Lando sent his way, but Lando always seemed to steer the trouble jobs toward Han. Not that he meant Han any harm. How was Lando supposed to know that the mild-mannered pilgrims bound for Taros were addicted to highly dangerous and illegal drugs that induced fits of vampiric blood-sucking? Or that the nice family wanting passage when their starliner was damaged in a port collision was actually a clan of assassins engaged in a fight to the death with a rival faction of the Imperial Assassins Guild? There'd been girls involved in that one, too.

"I want to see the passengers first." Han said as he set down his glass.

"She's in one of the booths." Lando grinned, stood and ushered Han toward the curtained alcoves in the rear of Jelsin's. Sighing, Han followed.

Han didn't know what he expected to see when Lando pushed back the opaque curtain, but it didn't approach the reality of the woman who sat at the table, staring down at her drink.

Han recognized the woman as one of the White Warriors of the Kadell with the silver hair and pigmentless pale skin of her people. She was a big woman; Han guessed she was as tall as he was and nearly as broad in the shoulders. Clad in a silvery chain mail tunic, she made an impressive sight. Yet Han felt a shiver of suspicion dance along his spine. The marble perfection of her face was flawed by a blue tattoo of intersecting lines inscribed on her right cheek. The other Kadell he had encountered, while serving his apprenticeship on a Searle smuggling ship, had been a male warrior with four lines. This woman had six. If Han's memory served him, it marked her as a high priestess of her kind.

"Kelandros Mea," Lando said in grand tones, as if he were still back in his family's ancestral castle instead of a low class drinking den. "May I present Han Solo?"

Thick silver eyelashes raised, revealing eerie, glowing silver irises. The strange eyes swept over Han and the Kadell nodded.

"This is the one," said a voice like music.

"Han Solo, Captain of the Millenium Falcon." Han gave his most engaging smile. "When do you want to leave for Monity?"

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Three days out of Kedling, Han couldn't stand it anymore. Turning toward the co-pilot's seat, he pointed a warning finger. "One more word, Chewie. One more growl, grunt or honk and I'll set your pelt on fire!"

Chewbacca glared down at him in sullen silence, blue eyes just as accusing as his previous complaints had been.

"I don't know why you're so upset. It's not like I'm bedding her or anything, although the gods know it ain't been for lack of trying." Han gave a grunt of frustration. He had unabashedly lusted after Kelandros Mea's silver and snow loveliness from the moment she'd looked up at him in Jelsin's. He'd tried every line, move and tactic he knew, but each sleep period Kelandros Mea had retired to her cabin alone, spending her time in chaste seclusion while he spent his in fevered fantasy. Chewbacca rumbled and Han cocked the warning finger at him again. "I mean it! I'm sick and tired of all these gloomy warnings that the White Warriors of the Kadell are beings of ancient and unsleeping malevolence dedicated to death. What do you know about the Kadell? You only met the one who was on the Searle ship and he didn't give anyone any trouble. All he wanted was to smuggle that Krippon fighting dragon to Habro Seven." Chewbacca's growled remark was interrupted by a warning beep.

"Now, see, we're coining out of hyperspace by Monity. We'll be in Perso in less than an hour. She'll take her droid parts, get off the ship and my virtue will be safe. Damn it." Chewbacca rumbled something else. Han, intent on the re-entry to normal space, didn't catch it all, but he didn't doubt it was like all of Chewie's other complaints, garnered from listening to too many old Wookiees gabbing over village chant fires. It was one of those times when Han suspected his foster family, the Solos, were justified in their belief that all Wookiees were big, hairy, smelly, trouble-making fuzzballs.

Perso port was nothing more than a dirt field and Han took special care easing the Falcon down. Within moments of the landing, uniformed port workers in a load-lifter were zooming across the field for their boss' cargo. Leaving Chewie to deal with the unloading of the droid parts, Han went to inform Kelandros Mea the ride was over.

At his first call the door to her cabin opened. She stood just inside the doorway. She was wearing what looked like a combat outfit of mottled green trousers and blouse with a dark brown vest that laced with leather thongs. It wasn't the kind of outfit he'd expected her to wear for her trip to Timero's estate at the top of the mountain looming over Perso port. Trying to keep his eyes off the tightly laced vest, Han cleared his throat and informed her, "Your boss' people are here for the droid parts. You want to oversee the unloading?"

"No."

A white hand reached up to touch his face. Cool fingers ran caressingly over his jawline, then across the scar on his chin. Silver eyes swept over him again. It seemed, to Han, that there was an inexplicable drop in the ship's oxygen level. And a rise in the temperature.

"Where is the Wookiee?"

"With ... with the work crew."

Kelandros Mea stepped forward until her vest was almost touching Han's shirt. He could feel her breath on his cheek. Then she tilted her head and with a sudden, smooth move, fitted their mouths together. Han didn't know what he had expected from an intimate contact with a priestess of Kadell, but he was more than satisfied by the long clash of lips and tongues. When they finally parted, Han had to suck in a breath. "I don't have to be at the estate until tomorrow," said Kelandros Mea. "Can you get rid of the Wookiee?"

"I can get rid of him," Han promised.

"I'll be waiting in your cabin. She moved toward him again, this time wrapping her arm around him as they kissed.

A few moments later, Han was making his way toward the Falcon's cargo hold. If an embrace that had all but melted his belt buckle was any indication of what awaited him in his cabin, he'd get rid of Chewbacca if he had to lock him in the smuggling bins.

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As he put away some tools in the Falcon's cargo hold, Chewbacca rumbled a chant-fire song to himself. He was a happy Wookiee. The laborers had finished unloading the droid parts which were now on their way to the mountain-top estate. He had in his possession a credit voucher that greatly increased his and Han's fortunes. And soon the Kadell priestess would be off the Falcon. It seemed that for once Lando Calrissian had not led them into disaster.

Chewbacca did not believe Lando did these things intentionally, out of vengeful spite. It seemed to be an unfortunate natural talent since Lando had been doing it long before he'd lost the Falcon to Han. Straightening the mess in the tool compartment, Chewbacca rumbled happily over the memory of that particular game of chance. The Falcon was a beautiful ship with a magnificent soul, a ship worthy of her new pilot. Although Han liked to pretend he was no one special, Chewbacca knew.

Wookiees were one with the Force and Chewbacca knew his companion was no cub of Clan That Walked Alone Together. They were a small people who achieved greatness only in their strength of will and their ability to hold senseless grudges. Such a clan had not birthed one with the soaring talent in Han's fingertips that made the old ship skim and dance and weave silvery arabesques in the blackness.

Of course, Chewbacca thought as he sealed the tool chest, Han also had a soaring talent for getting into trouble even without Lando's assistance. Han's pursuit of the Kadell had disturbed Chewbacca greatly. Wookiee elders told many tales of rites of combat and death, like the gladiator pits on Memmisi where slavers had taken many Wookiees to fight and die, and always the rites were presided over by the White Warriors of the Kadell. Chewbacca was glad the Kadell had shown no interest in Han's overtures. There was something wrong about her. Chewbacca's hunter's eyes, trained to detect and decipher minute evidence, could read nothing in her face or body movements, but he knew something was amiss. The priestess was an expert at concealment, but she was betrayed by the one thing she could not control -- her body chemistry. Three different times during the journey he had caught her watching Han, when the Corellian was engrossed in some ship's business and diverted from his persistent courtship-mating rituals. Each time she had given off a sickly scent, imperceptible to human senses but not to Chewbacca's sensitive nose. He remembered the male Kadell on the Searle ship with its lively, lusty female crew and he knew the priestess' scent was not one of sexual attraction.

It reminded Chewbacca of the musky scent given off by caged predators. He was glad the White Priestess would go up to the mountain and he and Han could leave this place. He'd been outside earlier during the unloading and found it to be a pretty place, heavily wooded, smelling of green and growing things, but he did not like it.

"Chewie?"

Chewbacca turned to see Han enter the cargo hold and was instantly alarmed by the tell-tale swagger in his walk. As Han approached, he flared his nostrils and caught a scent on the air, the herald of a change in Corellian body chemistry he had come to know well from their days on the Searle ship. The Kadell had not left after all and she had ceased rejecting Han's attentions.

Han smiled luringly. "Chewie, I feel real bad, making you take care of the unloading all by yourself. Look, I'll finish up here. You go into Perso and find an intoxicant shop."

Chewbacca rumbled angrily, quoting an old Wookiee proverb about human sexual customs.

"I am not going to become over-stimulated and run amok," Han said sullenly as he glared up at the Wookiee.

Chewbacca gave a derisive honk.

"I'm telling you, I can take care of myself. Go to town, have some drinks and think how glad Malla will be to see your share of the profits."

Chewbacca remarked that his mate would be happier to see Han return to their lodge, safe and whole.

The Corellian's face crinkled in disgust. "Look, I'm a big boy. I was bunked when I was sixteen. I apprenticed with the Searle. I can handle women."

Chewbacca growled a reminder about the incident in a certain city on Rith. "That wasn't my fault. Anyway, this is different. Kelandros Mea isn't interested in fusing with my soul for eternity, just a little fun. Nothing's gonna happen to me. You're the one who'll be in trouble if you don't take off."

Although Chewbacca was not nearly as sure as Han as to what the Kadell was after, one look at Han's face told him arguing would be useless. Han might not have been birthed by the Clan Who Walked Alone Together, but he had their unyielding will. Chewbacca told himself that the Kadell on the Queen of Skulls had done no harm to the Searle. Perhaps Han was right. Perhaps the Kadell priestess had no evil intentions either.

With a last rumbled warning, Chewbacca went out through the Falcon's cargo hold hatch. Blinking in the light of Monity's afternoon sun, Chewbacca headed for the collection of pre-fab buildings that served as Persol's port. The farther he got from the Falcon, the more the air smelled of sweet green life and the more Chewbacca disliked the place.

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Kelandros Mea unlaced her vest, removed it and folded it with ritual precision. She placed the garment on the edge of the small, cluttered desk protruding from the wall, which, along with a matching chair bolted to the deck and a shelf-bunk, were the sole furnishings in the captain's cabin.

Mea undid the catch-patches on her shirt with sharp tugs. War was the god of her people; combat their religion. She was versed in manners and means of death unknown even to the most canny mind of the imperial Assassins Guild. But she was also schooled in other types of combat, sparrings of the most sporting and satisfying nature. Yet as she hung her shirt on the back of

the chair, she felt strange. She felt as if she were disrobing for a mating ritual at the High Temple.

Soon. Soon it would be over.

Sitting, she removed her boots, then stripped off the rest of her clothing and stretched out on the silver foil blanket, waiting.

The cabin door opened and she heard the sharp intake of his breath. Turning her head, she looked at him. In the sharp cast face, she saw more than lust. There was admiration and awe. She said nothing, watching him as he unbuckled his holster and put it on the chair with a ritualistic slowness that matched her earlier movements.

Suddenly there was a flurry of clothing and laughter and warm, sun-browned flesh.

Soon, Mea thought, it would be over soon.

\* \* \*

Han Solo was lying on his side with his back against the bulkhead, for the bunk in the captain's cabin was more cramped than usual. Kelandros Mea was not a small woman. Han smiled down at the face beside him, the face that had haunted his dreams during the entire journey. He could hardly believe she was in his bed, one white arm resting on the silver foil blanket covering them. He was content, for the moment, just to look at her, drinking in the silver and snow loveliness. No line nor crease marred the perfection of her ivory cheeks and brow. Only the flare of her nostrils revealed the face was living flesh and not flawlessly carved stone. Thick silver lashes rested lightly on the colorless cheek. Han grinned to himself, thinking of the pink flush that had been on those cheeks not so long before. A strand of silver hair stuck to the cheek bearing the blue tattoo. Despite its metallic color, her hair was soft and fine. Han brushed the hair away. Instantly the silver lashes flew up revealing the eerie silver irises.

Smiling at her, Han ran a finger over along her jawline. Her skin was snow white but not snow cold. Han felt renewed stirrings at the memory of the heat of the pale skin. He kissed the base of her throat where blue veins pulsed beneath the translucent skin.

Intent on the soft skin, he felt rather than saw the movement of her arm. Her hand intruded between them. Fingers danced over his chest, stopping to trace patterns on his collarbone. Suddenly the hand pushed him backwards so hard he slammed into the bulkhead. Han was surprised by the rejection but not

by the strength of the shove. He'd experienced the strength in the curving muscles beneath the alabaster flesh.

Before he could stop her, she slipped out of the bunk. Han stretched and yawned as he watched her reach for the clothes neatly piled on his desk.

"What's the matter?" He tilted his head as he watched her. "You hungry?"

She had already slipped on the mottled green trousers and short sleeved blouse. She put on her softboots and picked up the dark brown vest. "Get up and get dressed." Her voice was flat and emotionless, as if she were reading coordinates to a nav computer.

Han watched her long fingers methodically lace up her vest thongs. She had whispered no sweet endearments, moaned no impassioned declarations. He hadn't been expecting undying devotion and life long commitment from her. He didn't believe in those things anymore, anyway, not since Jiselle. However, there was something wrong here. This was more than a woman who'd had a few moments of pleasure with a freighter bum and was taking her leave before things got messy. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Get dressed," she repeated, then left the cabin.

Han's first impulse was to pull the silver foil blanket over his head, have a childish attack of the stubbornness and stay right where he was. However, the note of ice in her voice set his internal alarms screaming like the Falcon's hull-rupture klaxon. Han let his caution override his desire for a tantrum.

Gathering up the clothes held discarded earlier with such gleeful haste, Han pulled on his underclothes, trousers and shirt. He was looking for his boots when he noticed his gun-belt was not on the chair where he'd put it, but on the desk. Han picked it up. The holster was empty. She'd taken his gun.

At that moment, Han heard the sound of the Falcon's forward boarding ramp going down. Bootless, he ran out of his cabin, down a curving corridor and through the main hold, the fastest way to the forward hatch. Han skidded to a halt on the slick deck. Kelandros Mea was still on board.

She had his blaster tucked into her belt.

She wasn't alone.

Standing beside the Kadell was a powerfully built being completely encased in expensive battle armor, including a helmet and weapon belt loaded with more instruments of destruction than Han had seen in one place since his last encounter with a Fett. The only explanation he could think of for the intruder

was a jealous spouse or suitor. If there was a male Kadell inside the armor, Han didn't want to tangle with him without a weapon.

Solos were reckless, but they weren't suicidal.

Before Han could decide what he should do, four taloned hands seized him. He had a jumbled glimpse of two thin-limbed reptiles, taller than him by a head, and apparently intent on pinning his arms behind him. Han had no idea what was going on, but he wasn't putting up with being mauled around on his own ship. With a howl of outrage, he flung aside both lizards, knocking them off their feet.

Han needed a weapon and the closest ones were on the belt of Mea's companion. Han launched himself at the armored figure, certain the combination of his speed and the other's ' encumbering armor would give him the chance to grab one of the dangling weapons.

Kelandros Mea materialized in his path. Han changed plans in mid-leap, swinging his right arm, open-handed, meaning to hit her, stun her and grab his blaster from her belt.

She ducked under his swing and came up inside his reach, so close her vest almost touched his shirt. He could feel her breath on his face. Long cool fingers curled around his throat. Han, skidding to a halt, grabbed her wrist with both hands and tore downward with a vicious strength that had broken strangleholds in many a barroom brawl. The ivory wrist did not yield. The silver fingers did not loose their grip. Instead, they shifted, exerted pressure. The flawless face winked out of existence along with the intruders, the Falcon and the rest of the universe.

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Sensation returned. Han felt pain in his wrists and a strange pressure at his throat. He opened his eyes. He saw a pair of soft- boots. Shifting his glance, he saw Kelandros Mea looming over him."I told you he would be unharmed, Honored One," Kelandros Mea said in a flat voice. She turned her head.

As Han followed the movement, he saw the armored figure, minus the helmet now. It was not a Kadell, but a male felinoid, with a bushy, buff-colored mane, broad face, black tipped nose and amber eyes with diamond-shaped pupils. Han struggled to his knees, then stood up, hampered by the fact his wrists were encased in the metal cuffs of security binders. A rigid piece of metal stretched between the cuffs, holding Han's wrists immobile while a thin link chain connected the cuffs to a metal studded belt around his waist.

Part of Han's mind registered the arrangement as a serious handicap, allowing only limited movement of his hands, but adrenaline and anger overrode his

caution. No one treated him like this in his own ship. Riding the crest of his welling fury, Han gave a Clan Solo battle-cry and launched himself at the felinoid, still intent on grabbing one of the weapons at his belt, preferably one that didn't require its user's hands to be free, but any killing instrument would do.

Pain erupted in Han's stomach so suddenly his first thought was that he'd taken a blaster bolt in the midriff, but he couldn't remember hearing the sound of the shot. Convulsed with pain in mid-air, he lost momentum and dropped. He tried to use his hands to break his fall but the shackles interfered and he hit the deck hard. Before he could suck in a breath, pain encircled his throat like a static charge warping around the Falcon's metal skin.

The twin pains vanished as quickly as they came, but Han's body reeled from the aftershocks. Gasping and blinking tears from his eyes, Han saw the felinoid standing over him. He had a small red box in his clawed hand.

The Lurian slave ship. The smell of vomit. The screams of pain. The red boxes. The collars. Memories of Han's childhood flooded back. Agonizers. The slavers who had owned him for two years had used agonizers to keep their 'goods' in line. As a child, Han had been considered too delicate for such treatment, but he had not forgotten the screams of those who wore the collars. The pressure at his throat, which he had earlier noted and dismissed, had to be a slaver collar. The belt, he thought disgustedly, was some modern improvement.

Hijackers? Slavers? A grudge? They were the only reasons he could think of for such treatment, but he was sure he'd never tangled with the felinoid before and he'd never heard of Kadells being mixed up with hijackers. Slavers, maybe, if he took Wookiee folktales at face value. But even Wookiees' conceded that the slavers worked for the Kadell, not the other way around and Mea had called the felinoid "Honored One."

Han's eyes shifted to the felinoid. He had to swallow three times before he could croak, "Timero?"

The felinoid nodded solemnly, his claw-tipped finger caressing the red box. "Yes, I am VaZel Timero. Welcome to my hunting preserve, Captain Solo."

Timero made a small head gesture. The lean lizards grabbed Han's arms and hoisted him to his feet. Muscular reaction to the agonizer made his legs weak and wobbly. Han sent furious messages to his knees not to fail him in embarrassing collapse.

"I've heard of dissatisfied customers," Han said as he held out his shackled hands "but isn't this a bit extreme?"

"Oh, I was quite satisfied with your services, Captain, and so apparently was Kelandros Mea." Timero pulled back his lips in a leer as he glanced toward the silent Kadell. Mea's face was as expressionless as ever, but her eyes were lowered, the glowing silver half hidden by her lashes. "Who would ever have suspected she had a passion for Corellians. I have but one passion, Captain Solo, and it is the hunt. I live for the thrill of the kill, for the sweet taste of victory. My wealth allowed me to indulge my passion. I roamed the galaxy in search of a challenge. I have hunted and killed beasts known to others only in holographs or legends. But there came a time when I could find no suitable creature, no opponent worthy of my skills."

Han struggled to make sense of the situation. The only remotely logical explanation he had for a billionaire hijacking a tiny freighter was that Timero wanted the Falcon to transport him to some Imperial game preserve that was off-limits to hunters. The Falcon was better suited for such a trip than one of Timero's massive personal yachts and Han knew he had a reputation for eluding Imperial entanglements.

Before Han could open his mouth to get confirmation of his theory, he saw Timero's finger touch the agonizer controls. He tried to brace himself but it wasn't possible. Pain lanced through his stomach, radiating up into his lungs and down into his intestines. The guards let go of his writhing body and he fell to his knees and then to his side. Because of the cuffs, he couldn't even reach his stomach or his throat where the pain tightened like a fist of fire. He felt his body curling into a ball in a Corellian reflex of pain. Abruptly, the pain was gone. Han's stomach, outraged by this last attack, revolted. Han uncurled himself, retched, spat and wished he had been close enough to Timero to vomit on him.

Timero heaved a dramatic sigh. "Without a challenge, hunting had no joy. Without hunting, my life had no meaning. I was in despair until I learned of the Kadell. At great expense, I arranged to view the gladiator combat in the pits of Memmisi. I found the Kadell there. I offered to pay them an enormous sum of money if they would bring me new challenges and the Lord Paramount of their temple sent me Kelandros Mea to find my one, true, worthy opponent."

The guards hauled Han to his feet and he hung there limply, watching as Timero approached, sniffing with his black tipped nose. "You were absolutely right, Kelandros Mea," he remarked to the Kadell. "He does radiate a very pungent odor when frightened and in pain. The Wookiee should have no trouble following the spoor."

The pieces locked into Han's mind like the final input in a nav computer. "Wookiees are sentient beings and it's against Imperial law to hunt ... "

"On Monity, I am the law. I do as I please and it pleases me to hunt wookiees."  
"I'll see you in hell first." Han wrenched free of the guards and went right for Timero's throat.

It wasn't often that Han acted without having some kind of plan in mind, even an insane plan, but this was one of those times. Clan Solo did not believe in repaying life- debts, but then Han wasn't really a Solo.

Timero hit the agonizer buttons when Han was in mid-leap. Pain tore at his guts and strangled his air passage, but Han's impetus carried him to Timero. He hit the felinoid so hard he knocked the larger being off his feet. The agonizer controls flew out of Timero's grasp as they hit the deck hard, with Han on top. Han thrust the rigid band between his cuffs against Timero's throat and pushed down with all of his remaining strength. He saw fear twisting Timero's face. One clawed hand tried to push away the brace-bar while the other slashed at Han's left arm. From the corner of his eye, Han saw the talons come away red with his blood, but the other pains were so terrible one little complaint from his arm was easily disregarded. His vision began to blur and still he pushed down. A Solo never gave up.

The lizards dragged him off, pulling him straight into the air. A Solo never gave up.

Han kicked with both feet and sank his teeth into something green and scaly, biting down as hard as he could.

A Solo never gave up.

But the pain in his throat made it impossible for him to breathe. The last thing Han saw before the darkness took him was Kelandros Mea, silent and still, watching him with glowing silver eyes.

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Perso's cantina wouldn't have passed for a snack bar in most spaceports. Chewbacca had slouched in a corner booth nursing one drink and listening to the few other patrons argue and debate until he couldn't stand it any more.

As Chewbacca wandered idly amid the other small ships on the landing field, he caught the scent of animals. Recalling stories he'd overheard in the cantina about the well-stocked hunting preserve Timero kept in the mountains above the port, Chewbacca's hunting interests were aroused. There were only a few ships on the field, small freighters like the Falcon which supplied Timero's estate and the community which served it, so it wasn't long before he found the source of the smell. A six-legged hunting cat, its muscular body struggling

against a restraining collar, was being dragged down a ramp toward a flat-bedded car like the one which had taken Timero's droid parts.

The cat was a magnificent animal. Chewbacca would have liked to test his skill against it. Imagining himself stalking the beast through leafy depths armed only with his bowcaster, he gave a snuffle of Wookiee pleasure. As he walked back to the Falcon, Chewbacca found his thoughts drifting to his home. Sometimes he wished he could be there, teaching his cub the secrets of the forest, but the fates which had intertwined his life with Han's were not to be denied. The Elders of his people had hinted that accompanying the reckless Corellian was a mission of great importance and honor. There were times, like this Kadell mess, when Chewbacca thought it was merely a great pain. But when he was most annoyed with Han, he just thought of home, of Malla's soft fur, their cub's merry growls, and remembered that he would never have seen them again if Han had not come to his aid that day in the slave market on Pekoe. It had been a selfless act that cost Han dearly in the end, his career, his honor, his woman. He had even lost the protection of the Clan Who Walked Alone Together, arousing their anger for the sin of aiding one of their hated enemies.

Chewbacca would have been happier if the nasty little persons had cut off Han completely, but he tried to understand that, although they were completely horrible, Han was fond of them and it pleased him that they hadn't totally severed their ties with him. For his sake, Chewbacca put up with their occasional appearances, interferences and potshots. There were times, though, when he wished he could get his hands on whoever had started the feud between the People and those short nasty creatures.

Chewbacca's right foot touched the Falcon's open landing ramp. He froze. There was a trio of red spots glistening on the metal. Chewbacca knelt and sniffed. He stood, long fingers clenching, itching for the bowcaster he'd left in the ship. He moved cautiously up the ramp. Standing to one side he touched the control that opened the boarding hatch. The door flew up. Chewbacca waited, but no enemy or enemy projectile hurtled through the open hatch. He waited a moment til his ears told him there were no enemies hidden nearby. Entering the ship, Chewbacca moved through the curving corridors, all his senses alert. But it was his nose which drew him to the main hold.

The hold was empty. There was blood and vomit on the polished deck. The smell of Han's pain hung in the air. Chewbacca sniffed delicately. He smelled lizards and lubrication fluid, top grade, the kind used in expensive weapons. There was the musky smell of a large mammal and the faint, bitter scent of the Kadell.

Chewbacca went first to the weapon's cabinet. His bowcaster and bandoleer of quarrels were gone. All of the other weapons had been melted to slag.

Chewbacca searched the ship, but there was no sign of Han or the intruders. Every object he might have turned into a weapon had been removed or destroyed. Coming at last to the cockpit, Chewbacca heard an unfamiliar hum among the ship's gear. A silver globe, similar to the remotes Han used for target practice, flew out from behind the protection of Chewbacca's wide co-pilot's seat.

"Greetings, Mighty Hunter," a voice issued from the globe. "I have been anticipating your return."

Chewbacca gave a bellow of rage, demanding an explanation.

"I have heard that Wookiees are great hunters. I am Vazel Timero, the greatest hunter of all. I welcome the opportunity to match skills with you. I am on the mountain. I have the Corellian. Follow me if you can. But remember, the woods are full of perils."

Before Chewbacca could howl a comment, the globe shot past him. Chewbacca lunged into the corridor in time to see it flash out of the open hatch.

Chewbacca walked slowly to the hatch and stood there, staring across the landing field at the mountain. He glanced down at the drops of blood, darkening in color as they dried. He remembered the hunting cat being loaded into the van. Some so-called hunters lured the cats into weapon's range by catching and skinning their cubs, then dragging the carcasses to make a blood trail for the cats to follow. Chewbacca made a soft sound deep in his throat.

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Monity's sun striped the forest floor with bands of gold and green. The air was cool and sweet. It was very different from the bitter, blood-red plains of Kelandros Mea's homeworld, but the rites were the same. The rites were always the same.

Timero, carrying the Wookiee's bowcaster slung on his back along with his favorite rifle, led the party. He moved on one of the maze of trails cut into the forest for his convenience. Behind him walked the Ceidro guards, their clawed feet scoring the ground as they carried the unconscious Corellian between them. His arm was still bleeding, leaving bright droplets on the green leaves. Mea brought up the rear, her soft boots leaving hardly a trace on the path.

And some distance behind her was the Alrith, stalking them, drawn by the blood. Mea heard the great, long-limbed animal coming close. She removed her knife from the sheath on her belt without looking at it and without brushing her hand against any of the gear that hung from her belt.

Closer.

The Alrith attacked, a flurry of green fur and dripping fangs. Its horrible wail was meant to paralyze its victims, but Mea wheeled without hesitation, her knife a flash of silver splitting the air. Her trained ears heard the thunk of metal into flesh. Then she was nearly deafened by the roar of Timero's rifle. The creature's death was already in its eyes as its powerfully muscled body exploded in mid-air as the energy charge of the high powered rifle hit it. It dropped, its body charred and smoking.

"A kill!" Timero roared as he hurried toward the remains. "Did you see that! A magnificent shot! A beauty!"

The Ceidro had dropped the Corellian in panic. They left him on the ground as they hurried to their employer to listen dutifully to his boasts and examine his kill. Mea had heard it all before.

Mea went to the Corellian who was sitting up groggily. She took the flask from her belt and held it to his mouth. She knew his pain, fear and blood loss must have parched him, but he gritted his teeth, stubbornly refusing the liquid.

"It is only water," she assured him,

Hazel eyes narrowed in a suspicious squint. She put the flask to her own lips and drank. The next time she offered it, he accepted, drinking thirstily, but the suspicious squint did not ease.

Timero's claws had raked parallel tracks in the Corellian's upper arm but because of the cuffs he could do nothing but glare at the wounds. As she replaced the flask on her belt, she noted his eyes were very bright. She reached a hand to his cheek to check if he were fevered. He flinched away from her touch as if she had struck him.

"You do not understand."

His mouth twisted as he looked at her. "Oh, I understand. I've seen your kind before. All my life. Trading other people's blood for credit."

"It is not the money. It is my duty, my faith."

"Ah, Captain Solo, awake at last." Timero approached, caressing the stock of his rifle. "On your feet."

"To leave a better trail for Chewie to follow and lead him right into your sights?" The Corellian's voice was soft and bitter and he did not move to rise.

Timero held out a clawed hand. One of the Ceidro placed a metal leash in his palm. Bending, Timero hooked it to the front of the slaver collar. He tugged on the leash with such power he pulled the Corellian upright. The Corellian's bare feet slid on the moist leaves and went out from under him. For a moment, he swung in the air, painfully suspended by the leash, then he got his balance. As Timero began moving, it was walk or be dragged by the throat.

The Corellian walked.

Timero, huge and hulking in his armor, headed in the direction of the base camp. The others fell in behind him, the Ceidro moving cautiously, peering anxiously at the trees, the Corellian struggling just to stay on his feet.

Soon, Mea thought, soon it would be over.

\* \* \*

The place where they had killed the green-furred creature stank of charred flesh and fur. Even Chewbacca's sensitive nose could pick up no scent over the stench, so he cast about for signs. Here, Bigfoot, whom he suspected was Timero, had hurried toward the carcass, boots leaving heavy marks and nearly obliterating the faint marks of the Kadell's prints.

The Kadell had killed the beast. Chewbacca had found fragments of her knife in its heart. The rifle shot had come afterward, destroying the knife as well as a large portion of the creature's chest. Moving toward the opposite side of the site, Chewbacca saw more blood, smeared on the leaves. Kneeling, he made out the faint impressions of the Kadell's boots, Timero's heavy prints and then, the prints of a bare human foot.

Chewbacca gave a soft rumble of pleasure.

Han was still alive. On his feet now, moving away from the scene. Moving badly from the erratic pattern of the prints, but Chewbacca rejoiced in the knowledge his companion was still alive. Until this moment, he had not been sure if he, like the hunting cat, was following the blood trail of a live friend or a still warm corpse.

Chewbacca had only the faintest warning, a whisper of disturbed leaves, then the six-legged hunting cat was on him. However, the warning was enough for him to elude the cat's pounce with a lithe twist.

It struck the ground with its six powerful legs, but before it could turn, Chewbacca flung himself on its back. He wrapped his powerful arms around its throat and wrenched it upward until only one set of its legs scabbled in the

soft dirt for purchase. Out of balance, unable to reach Chewbacca with teeth or claws, the cat twisted and yowled in fury. Chewbacca tightened his grip. He bent the cat backward with all his strength. The creature's back snapped.

It struggled feebly, then died in his grasp. Chewbacca released the carcass.

He stood for a moment, panting. When his breathing returned to normal, he began to follow the trail. Toward Han. And Timero.

\* \* \*

Growing bored with hauling a stumbling Corellian in his wake, Timero had given the leash to Kelandros Mea. She had walked at Han's side in silence, but he could see her hand clenching and unclenching on the end of the leash.

When the lizards stopped to relieve themselves, Han took advantage of the break to do the same. It was embarrassing and a little awkward with the security cuffs on, but he managed, knowing it would be worse if he soiled his clothing.

Kelandros Mea's back was to him as he struggled with the last catch-patch on his trousers. From the movement of her shoulders, he could tell she was unhooking her water flask again. Licking his parched lips, Han despised himself for hoping she would offer him some, but he couldn't help it. His right sleeve was stiff with dried blood yet still the wounds oozed, draining fluid and strength, dripping a trail to lead Chewie into Timero's gunsights. Han gritted his teeth. He would not let Timero kill Chewie.

On Pekoe, he had acted impulsively, doing the right thing and believing, like an idealistic young fool, that everything would turn out for the best. He'd learned better as those he trusted abandoned him or betrayed him. Only Chewbacca, who was almost a stranger, had risked all to come to Corellia and help him, standing as his only friend until the Solo's made their annoyed and belated appearance. And in the end it was Chewbacca who had saved him from a firing squad. That, Han thought with a wry smile pulling at his mouth, was what really made the Solos mad and madder still when he told them he owed Chewbacca a lifedebt and would travel with him til it was repaid. The debt had been paid and owed again many times over. Han sighed as he stared at Timero's broad armor-encased back. Perhaps this would be the last time.

"Water?"

Han blinked and realized Mea was holding out the flask. He drank in hasty swallows. When he stopped for breath, she shook the bottle, then held it to his lips again. "Finish it. It is not much further to base camp."

He swallowed the last mouthful, then watched her as she replaced the empty flask at her belt. It was near dusk and as the darkness grew, her hair shimmered, silver in the shadows.

It seemed impossible that just a few hours ago he had been smiling at her in muzzy contentment and sleepy affection. He had no one to blame but himself; he was old enough to know better. Jisselle had taught him. Han shut his eyes, remembering the feel of ebon hair, the taste of hot lips, the sound of her passion and her contemptuous laughter as she said her last farewell. Opening his eyes, Han watched Kelandros Mea checking the pockets and compartments of her belt. Compared to Jiselle's betrayal, Mea's didn't seem so bad. After all, the Kadell had never promised him a home, a family, a life.

"Can you stand?"

Han blinked as he realized he was looking up at the Kadell's pale face. He didn't remember sitting down and he hadn't even noticed the change of perspective. Han drew in some deep breaths, fighting down panic. He'd be no help to Chewie in this fuzzy-headed state.

Timero appeared on the path ahead of them, roaring, "Come along! Move! Move!" The lizards, who'd been sneaking a smoke of some noxious weed, scrambled to obey. Han, unwilling to suffer the agonizer again if he could avoid it, tried to get up, but his legs were not cooperating. Kelandros Mea still had the leash in her hand. She let it go as she bent, put her hand under his good arm and helped him to his feet.

"I won't let him kill Chewie," Han said quietly. "And if you get in my way, I'll take you down, too." He knew it was a ludicrous remark from a man who couldn't stand up without help, but the Kadell priestess merely nodded.

"Move!" Timero roared.

One of the lizards grabbed the end of the leash and began pulling. Han gritted his teeth, forced his legs to move and sternly told himself that a Solo never gives up. As he walked he could sense her behind him and knew she was watching him with those glowing silver eyes.

\* \* \*

The forest was in darkness

Although Chewbacca'ss night vision was excellent, he was relying on his nose and ears. A strong breeze brought the scents of Timero's party to him. His ears told him there was something ahead, something that gave off the faint hum of a mechanical device. Perhaps a shelter to which Timero was heading or perhaps

some device of ambush. Timero had not promised all the perils in the forest would be natural ones.

With darkness, the coolness of the forest had ceased to be pleasant. Chewbacca's thick pelt protected him, but he worried about Han, barefoot, coatless, injured.

The dense foliage thinned gradually and as the trees diminished the hum intensified. Slipping from shadow to shadow in the shelter of the last few trees, Chewbacca saw a large barren area ahead. He could not be certain whether the area was naturally or artificially created, but he knew the hum originated there. In the center of the clear space was a structure, clearly a bubble-shaped survival hut, but an expensive model, nearly as large as Chewbacca's family lodge.

Before Chewbacca could react, the silver globe whizzed by his head, gave off a shrill scream, then zoomed into the air high above Chewbacca's reach. Suddenly, powerful lights blazed to life, momentarily blinding him. When his vision cleared, he could see figures standing outside the hut. A pair of lizards, a felinoid in armor, the Kadell, and Han.

"Greetings, Mighty Hunter," called the felinoid. It was the same voice Chewbacca had heard from the globe. "My seeker eyes have been recording your every move since you left the ship. I wasn't misled about a Wookiee's prowess. Your skills are indeed great."

Concealment was no longer necessary so he moved from the shelter of the trees. Han was kneeling on the ground. The left sleeve of his white shirt was soaked in blood, but otherwise he seemed uninjured. Chewbacca noted he was confined by a belt and security cuffs. There was a collar around his throat; attached to it was a slender metal leash tied to a meter-high post.

Han reared to his feet yelling, "Chewie, get out! Take the Falcon and get--"

Han's cry ended in a strangled gasp. Chewbacca watched in alarm as Han fell to his knees. Alarm became horror as Han curled up into a ball. He had been around the Corellian long enough to know the level of pain needed to produce that reflexive action. Howling his fury, Chewbacca charged forward, only to strike and bounce off an invisible wall.

Force field, Chewbacca thought as he struggled to retain his balance. Its generators had made the humming he'd sensed earlier. Chewbacca shook his fists over his head and raged.

"You wish me to stop," Timero said politely. "But, of course."

Through the blur of his hatred, Chewbacca saw Timero move his hand, then noted the red box and made the connection to the belt and collar. Agonizers. Chewbacca remained perfectly still and lowed an interrogative.

"Why? Why not? Life is for the strong and the powerful. I am both. The weak of the galaxy were put there to give pleasure to the strong. The Corellian is small and weak. He is nothing but bait. You have strength and skill. You may be a worthy opponent for me." He turned to flash his pointed teeth at the Kadell. "Is he the one, Kelandros Mea? Is he the one, true opponent you prayed to your gods to send to me?"

"I have labored long in your service, Honored One," said the Kadell, her voice ringing across the clearing. "Surely my gods must answer my prayers."

Timero gave a shrill yowl of laughter. "Perhaps you are right about the Wookiee, dear priestess. I saw the tapes of his fight with the hunting cat. Most magnificent. But remember, Mighty Hunter, I am not a hunting cat. I am Vazel Timero. Greatest hunter of them all. Today you hunted me. Tomorrow I shall hunt you."

"Chewie, take the Falcon and run!" Han's yell was pathetically squeaky. "Get out while you can!"

Timero touched the red box again.

Chewbacca watched as Han dug his fingertips into the dirt, watched the lean body arch in pain, watched blood appear on Han's mouth as he kept in his cries of pain.

"The Corellian lives as long as you do." Timero said calmly. "Go into the forest. If you survive the night, the hunt begins at dawn."

Realizing Timero meant to keep the agonizer on until he left, Chewbacca melted into the darkness. As he went, he made the most solemn of Wookiee oaths, swearing Timero would die, slowly and in pain so terrible it would make the agonizer seem pleasurable in comparison.

\* \* \*

Timero's survival hut was furnished with plush couches, well-stocked food dispensers, sonic showers and banks of monitors receiving images from the myriad seeker-eyes scattered through the forest. The Ceidro were enjoying a sumptuous meal. Timero, out of his armor at last, sat by the monitors. He had a large bowl of raw flesh perched on the control panel. From time to time, he tossed a handful into his mouth as he peered excitedly at the screens.

"The first globe lost the Wookiee," Timero said in annoyance. "But it is only a matter of time before one of the others picks him up again. These seekers are the best money can buy."

Mea, sitting on a couch upholstered with the skin of a now-extinct species, did not respond. She knew he was speaking to himself, the only person he usually found worthy of his conversation.

There were several surveillance cameras on the roof of the hut, all of them trained on the Corellian, so Mea could watch a multiple images of his struggle with the leash chaining him to the post. Bracing his feet against the post, he wrapped the leash around his hands and pulled with all of his strength. The metal would not yield, but neither would the Corellian. He would stop, gather strength, then try again.

"Mea! "

"Yes, Honored One?"

"I see you watching him."

Mea made no reply. Tiinero raised an entire leg bone and crunched away happily before lick- ing his chops and grinning at her. "Was it pleasant?"

"What?"

"Mating with the Corellian?"

Mea stood up. "I am a priestess of the High Temple. It is offensive to me that you speak of such things."

"I pay your people a fortune for your services. I'll say anything to you that I want."

"If the Lord Paramount of the Temple thought I was being treated in an unseemly fashion, he would send the keepers of the Right to chastise you."

A low rumble in Tiniero's throat told her that he had heard of what happened to those chastised by the Keepers of the Kadell. And the rumors paled to insignificance beside the reality of the tortures. Occasionally even the Emperor, who had access to the power of the mighty Sith, requested that the Kadell make an example of some unfortunate transgressor.

"I meant no offense, High Priestess," Timero said quickly. "I'll make you a present of the Corellian. That will please you, won't it?"

Mea made no sign of approval or disapproval as she took her silver foil cape from its pouch at her belt, unfolded it and clasped it around her throat, then left the hut. The Corellian was still struggling with the leash, stopping only when he noticed her. Putting his back to the post, he watched her approach with wary eyes. When she was at arm's length, she stopped. In the bright lights, she could see what his struggles had cost him. His wrists were swollen and purple, his fingers cut and bleeding; there were cuts and mottled bruises on his throat where the collar had dug into the flesh.

Squatting in the dirt, the silver cape flaring around her, she reached beneath it and unhooked her flask. Offering it to him, she said, "Broth this time. It will nourish you."

"You first." There was a touch of mischief in his hoarse voice.

Unstopping the flask, she sipped, then handed it to him as a priestess would hand the silver chalice to the Chosen at the ritual mating. Awkward in his bonds, he took the flask and gulped down its contents. As he drank, she examined his wounds. The bleeding had stopped, but the flesh was red and raw. He licked the last drops of broth from his lips and handed back the flask.

"Thank you."

"I am a priestess of the High Temple. I was sent by my people to find Timero's true opponent. If I fail in my task, I will suffer punishment your mind cannot even comprehend"

She saw some emotion growing in the hazel eyes, but it turned quickly to cold rage as Timero's voice blared over a loudspeaker.

"Corellian, your Wookiee is being hunted by a pack of zelots. Do you know what they are? Great creatures, all flesh-ripping claws and bone-breaking jaws. Do you think the Wookiee will survive til dawn?"

Mea saw the hazel eyes sweep over the space between the pole and the hut. They settled on something and she saw him give a tiny nod of his head. Then he drew in a breath through his nose, a strange harsh sound in the darkness. He grabbed the leash, braced his feet and began to pull. Sitting back on her heels, Kelandros Mea watched as muscles stood out in his jaw and neck and cloth stretched over his shoulders and back. His breath came in fierce grunts, faintly reminiscent of another time she'd heard him labor.

Timero's laughter rolled from the speaker. 'That pole is triple strength egarium. A land- speeder couldn't bend it. What chance do you have, you pitiful little creature?"

Yet still the Corellian struggled. There was a slight shifting of the post and suddenly Mea saw his plan. The egarium would not yield, but the ground would.

With one last, terrible effort, he pulled the post and its mooring right out of the dirt. Then he was on his feet, holding the pole like a spear. Mea saw where his feet and his eyes were pointed and realized that in the short span of time he'd looked toward the hut, he had devised a formidable plan. He was going to charge across the clearing with the post and drive the heavy end right into the force field generator which sat humming beside the hut. Disabling the generator would blow the force field and the lights. In the dark confusion, he might have enough time to get beyond the rather limited range of the agonizer.

As she came to her feet, Mea wondered if he'd gotten far enough in his plan to think of what he would do, alone and helpless in the forest full of predators or if he had considered the fact that damaging the generator might cause an explosion which would kill everyone within the field.

He had taken only one step when Mea grasped his throat above the slaver collar. She exerted pressure and he went boneless.

"Did you kill him?" Timero's voice roared at her.

She caught the slumping body and lowered him to the ground. She turned to the survival hut. "Shut off the cameras, Honored One."

"And miss the fun?" leered the voice.

"My worship rites are not to be seen by outsider eyes, or the Keepers ..."

"I'm shutting them off!"

She waited until the tell-tale red power cells on the cameras went dark. A moment later the harsh outside lights went off, too.

Mea sighed. She doubted if Timero realized what had just happened. She bent over the Corellian. The sleeper hold had been a mild one. He was on the edge of consciousness, breathing in a harsh rasp. His eyelids fluttered, then closed. His strength was gone. Her fingers ran gently over his sweat damp cheeks, touched his temples and began to move in soothing circles as she'd been taught. Lowering her head, she touched her lips to his. He resisted for a moment, then suddenly his mouth responded to her caresses. Spreading her cape like the wings of a great silver bird, she drew it around him until he was lying on his back, protected from the chill ground by the cape. She lay beside him, against his right side, pressed against his good arm. Her fingers danced over the flesh exposed by the vee of his shirt. He lay still, eyes shut and was asleep between one breath and the next.

Soon, Mea prayed, let it be over soon.

\* \* \*

The trees of the mountain forest were twigs compared to the mighty woods of Chewbacca's homeworld but they were significantly high for climbing. Chewbacca moved easily, walking along thick branches as other beings trod the ground. In one hand, he held a splintered branch.. He'd left one such makeshift spear in one of the toothy things that had hunted him. While the others fell upon their dead brother he had leapt into the safety of the trees.

The spear might help him survive til morning, but with planet dawn would come Timero armed with high tech rifles and the seeker eyes. Chewbacca barely restrained a howl of indignation. To be hunted by that mad creature was bad enough, but the fact that he had Han was unbearable. Between the force field and the seekers, Chewbacca couldn't even get near Han.

Lengthening his stride, Chewbacca tried to keep his mind on the forest, but he could not banish his concerns. He was worried about what Timero would do to the Corellian, but even more worried about what Han would do. Chewbacca had once endured an agonizer and he knew the torment. Pushed beyond endurance, perhaps beyond sanity, the Corellian was capable of anything. It was unthinkable that the Head of a Wookiee Honor Family abandon a companion, especially one as dear as Han. Han knew this, making his insistence that Chewbacca take the Falcon and run chillingly ominous. Chewbacca's foot slipped off the rounded surface of a branch. Only a desperate grab for a handhold kept him from plunging to the ground far below. Gaining a secure purchase, Chewbacca spotted a nearby fork in a tree and forced himself to squat there to catch his breath.

He told himself he was not a hunted animal. It was disgraceful to let himself be harried through this pitiful excuse of a forest by a bloated cat. Chewbacca was the head of a Wookiee Honor Family. He had more than his legs and his brute strength. He had his mind.

And not much else, he thought grimly as he opened his shoulder pouch; just some food concentrate, a med kit and some small hand tools he had stashed in the pouch and forgotten to remove. Eating some strips of dried fruit, Chewbacca considered his situation. As he saw it, Timero's greatest advantage was the seeker eyes. With them, he was all-seeing. Without them, he would not be blind, but he would become considerably near-sighted. Chewbacca's long fingers dipped into his shoulder bag and pulled out a small probe. His lips lifted to reveal his fighting fangs.

In the language of the People, his name meant Mighty Hunter. Now it was time for the mighty hunter to find his prey.

And tonight his prey would be small and mobile and silver.

\* \* \*

Han opened his eyes and saw a sun shining down on him. He shut his eyes again, basking for a moment in the warmth on his face. He felt cold and stiff. He tried to sit up and gave a low, involuntary moan. Memory returned with pain as his muscles reminded him of abuse and agonizers. Struggling to sit up, Han discovered he was wrapped in a silver foil cape. Realizing that sitting was beyond his strength for the time being, Han concentrated on turning his head. His neck felt as if someone had sawed off his head with a blunt rock, then put it back on with a hand welder. Once he'd moved his head, he saw Kelandros Mea, squatting in the dust a meter away. She had the end of the silver leash in her hand. Han blinked as he stared at her. The flawless white face was decorated with streaks of red makeup, swirling patterns on her temple and cheeks.

Feeling a bit stronger, Han braced himself on his palms and managed to sit up. His injured arm was hot and stiff. All of the muscles in his body hurt. He dimly remembered having a berserker fit and tearing the egarium pole out of the ground, intent on heaving it into the force field generator and escaping to help Chewbacca. The post was nowhere to be seen. Han looked at Kelandros Mea's impassive face.

"Chewie?"

'The Wookiee still survives.'

Han heaved a sigh of relief, then quirked a wry eyebrow at Mea. "You wouldn't happen to have a five course meal in your belt?"

"It is Holy Fast." Kelandros Mea's voice was strangely hoarse. Her silver eyes seemed brighter than ever. The glow unnerved Han and he looked away.

With the limited use of his hands, he managed to massage a little life into his stiff muscles. Plans wheeled and whirled in his brain. He felt a little stronger at the moment, but sensed it was only a reprieve. He knew Chewbacca would be making his move at Timero and he wanted to be of some help. He hoped Chewie didn't wait too long.

Han saw Timero and his ever-present lizards leave the hut. The Kadell, however, did not turn her head, but continued to stare at him.

"Ah, Captain Solo, feeling more fit this morning?" Timero leered as he approached, twitching his black nose. "It should please you to know the Wookiee seems to have survived the night. My seeker eyes picked him up, not far from here, on the west flank of the mountain." The felinoid flared his nostrils and inhaled heartily. "It is a fine day for a hunt."

"Or a murder," Han said quietly.

Ignoring him, Timero began to give orders to his guards to bring his favorite rifle and the hand monitor which would give him the exact coordinates of his prey.

"Damn seeker-eyes," Han muttered as he got to his hands and knees. "Not very sporting."

"It is unlawful," Mea said suddenly. "It is an offense to the gods."

"Maybe your gods could hit him with lightning or something?" Han inquired hopefully.

"The gods will send his true opponent."

Han snorted in disgust. Spacer clans did not believe that gods or mythical energy fields, like the Force, controlled their destinies. That was in their own hands, with a little help from the bitch goddess of luck. Han said the only prayers he knew and hoped the goddess of the Solos wouldn't think it was sacrilege if he asked her to smile on a Wookiee. Chewie was going to need all the help he could get.

A few moments later one of the lizards drove up in a hover car. It had a cab for the driver and passengers and a flat bed for the catch of the day. Han was bundled onto the flat bed. He had to hold on as best he could as the craft soared into the air and zipped above the trees.

Squinting against the wind, Han watched as the car approached a circle of stones on a Cliff. On one side was an open approach, a slope burned bare of trees. On the other a sheer drop with no handholds even for a climber as skilled as a Wookiee. The car settled and Timero hopped out, much more mobile since he'd exchanged his armor for a light protective vest. Watching Timero caress the stock of his high-powered rifle as he walked toward the low flat stone set like an altar on the cliff, Han felt despair chill his stomach. He knew the rifle could kill a Min dragon at a kilometer.

Hauled out of the flat bed, Han let himself be dragged up to Timero's position. Han inhaled in surprise as he realized the rock slab was no altar. It was an outdoor monitoring station. Banks of small screens winked up at Han as seeker

eyes scanned diligently for his friend. Once his quarry was sighted, Timero would take the silent hover car to the area and use his hand-held control to zero in on his prey.

"I can't see the Wookiee," Timero said in annoyance and flipped a few switches jutting out from the stone. "This grows tedious."

As Han watched the seeker eyes converted to heat scan mode hunting through the dense foliage for any source of body heat large enough to be the Wookiee. "It will only be a matter of..." Timero broke off as a monitor gave a burst of static. Its picture changed to wavy lines then went blank. "What in the ..."

One by one the monitors went blank. Han felt a grin pulling at his mouth.

'That's no animal you're hunting, Timero," Han crowed in delight as the last monitor gave a burst of static and surrendered. He knew Chewie must have caught one of the scanners, rewired it and turned it into a weapon against the others. "Not so keen on hunting a Wookiee you can't see, are you, Timero?'

'Be silent, you impertinent creature," Timero hissed. He produced the red box and Han was suddenly on the ground, the air being squeezed out of his throat.

When the pain ceased, Han was lying on his side. There was a roaring in his ears which told him he'd come close to suffocation that time. He heard Timero ordering the lizards to take the hover car back to the estate and use the main systems to reactivate the seeker eyes. Han shut his eyes and concentrated on breathing. He felt as if someone had poured molten metal down his throat and it was working its way into his lungs.

When he opened his eyes, he looked for Kelandros Mea. He tried to remember if she still had his blaster amid the gear on her belt. Warily, Han raised himself up on his elbow. She was gone. He didn't know whether she'd left with the lizards or taken off on her own, but whatever the case he was alone with Timero. The red control box sat on the edge of the stone encased monitor panel. The odds of his reaching it before Timero noticed him weren't very good.

Never tell me the odds.

With a fierce determination, Han forced himself to his feet and lurched toward the box. Timero turned and with a casual back-handed swipe knocked Han off his feet.

Han hit the ground hard, the security cuffs cutting into the swollen flesh of his wrists. He rolled over once and found himself staring over the edge of the

cliff. Jagged rocks below looked like an open hungry mouth. Scrambling back to safety, on his hands and knees, Han collided with Timero's leg. Grinning down at him, the felinoid triggered the agonizer, throwing the belt to maximum. Knowing his cries would draw Chewie like a tractor beam, Han tried not to make any noise, but this time he couldn't keep his screams in.

The belt shut off, but Han's muscles continued to contract in frenzied reaction. Han squeezed his eyes shut and dug his fingers into the dirt. He had to hold onto consciousness. Chewie must have heard him. The Wookiee would come roaring in like a heat missile, right into Timero's sights.

Han heard a familiar yowl and opened his eyes. Lying at the lip of the cliff, he had an unimpeded view down the burned slope. There, at the edge of the woods, was one very irate Wookiee.

Han looked up at the felinoid standing over him. Timero slipped the high power rifle from its shoulder strap.

Life debts to pay.

Adrenaline flowed as Han's mind ran through his options with the speed of a fighting computer; he saw them very clearly just as he had in the days when he'd been a fighter pilot. He could jump Timero, distract his aim, but Timero's strength was too great for him to wrest the rifle away from him or to keep him fighting long enough for Chewie to cover the distance across the burned ground.

Timero had the rifle unslung and was drawing it into line.

Below, Chewbacca, aware of his danger but committed once he left the shelter of the trees, was running up the slope with all the speed he could muster. Han knew his long, echoing call was a Wookiee death- chant.

Life debts.

Han struggled out of a sitting position into a crouch. He grabbed the thin metal leash attached to his collar. A loop formed between his cuffed hands. Timero, his back to Han, was aiming the rifle now.

Han came to his feet.

"Solos aren't suicidal," he said in a conversational voice. Instinctively, Timero turned his heavy maned head toward the voice as Han muttered, 'But, then, I'm not really a Solo. "

Life debts.

Han threw the leash over Timero's head like a garrote. Timero dropped his rifle and raised clawed hands to the leash. But Han wasn't giving Timero the chance to rip the leash from his hands or his arms from their sockets.

Han threw himself backward with all his strength and pulled Timero off the cliff with him.

\* \* \*

Standing amid the trees on the slope opposite the cliff, Kelandros Mea saw the Corellian throw himself backward with such violence that Timero flipped right over his head. Mea heard Timero's angry bellow as he realized he was hurtling face down toward the ground. The Corellian was above him, body curved, looking like a falcon stooping after its prey.

The bodies fell, locked together by the Corellian's bonds wrapped around Timero's throat. They hit the rocks, bounced on impact, then separated as the Corellian released his hold at last. For a moment there was silence, then she heard the keening of the Wookiee.

Soon. Soon it would be over.

Kelandros Mea walked up the slope to the place she had left the hover car. She stepped carefully over the bodies of the Ceidro and got in. Soon. It would be over soon.

But first, she had to deal with the Wookiee.

\* \* \*

Chewbacca could hardly bring himself to look over the edge of the cliff. Part of him could not believe what Han had done, yet another part could. The only thing stronger than the Corellian's will to live was the strength of his affections. Many times Chewbacca had seen his willingness to offer his life for a friend. But this time he had done more than offer.

The bodies were sprawled on the rocks. Han looked very small. He was on his back, legs outflung, but hands still bound by the cuffs. Sunlight glinted off the agonizer collar and belt.

Chewbacca turned and began to run down the slope in long, distance-eating strides. If the fall had not been instantly fatal, there was still a chance. Chewbacca had seen Han cling to life when larger, stronger beings had given up. A Solo never gave up.

How many times had he heard Han mutter or grunt or crow the words by which the Clan Who Walked Alone Together lived? Tenacity of spirit was the gift of the Solos and it had saved Han's life almost as many times as the soaring talent that came from his birth clan.

If it had saved him this time, Chewbacca vowed, he would let the Solos take all the pot shots at him that they wanted.

Galloping down the burnt out slopes, Chewbacca heard a noise and looked over his shoulder just in time to see a hover car flash over the lip of the cliff and soar down the incline. He saw sunlight glinting on silver hair. He tried to stop and turn to face the threat, but he was going downhill and moving too fast. His feet slid out from under him. He tumbled a few meters, then rolled and came to his feet smoothly, fighting fangs bared.

The Kadell dropped out of the air car and landed on her feet less than a meter from him. He reached out for her with huge hands, wanting to seize that slender white throat.

As a child, Kelandros Mea had been taught the dances of the Temple, a prelude to the dance of death in combat. When the Wookiee lunged at her, she leaped toward him like a dancer into her partner's arms. She flowed between the grasping hands like water through the rocks. She struck one blow to a nerve cluster. The Wookiee made a soft woofing sound, then collapsed at her feet in a heap of russet fur.

Now.

Finally the time for the fulfillment of the Holy Vision had come.

\* \* \*

Vazel Timero felt very strange. Numb. He felt numb and sluggish. He tried to remember what had happened, but all he could recall was the ground rushing up at him. He heard a rasping sound and realized it was his own breathing. He tried to sit up, but his limbs would not respond. It seemed dark, yet he was sure it was only mid-morning. Blinking, he looked up and saw the cliff. He remembered. The Wookiee coming into his sights, the pleasure of the kill, the Corellian's soft voice.

The Corellian.

Turning his head, Timero saw the Corellian. He was lying on his back nearby. One leg was draped over a rock. The leg was badly broken, bone showing through the flesh. His hands were still shackled by the security cuffs. The

silver leash had snapped off its link to the agonizer collar, but one end was clenched in bloodied fingers.

Timero looked back at the cliff. He remembered. Suddenly, the silver-maned head of Kelandros Mea loomed over him. The red scrolls adorning her face had streaked and smeared, her eyes glowed like silver left in the sun, hot and shimmering.

"Help me!"

"I prayed," she said softly. "I prayed long and hard and finally my gods have heard me."

He didn't understand what she was babbling about. He snarled up at her. "Help me. I am your employer. I pay the Temple. You must help me."

Timero tried to raise a hand beseechingly, but his muscles would not obey him. Looking at his hand, he saw it was as badly broken as the Corellian's leg. Yet he felt no pain. A coldness spread through him and he realized it was fear.

"I have helped you, Honored One. I have brought your true opponents."

"The Wookiee was no true match for my skills," Timero rasped. "I had him in my sights. Now get help, summon the..."

"The Wookiee was merely the bait, Honored One. The Corellian was the one I brought. He was the one my gods had sent to slay you."

Timero stared up at her. "Slay me?"

The silver eyes were cold now, like the moons of Monity.

"To my people, you are an Unspeakable thing who uses machines to slay at a distance. Your slaughter of animals was offense enough to us and our gods, but when you dared to come to the Temple and ask the Lord Paramount to help you, you committed the foulest blasphemy. The Lord Paramount sent me to bring the god's vengeance on you."

She was insane. Or on drugs. Or both. Timero didn't care. Gathering all his strength, Timero gave the loudest roar of which his race was capable, a great echoing bellow to summon his faithful Ceidro.

"They will not come," Kelandros Mea said softly. "I killed them."

Timero wanted to get up, to move, to grope for one of the many weapons hung from his belt. But he could not move; the fall must have damaged his spinal cord.

"I saw it in the Holy Vision," said the Kadell. "A bird, small and fragile, but a bird of prey. When I saw the Corellian, I knew he was the one the gods had sent. He was the true opponent you sought, one more dangerous than all your guns and weapons of destruction. And you, in your pride, could not see that your death was as close as the end of a metal leash."

Timero watched as she turned and walked to the Corellian. She picked him up easily, as if he were a child. Timero noted with bitter satisfaction that he looked very bad.

"His injuries are grave," the Kadell said as if she'd read his mind. "But healing him is not beyond my skill."

"The gladiator pits ... trained in the healing arts. Yes, you were You could help me!"

The Kadell shook her head.

"I'll pay you. Anything! I can fill your Temple with precious stones, I can give you entire planets! Anything! Just help me!"

"Do you hear that sound?"

Timero's ears were usually very sensitive, but his hearing seemed to have dimmed just as his vision had. Straining, he picked up a faint howling. He felt his heart start to pound. 'Zelots!'

'They smell the blood.'

Timero's heart pounded so loud he could hear nothing else. Zelots, all teeth and snapping jaws. He had brought them to Monity himself to test the prey the Kadell had brought. If they could survive the zelots and the other predators, they were deemed worthy of being stalked by Vazel Timero.

Only now he was the one being stalked by the zelots.

"Anything!" he croaked. "Anything! Name it! Jewels, slaves, planets! I have money! I have power! I'm Vazel Timero! Anything!"

"In the Holy Vision I saw your body, rent as if by the claws and fangs of many creatures. As if all those you had slaughtered had their vengeance." The Kadell bared her teeth then as humans did to express pleasure or joy. "Soon. Soon it will be over."

She turned and walked away, her fluid stride hardly altered despite the burden in her arms. Timero roared after her, shrieking promises, swearing threats. And he heard the zelots coming closer.

\* \* \*

Han Solo hurt. Every muscle and every nerve ending was screaming in outrage. The worst was from his left leg, pain pulsing like the flux of a ship's powertrain. Han opened his eyes and was vaguely surprised to see a bright sky overhead. What had happened to the ceiling of the interrogation cell? He remembered the smiling faces of the Imperial interrogators as they ravaged nerve clusters and broke bones and asked the question over and over. "Why did you kill Captain Evor?"

"Slavers."

Han heard his own voice, cracked and hoarse. His tongue felt thick, his lips cracked..

He wanted water. Just a sip of water.

And then he remembered. Silver and snow beauty. Kelandros Mea offering him a flask of water. Agonizer belt. Timero. Chewie. The Cliff.

"It is over now."

Han's eyes moved to the source of the voice and he saw her, kneeling at his side. She had small objects in her hands. Behind her, he saw a mound of russet fur lying on fire-seared ground. He tried to sit up, but just a touch of her hand on his shoulder was enough to stop him.

"The Wookiee still lives. When he regains consciousness, he can take you back to your ship."

Han stared up at her. She had cleaned the red scrolls from her face but her eyes still had the frightening glow he had seen earlier. "Timero?"

"He is dead. His spine was severed in the fall and he lay there helpless when the zelots found him. The pack feasted well."

'But he — but you — "

'The Lord Paramount of the Temple chose me to be the instrument of our gods, to find and bring to Timero the one who would slay him."

Han had to swallow three times before he could croak, "Me?"

The silver head nodded. 'The wisdom of the gods is great. Timero's strength was all in his body. When that was broken, he was a weak and mewling creature begging for mercy. Your strength is very different.'

Han knew he should say something, but he was too tired and too angry. It was bad enough that the Wookiees were always telling him that the Force was guiding his destiny; now somebody's gods were arranging for him to fight battles to the death. He wished the galaxy would just leave him alone.

Mea put a white hand against his cheek. "Sleep now. You need your strength. When you wake, the Wookiee will have returned you to your ship."

"Mea ..."

She cut his angry protest short with a finger against his lips. "You have released me from my bondage. I shall not forget."

She bent her head and touched her lips to his. It was a delicate kiss like the touch of an insect's wings. He felt her hands move to his throat. He knew she was going to use a sleeper hold to knock him out as she had several times before. The kiss deepened and he responded to it.

Then her fingers moved and the darkness took him.

\* \* \*

Kelandros Mea removed her fingers from the Corellian's throat. She took a locking device from her belt and unlocked the agonizer collar, then the belt. She would put them on the Temple altar. She would leave the air car for the Wookiee and walk back to Timero's estate where she had left her ship.

She was going home.

It was over.

END

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