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Twink

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On civilized worlds it was the hour when the big gear-down for an evening's excitement would begin. But Krinto was not civilized, not so Han Solo could notice. He stood several meters out from the ellipsoid shadow of his ship, hands on hips, watching the magnified disk of Krinto's primary submerge behind a line of low hills and wishing himself about a parsec distant -- in any direction.

Glancing up over his left shoulder, he tried to make out the furred form of his copilot at the cockpit controls, but the sunset glow painted a pastel reflection on the transparisteel facets of the canopy, artistically opaquing them. Solo knew the Wookiee was there, though, mounting vigil, patiently manning the auxiliaries that controlled the servos for the quad guns that gave the starship Millennium Falcon her defensive capability.

The sun disappeared behind the black hills. Solo shivered as a chill dusk wind rippled the tall grass. His age was difficult to tell. No longer a youth, there was about him a sense of motion and acute attention to his surroundings that gave him a predatory air, softened occasionally by a wry smile that sometimes reached his eyes. He was a bit over medium height, lean and handsome in an offhand way. He was also one of the fastest gunmen in the very big galaxy.

Presently he turned and headed back towards his ship, the breeze plucking at his shirtsleeves.

The Falcon rested on her tripod landing gear just clear of a copse of gnarled whiphthorn trees which acted as a windbreak of sorts. Over the whine and slash of their long barbed vines, Solo suddenly heard the low

thrumming of a powered craft. Its approach was masked by the whiphorn symphony, it was almost on him before he realized it. Whirling, he dropped to one knee in the sheltering overhang of his ship, pulling his blaster free of its holster and scanning the darkening horizon for running lights.

The small cargo lifter came in from the south, a dark smear against the cobalt sky. The cacophonous whiphorn forest at dusk for a rendezvous. Solo's naturally sharp senses heightened and his muscles flowed in an instinctive defensive alignment.

While he watched, the lifter settled onto the grass nearby. Once down, her hull lights flashed briefly in a prearranged signal.

Solo cupped the comlink he carried against his cheek "Chewie, keep extra sharp. I've got a feeling about this one." Something in the air did not feel right, an invisible factor, a wild card in the game he was about to play.

A dark shape separated itself from the side of the lifter, swung out and down -- a boarding ramp -- followed by a man-high form. Even in the dimness Solo could see the hand held away from the body, apparently empty. He moved out from beneath the Falcon's starboard bow mandible, straightened, and bolstered his weapon, though he left the retaining strap loose.

A figure from the lifter approached. A voice hailed him, sounding metallic as it was filtered through a vocoder. Not a human, then. "Solo?"

"I'm Solo."

"Have you brought the consignment??"

"No other reason I'd be here."

"We'll make the transfer on grav-sleds, agreed?"

The shadowy figure had halted, oddly, off to one side of the Falcon. Nerves tense, Han felt the sense of not-right growing more pronounced. Chewie must have felt the same thing, for Han heard a whine as servos swung the belly turrets to cover the stranger. Topside guns remained silently trained on the cargo lifter.

Vocoders conveyed a scant range of emotions, but this one managed a touch of anger as the alien responded, "I'm not armed!" He held up a splayed-fingered hand and waved it stiffly out to one side. At that,

invisible guns on the lifter sent a salvo arcing over the Falcon's hull and Han realized why the creature had veered to one side. Energy danced harmlessly over the starship's defensive shielding while Chewbacca let loose an answering shot that was itself confounded by the cargo lifter's energy deflectors.

"Raxerian standoff," commented Han as he leveled his blaster at the alien, "except that I AM armed. Now talk fast."

"A mistake!" the alien croaked, moving closer to Han, "a miscue! Let's be reasonable, Solo, you still have the upper hand. All we want are the guns and you'll be paid as agreed."

"We're going to do this a little different now," Solo replied. Cupping the comlink again, he said, "Give us some light, Chewie." Immediately a spot flared to life above them, displacing the dark with a cone of brilliance which illuminated the two speakers.

Solo saw at once why the alien might have opted for darkness -- he was ugly. He shielded his single multifaceted eye with a clawlike hand. "**\*Sheeinalgxachoo pitrogleetic!\***" he garbled, his vocoder failing to find a sufficiently horrific equivalent Standard malediction. "It is light you want, yes?" and from his grinning jaws came a belch of black smoke followed swiftly by a searing stream of flame that lashed out at Solo's chest and face, sending him backwards into the dark, the blaster slipping from his grip as he went down on the long grass.

Chewie couldn't see the action, but he heard the **\*Whomp!\*** of flame and Solo's yelp of pain through the open comlink. Howling in fury, he rushed from the cockpit, shot the hatch and tore down the ramp. Ducking he cut under the mandible, heading for the cone of light.

The alien heard him coming and drew himself up for another burst, just as Chewie caught his furred toe against Han's shoulder, staggered and went down on all fours. The flame rushed over his back and dissipated. At once the Wookiee was up on one knee hauling at the cocking lever of his bowcaster, stooping low over Han's body for a clear shot at the bizarre alien who was approached cautiously, black tendrils of smoke curling about his head.

"Hold it right there, dragon!" commanded a new voice. Solo, who was just sitting up and smelling the unpleasant odor of his own charred flesh, thought incredulously, **\*a woman\*?**

The alien jerked to a startled halt, looking around nervously, but the light effectively blinded him to anything outside its perimeter. "Who calls the Gorloo?"

He was turning toward his own ship now, obviously looking for reinforcements, when the female voice came out of the darkness once again. "Still as a statue, dragon, or you are carrion." Then in a low voice she said quickly, "Captain Solo, if you are able, please move behind me to the safety of the ship. First Mate Chewbacca, help me cover our retreat."

Too astonished to ask questions, Han scrambled around on the ground for his blaster then moved swiftly to the ramp, clenching his teeth against the pain. He staggered slightly, pushed himself up and inside, turning to watch the wary retreat. Chewbacca backed in, took a quick look at his partner and bared his fangs in a grin, then their rescuer emerged from the dark ramp into the low-lit corridor. She hit the shot-locking switch and turned to face them.

Solo nearly forgot his pain. She was a stunning young woman, a finely chiseled beauty of the classic mode. Her brown hair was twisted into plaits and fastened in coils around her head. Pale, with dark assessing eyes, she was dressed in a functional, if somewhat picaresque, outfit of leather jerkin, shorts, and high boots. At her right hip was a tie-down holster, empty, as the Rushak power pistol was still in her hand; and, Solo noted, it was covering them now. The woman jerked her head in the direction of the cockpit. "We lift off at once, Captain." Han started to protest but she shook her head. "You and your First Mate get us off planet where that surface-hop cargo lift can't follow us and we'll talk then." Han saw some sense in that. "And I'll attend to your injuries."

"Just who are you?" Han asked, sliding gingerly into the pilot's seat.

"Fly, Captain."

"I'm flying, OK?"

The flame-throwing alien had apparently made it back to his ship, for the Falcon was obliged to lift off amid a dazzling hail of laser fire.

When they were safely launched into the star-dark outside Krinto's atmosphere, Solo turned around and confronted the woman again. "All right, lady, now who the hell are you, and what's going on?" It didn't come out as forcefully as he wished, however -- more like a gasp, as the full measure of the burning punishment he had taken nearly overwhelmed him. Chewie reached out an arm and supported his friend.

The woman was impassive, the barrel of her power pistol never wavering from a point midway between the two pilots, but she did smile slightly as she replied, "Captain Solo, I'm hijacking you."

\* \* \* \* \*

The spray was cool, anesthetizing. The woman gently peeled back the fragments of Han's shirt while Chewbacca stood watchfully to one side. Her power pistol was holstered, the bowcaster uncocked, and Han was in no mood to offer hostilities. They'd called a truce when she'd requested it; their consignment was still intact and the only violence done them so far was through the treachery of the contact man.

Han sighed as the raw burning pain gave way to cold oblivion. He moved his shoulders and she drew off his vest, then the rest of his shirt. When the spray had taken the edge off, the woman began to apply a healing salve to the angry-looking burned area covering Solo's chest and throat. Her hands were long with strong capable fingers and she seemed to take a certain pleasure in ministering to the afflicted.

"Shall we talk now, Captain?" she asked, gently massaging his pectorals. He thought just how pleasant this might be if, first he weren't so badly burned, and second, if he weren't numbed into nothingness by the spray.

"By all means." He looked at her directly, and she didn't evade his eyes.

"To begin with, then, my name is Rian Terellian. I am from Yaniwess." Han's eyebrows went up at that, and Chewie muttered a low interrogative. "I was dispatched to Krinto to divert you and your cargo to Yaniwess. So far I have been successful." She let her fingers trail down Solo's arms and finally let her hands rest on his knees.

"All right, the obvious question is, who sent you?"

Again Rian smiled faintly. "I was instructed to ask you what you'd think were I to say 'Dead Drop.'"

Now it was Han's turn. His mouth quirked at one corner, recalling that awesome canyon-obstacle which had almost ended his career for good during a wide-open roto-cross on a planet called Ganna II. "I would think," he replied, "of one over-the-hill dustbuster who stole my girl then saved my life so I couldn't kick about it.

Rian seemed startled out of her equitable poise. "The Lady Trella... ?"

Han thought about the tall redhead with the boundless enthusiasms and appetites and decided that her appellation was surely titular. He'd never known Trella to behave like anything remotely resembling a lady. "Trella, that's the one. So what do En Morgon Ben and his lovely Lady want with me?"

"Oh, it is no longer En Morgon. But it will soon be King!" she said staunchly. "The Prince instructed me to tell you that the future of Yaniwess is at stake."

"What's that to me?" Han responded.

"Prince Ben said you would say that. In fact, he said that the future of Yaniwess would be bantha droppings to you."

"Ah, the Prince wasn't far wrong."

"He also said to tell you that there are vast sums of money from the Trans-Empire Corporation and from the planetary treasury to be had. Also, of course, he'd pay you and your partner premium for your consignment of arms -- double whatever that dragon was offering. So, shall we do business, Captain Solo, or shall we shoot it out in customary style?"

Solo leaned back and directed an inquiring glance at Chewbacca. The Wookiee shrugged and mouthed a conditional affirmative, tossing the ball back. He turned to Rian with what he hoped was a pleasant expression -- the pain in his chest was returning and a grimace was imminent. "I've never been to Yaniwess," he said. "It'll be a pleasure."

\* \* \* \* \*

If a man had to make his home on a planet, thought Han, Yaniwess would be a good choice. Coming in from the night side, he raced the dawn line over high mountain ranges separated by wide lakes of sparkling blue. About the lakes stretched fertile valleys sloping up to thickly forested hills. The landscape was laced with delicate trceries of silver -- tributary streams feeding the lakes.

"My homeworld is a beautiful thing, Captain Solo," Rian said softly from the navigator's station behind him. "I'd never seen it like this before. The drone which took me to Krinto took off at night. What does your homeworld look like?"

"Not like this," Han replied. He was wearing a shirt Rian had fashioned out of free-fall netting. The burns were healing but still sensitive. As they flew at Rian's direction, they could see to the north a smoky pall indicating substantial industrialization.

Chewie commented with a guttural phrase and a wave of his giant paw, and Rian answered, "Yes, the capitol city, Adrick-Er of the Greater Provinces, now defiled by the usurper." She said it calmly but with an intensity which gave Solo occasion to raise his eyes skyward and shake his head at the amount of energy men could expend on causes. That was what spending life on the ground does for you, he thought -- it made you a sucker for territorial disputes and all manner of nationalistic folly. The only home Solo had was his ship, and he liked it that way.

Rian indicated a more southerly course now, away from the low-lying industrial area surrounding Adrick-Er and deeper into the mountainous country.

"How much farther? We should have been picked up by patrol ships by now." Han was keeping a wary eye on the long-range sensors, assuring himself that sooner or later things would get tricky, but the woman replied, "Yaniwess is still on open status. We would only be questioned were we to attempt to land in the north. Don't be concerned. There!" She pointed right where an escarpment loomed.

Perhaps three hundred feet vertically, it resembled a cutaway cylinder of gray stone. Within the semicircle of its base green hills piled, and atop the highest hill Han could see a sprawling bastion of stone. "There is Sentinel South. Prince Ben is there."

"Then maybe I'll get some answers," Solo said, half to himself. Rian had been closemouthed about just what was happening on Yaniwess, and he was beginning to succumb to the peevishness he was liable to when people, or situations, contrived to deprive him of information.

Han brought the Falcon to hover above the topmost battlements of Sentinel South. "You may land in the courtyard, Captain. Your ship will be safer inside our walls."

It occurred to him that the cool, competent hijacker with the sensational legs might be any number of things, not the least of which was a liar, but he quieted his misgivings and, having nowhere else to go for the moment, made an expert setdown in the wide courtyard behind the massive walls.

They were met at the foot of the boarding ramp by a young man in a uniform every bit as rakish as Rian's was fanciful. The badge emblazoned on his bright blue surcoat was a triskelion affair involving eagles enclosing a five-point starburst. He smiled affably at the two spacers as they descended onto the sunwashed stone paved landing area, but appeared

to save his most enthusiastic greeting for Rian Terellian. "Commander, welcome home, and congratulations on a successful mission." He beamed and offered her a hand, though Rian was quite capable of negotiating the ramp unassisted. "Are these our guests then, Commander?"

Indicating the pilot, she replied, "Captain Han Solo. The Wookiee is called Chewbacca and is First Mate of this ship. Gentlemen, Randi Adrick, nephew to Prince Ben."

There was an exchange of greetings while Solo wondered briefly what sort of relationship existed between Ben and the son of his younger brother who, according to the Prince, had an alarming way of running through the planetary treasury. But the young man, extravagantly blonde with shoulder-length hair and merry eyes, seemed full of genuine good spirits and courtly manners. \*Dashing,\* Solo thought -- \*the boy's got style.\*

"Randi, see to unloading the weaponry, top speed..."

Solo interrupted her with, "Hey, hold it! What's the rush? I usually like to see the color of the cash before I dump my cargo."

"Captain, you are a difficult man to deal with." Rian seemed impervious to anger and merely eyed him calmly.

Solo took her sally as a compliment. "When I get jerked around, yeah, you bet I am. I want to see Ben and get a few straight answers."

"I was on the point of taking you to the Prince. Haste is essential." She sighed. "Will you not hold your skepticism in abeyance from here to the reception room? I apologize for not being at liberty to tell you all you might wish to know."

At least, Han thought, she recognized his annoyance at having to act half-blind, and it mollified him somewhat. He frowned at the ship. "OK, go to it. But Chewie will stick around and keep an eye on things." He tipped the Wookiee a familiar look. "I'll be back as soon as I've had an audience with our royal host."

Leaving Randi to supervise the offloading, the commander led Han into the castle proper, an imposing pile of shaped stone with massive beamed ceiling and an airy echo. People moved about, intent on errands of their own, scarcely noticing the two as they strode purposefully through the corridors.

Even in his free-fall shirt, Han decided, he wasn't dressed any more eccentrically than some of Sentinel South's inhabitants. Armed to a man,

and woman, they sported leather fashions and bright silks. Boots ranged from ankle-toppers with belled jesses to the thigh-high numbers with yards of thong lacing, Solo wondered if Trella had anything to do with Yaniwess' haute couture.

"Nice place you've got here," he ventured.

Not breaking her brisk stride, Rian regarded him sideways with her inscrutable glance. "We took Sentinel South with 348 lives." Han missed a beat. \*Lives? What is Ben Adrick up to?\* It wasn't long before he had his answer.

At the head of a short flight of stone steps, a uniformed guard ushered them into the reception room. Behind a polished plank table which ran nearly the width of the chamber stood the brawny tavern brawler, wily roto-crosser, and jaunty man-of-all-action who would be King of Yaniwess, Ben Adrick. There was perhaps more silver in his shaggy dark hair, and the dramatic handlebar mustaches were lengthier than Solo recalled, but the flashing grin was as wide and friendly as ever.

"Han! Damn! She said she'd bring you, but I only half believed it!" He held out a hand.

Solo stepped forward, clasped it firmly. "Ben."

"Well, gods' grins, man, you look ... burned!"

"Uh... the original consignee of the gun shipment had a trick or two up his sleeve. How did you know where to look me up? Krinto's a pretty out-of-the-way place."

Ben shrugged. "I have a few off-planet information sources. I got word of a shipment of armament -- things we could use -- and your name was mentioned. Nothing mysterious. Your contact tried to fry you?"

"It was the Gorloo, as we guessed, Sire. Captain Solo was taken off guard."

>From a corner of the room behind Ben they heard an amused voice remark, "That would have been something to see! "

Han grinned. "Trella, is that you?"

"Bet your asteroids, Solo," said the would-be queen of Yaniwess, rising and coming to stand beside her husband. She was gowned toe to throat in a lavish iridescent aquamarine shift and Solo bet privately that she still looked like a Danis showgirl underneath it.

"Royalty agrees with you, gorgeous," Han decided.

Rian looked slightly scandalized at the casual repartee, and he found that in some way that pleased him.

Trella did look sensational. She also looked contented and happy and no older than the last time Han had seen her disappearing on Adrick's arm through a docking bay doorway. Yet there were recently etched frown lines between her liquid green eyes which made him more curious than ever as to what kind of a mess he'd landed himself and Chewie in.

But she was smiling gaily for all her worry. "Han, it's good to see you again. Where's Chewie?"

"Chewie's with the Falcon. I told him I'd be back."

"Rian," Ben signaled, and the commander nodded brusquely, turned on her heel and hurried out of the room to fetch the Wookiee: relieved, Han thought, to be free of the strange web of familiarity connecting her liege, his lady and an enigmatic outworlder.

The moment they were alone Han exploded. "Adrick, what the hell is going on here? You send some hotshot female to hijack me, bring me out to East Crapcake Nowhere, and stand there grinning like a ... " He looked Ben up and down briefly, noticing the triskelion badge on his laced tunic, "...like an over-aged Honor Scout!"

Ben continued to smile. "Go ahead, Han, blow it off. You'll feel better."

"I don't give a damn about feeling better! I want to know what's going on!" He planted his knuckles on his hips, radiating stubbornness.

"Sweet and simple, then, Han? I'm overthrowing the government and I need your shipful of guns."

Solo's eyes narrowed. "I came all the way from Krinto for a bad joke?"

"No, I'm serious. Sit, I'll fill you in. I'll also pay you by the way. Here." Ben dipped into a thigh pocket and came up with a credit book. He scrawled across one sheet with a light stylus and handed it to the pilot, who scrutinized it carefully.

"This is a TREC voucher."

"Good as gomelinite from the Tion to the Arc."

"I know, I know," Han said, hitching around to half-sit on the table and look intently at the slip made out in his favor for several times the amount Rian had suggested. "Where'd you get it?"

"Han, have you ever heard the story about the good little prince and the wicked stepmother? My father did one very stupid thing before he died. He remarried. She had inherited a director's chair on the Trans-Empire Corporation from her first husband and she traded it to my father for royal status. I think he must have gone a little soft," Ben gestured toward his temple, "at the end. Anyway, when Trella and I got here a couple years ago, he was dead, and Madam M'Zeel was back in possession of her board chair AND the reins of the planetary government. She's a lousy administrator, besides being paranoid, greedy, and mean as a dinko."

"She's also built like a suborbital barge," added Trella.

"A thoroughly charming lady, I'm sure." Han agreed.

"The people were on the verge of open revolution -- Rian, whom you've met, was the rebel leader, by the way," Ben continued. "M'Zeel wanted me to join forces with her. I'm an Adrick, the eldest son -- our planet is very long on tradition -- and I had the people with me, but, hell..." He spread his hands in the elaborate shrug Solo remembered.

Trella continued, "She settled for Ben's kid brother, Bar, a real pleek -- excuse me, darling, but you know he is -- brought in a lot of TREC muscle to consolidate her position and declared us renegades. It was shoot and run for a while there." She grinned at the Prince. "But now we've..."

The rest of her disclosure was halted by a whoop of sirens. Han slid off the table, blurring his gun into action and looking for targets.

"It's the old Royal Air Force, my friend, coming to pay a visit, and I don't think your blaster is quite up to the task," Ben yelled over the noise.

As he holstered his gun, Solo's smile was sardonic. "They're going to cook you, you know," he said. He gazed up at the dim vaulting far above his head, visualizing the blue sky beyond full of hostile aircraft circling busily while they dropped fusion bombs down that cylindrical well of rock right onto Sentinel South.

"Han, give us a break. The whole top of the escarpment's thick with gun emplacements, and in the courtyard right now sits a very lethal quad-mount cannon."

"You knew they were coming!"

"Shrewd guess."

Solo wasn't sure whether Adrick was referring to his own powers of precognition or Han's estimation of his cunning, but he glared. "If anything happens to my ship..."

"Put Chewie in the Falcon and tell him to shoot straight up. Her shields should stop anything they've got. Come on! We've got to MOVE!" Ben gave Trella a gentle shove in the direction of the rear door, then vaulted the table. He slapped Han between the shoulder blades. "Hey, junior, I like your shirt."

Without quite knowing why, Han found himself running alongside the older man, the familiar adrenaline rush of combat intensifying his senses and charging him with something almost like pleasure. "Your set up here, Ben -- it just might work. It reminds me of the corrie-nest traps on Voola."

"They say the women of Voola are winged."

They were both looking straight ahead, clattering down the stone corridor and Han was obliged to raise his voice over the siren's undulations. "They are! Feathers!"

"Feathers?"

"Feathers. Down."

"I'll be damned."

Rounding the corner they ran into Chewbacca, Rian, and Randi. The Wookiee put out a huge forearm and brought Solo up short. "Chewie, double quick back to the Falcon and layer shields topside max. I want you in the top gun and very sharp." The Wookiee grinned a look of fanged enthusiasm, nodded once and was gone the way he'd come.

Meanwhile, Randi had appraised Adrick of the situation. "They're coming in at 0 niner 7, northeast," he said quickly, "a dozen we count. They can't evade our sensors so we have some lead time. Han," he faced the pilot directly, "will you man an escarpment gun?"

"What am I supposed to say? Your wish is my command?" He looked away disgustedly and laughed. "For old times sake. This one time. Once. Then I'm gone. Agreed?"

"A deal." Ben turned to Randi. "Son, is your old man in this little escapade?"

"Uncle, I sincerely hope not. He's not much of a pilot."

"Good, man an escarpment gun. Rian, take Han up to the South face. Randi'n I'll bracket them on the north. We'll pick up intermediates on the way. Go!" He whirled and pounded off down an intersecting corridor, the stalwart youth at his heels.

"This way, Captain," said Commander Terellian. He followed her in the opposite direction through a ray shielded station and into a bounce tube cut, apparently, into the rock escarpment itself, a vast flume that in moments popped them into the sunshine and breathtaking vistas a hundred meters above the sprawling mass of Sentinel South.

The sky was clear, the prospect seemingly limitless. Han supposed they would be able to see them before they heard them. "What are we up against here? What are they sending?"

"I'll know as soon as you, Captain. Meanwhile, we'd best get to our guns. Will you take the Howler?" She gestured to a tidy, businesslike single-bore cannon fuse-bolted to a formex slab near the dizzying edge of the escarpment, and moved quickly to the right to place herself behind the sights of a twin-bore projectile gun. Someone had scrawled the legend 'M'Zeel's Bane' on its magazine. Behind them a grove of dak trees, thick-trunked and massive, provided a cover of sorts.

\*Howler,\* thought Han. Borodine RT120 phaser cannon nicknamed the Howler. He'd fired one before. Sliding into the gunner's seat he fitted his feet into the radial response slips and pressed one after the other. The gun emplacement swung right and left while the hand grips unlocked, giving him full control of the main bore.

A high-pitched hum reached their ears. Han swiveled the cannon to track the squadron of small air-to-air ships that suddenly shot over the escarpment's edge. They were slant-wing fighters of a type Han had never seen before, though he was willing to give them the benefit of a doubt, and ready to accord them negative respect.

Like silver arrowheads they zipped into the sky above the gunners, aligning themselves into an X formation. Han opened fire. The Howler lived up to its name, blasting a pulsing phase beam at the nearest slant-wing. The ship shot fifty meters into the air, spinning end over. Solo crowed delightedly. It seemed almost too easy.

Over the noise of the weaponry he heard Rian shouting, "You just hit its shielding! It'll flip and come right back at you! They're only vulnerable when they vector!"

"What?"

"When they vector! Head on, lateral, vertical! Place your shots!"

\*Right, boss,\* Han thought, scowling. He took his flush of anger out on the slant-wings, throwing a triggerlock barrage that, more through luck than skill, caught a vulnerable area and blew one sleek ship out of the sky. He turned towards Rian with a superior smirk, only to be met with her look of cold contempt. Solo went back to his gun, wondering how Chewie was doing.

The Wookiee was enjoying himself. Flat on his back in the Falcon's top turret he fired the big cannon straight up, whuffing with surprise as he watched the ship he'd sighted get tossed high, only to realign itself and swoop down again into the fray, dropping one of its load bombs to explode harmlessly against the Falcon's deflectors.

He tried once more and again the slant-wing bounced up, circled and dove. Something about this series of maneuvers amused the Wookiee. He chuckled -- his staccato growl sounding like a recalcitrant roto-drive -- and opened his guns all the way up, quartering the sky above Sentinel South, whereupon the entire squadron of slant-wings began to leap and spin on the top of his laser updraft. He roared with mirth. It reminded him of toasting pop nuts.

On the escarpment the gunners were startled to see the dazzling impromptu acrobatics. Han laughed with appreciation for Chewie's outrageous game and kept directing a constant stream of blue energy at the hapless fighters.

One by one, however, they managed to vector free of the Falcon's fusillade and sail out to regroup. As they did so, Rian scored a hit and her slant-wing went into a spinning dive.

Giving the Falcon's field of fire a wide berth, the remaining ships directed their attention to the gun emplacements, and the gunners, north face, south and in between, had their hands full. Now, however, the fighters were forced to come in head on firing, providing unshielded nose targets.

Han circled rapidly, zeroing in on one after another of the small fighters, trying to pinpoint his phaser beams with painstaking accuracy.

All around him energy slashed and sizzled.

Further north along the escarpment's curve, a gun emplacement exploded. Simultaneously, Ben found his target and another slant-wing angled off trailing flames. Odds were about even.

Han had noticed one pilot with a predictable pattern to his attack runs. Leading him slightly, anticipating with super-sensitive intuition, Han fired just as the fighter swung 90 degrees and opened up on him. Phase beams went up the slant-wing's forward intake and she exploded with a gratifying thunder and flash.

Behind him a central gunner took out another fighter, her pilot catapulting free and drifting down behind the trees, dangling from the lines of his jettison chute. With that score, the squadron leader appeared to decide that his losses were better cut, and the remaining fighters veered off northward.

Only one hung back for a parting shot. Aimed at Han, who fired back and missed, the projectile sliced a nearby dak tree, cleaving the vast girth so that one half crashed backwards into the thicket and the other careened toward the escarpment edge, its ponderous weight slamming into Han's cannon barrel. The impetus was so great that the entire emplacement was ripped from its foundations.

As he was thrown clear, Han experienced a moment of awe, seeing the fuse-bolts pulling clear of the cracking formex. Then he was rolling, flailing, grasping frantically for purchase and, horribly, sliding over the edge of the escarpment.

With desperate strength his fingers clung to the rock, toes scrabbling for support and finding none. Any second now, he knew, his muscles would fail him. Gravel slides peppered his face. Between the soles of his boots and the topmost battlements of Sentinel South there was nothing, absolutely nothing, but 100 meters of empty air.

Then he heard Rian's voice. "Captain! Hold on a moment longer. I can get you. Hold on!" He wanted to tell her no, his weight would pull them both over, but found he couldn't speak. He looked up. Rian was leaning dangerously far out, her hand reaching down to fasten firmly on his right wrist.

"No," he managed. "We'll both go."

"Nonsense." She had a grip on him and was letting down a line with the other hand. "Take this. Wrap it tightly about your left hand. You'll have

to trust yourself to my strength while you do so." More gravel pelted him. Breathing was becoming enormously difficult.

He closed his eyes and hung on in a wrist lock grip to Rain's left arm, whipping the slender line several times around his left wrist and hand. "We'll never make it," he gasped.

"Captain Solo, there are three husky young gunners holding me by the legs. We'll make it!"

"Well, pull, damn it!"

"Pulling."

Inch by inch they hauled Solo up and over the edge, the stone surface doing agonizing things to his half-healed burns. But eventually he felt the ground under him again. Rolling onto his back, he gazed gratefully at the clear sky, catching his breath. Rian knelt beside him with a concerned look. Solo wondered how she did it -- hardly a hair was out of place.

"It's a good thing those fighters beat it when they did," he said finally.

"Oh? "

"Yeah. My gun's busted."

\* \* \* \* \*

Revolutionaries, Han decided, were an odd lot. They were treating him as though he had thrown himself off the cliff in some grand gesture of defiance instead of being knocked ass over afterburners by a falling tree. In short, they were treating him like a hero, and although they were making far too much fuss, he had to admit it was pleasant.

Skillfully tended by Sentinel South's medical team, bathed, refreshed, and pampered, wearing some of Ben's own silks, he lounged on an enormous contour form chair in one of the recreation areas in the royal apartments. Around him were a clutch of outlaw demi-nobles, a favored few rank-and-file rebels and several frankly admiring women. Rian was not among them, having begged off to attend to some personal matters.

Chewie stretched out nearby, enjoying prodigious quantities of a local potable and the awed attention of a group of younger Yaniwess aristocracy who hung on his every growl. He was recounting the engagement with the

slant-wings, complete with vigorous gestures, and was nearly overcome again with the humor of the situation.

"...and," Ben was saying as Han helped himself to a handful of salted flix and washed it down with T'iil T'iil, "she's fortified the palace in Adrick-Er. We'll have a fight on our hands, but with the weapons you've provided I think we have a good chance."

"All the luck. Tell me about the TREC Board chair."

"Oh, glad you asked. That's a real killer. The chair is invested in the name of 'The Planetary Ruler of Yaniwess' who, of course, is me -- if I can bump M'Zeel. An awesome thought, that."

"You're really serious, aren't you?"

Ben hesitated a moment before answering. "Yeah, Han, I guess I am. When I got back here and saw what was happening...I found out that I cared. This is my home." Han looked away. "Besides, M'Zeel sold all our heads, mine, Trella's, the kid's..."

"Kids?"

"Sure!" Ben grinned widely. Randi, fetch Young Ben and Twink." The blonde rebel sketched a jaunty salute and left the group around Chewbacca.

Trella appeared at Han's elbow. "For the hero," she said with a droll expression. "Yaniwess' own brandy, and I laced it with mancet. You Corellians all love mancet, don't you? They say you're weaned on it."

"This Corellian does. What is it, Trell? Are the kids that bad?"

"Drink! Drink!" she laughed as Han sipped the liquid, its customary amber color shaded to red by the addition of the euphoric.

A few moments later, in his very best mancet-mood, Han was introduced to Ben and Trella's children. A pair of four year old twins, they stood on either side of Randi, holding his hands.

Han, who had about as much use for children as he did for a second navel, regarded them with benign good grace. They stared back, redheaded poppets with Ben's dark eyes. At last the girl, the one her father had called Twink, spoke up.

"Cap'n Slow, are you a fox? My mummy says you're a real..."

Over Ben's laughter they heard Trella saying seriously, "Yes, dear. Captain Solo is quite a fox."

Han grinned at the little girl, having no idea what to say. She continued to observe him solemnly, not interested in the adult mirth she had occasioned. Then she asked, "Mummy, can I have a fox?"

When the burst of hilarity had subsided, Ben intoned formally, "Captain, allow me to present the En Morgon of Yaniwess, Young Ben Adrick, and his sister, the Princess Hana."

Solo's gaze slide suspiciously to the parents. "Tell me you didn't."

"Oh, on the contrary," said Trella, "it was Ben's idea. He figured we owed you a lot."

Solo shook his head in wonderment. Getting involved with an amiable roto-crosser years ago and parsecs away had set off a significant explosion of events, and he was fairly sure he hadn't heard the last of the repercussions

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the next morning, to a terrified nursemaid, fell the unenviable task of informing Ben and Trella that their children had been kidnapped.

Han was in a sunlit dream where a girl ran singing on the sand. She turned, her golden hair steaming in the sea breeze, beckoning to him and he recognized her. \*Han,\* she called, smiling. \*Han\*...

"Han! Wake up! Wake up, Han!" Ben's hand shook his shoulder roughly. "Wake up, man!"

"Ben ... what?"

"It's M'Zeel. She's got the children."

Sleep rushed away from him like a ship at light speed. He sat up, throwing off the covers, aware of Ben's suppressed fear and the anguish threatening to overwhelm him in the trembling of his hand. He dussed quickly, in grim silence, not venturing any guesses until he knew more, and unwilling to offer comfort where there might be no hope at all.

In a moment they were at the door of the nursery, a fanciful, whimsical place full of color, made grotesque by the horrible fact that the children were gone, and by the sound of a woman weeping.

"Trell..." Han had never seen, never imagined, that Trella could cry.

She turned at his voice, distraught, her tear-streaked face twisted into lines of pain. "Oh, Ben, they're gone." She threw herself into her husband's arms, burying her face against his shoulder, sobbing.

Han stepped past them into the room, feeling the weight, the sense of dread. Suddenly it was all so serious. The valiant plans, the high adventure -- it was nothing in the face of reality. He looked around along the lines of the ceiling, checked out the walls. "How?"

Ben spoke past Trella. "We guess they were taken out of the upper windows onto the roof."

"Where's Randi?" Solo asked it casually, but Ben took his meaning at once.

"No, not Randi."

"Sire," Rian Terellian pushed through the gathering of retainers, "Madame," and she nodded to Trella. "I hold myself responsible. The guards were lax following victory..."

Ben cut her off with a gesture. "Recriminations are pointless. All I want to hear now are some good ideas on how we get them back."

"But, Ben, who...?" Trella's voice rose with stunned incomprehension.

"People will do many things for money." Rian was looking at Han.

"What's that supposed to mean? Whose idea was it to come to Yaniwess, anyway? Where were you all night? Shining your shorts?"

"The Wookiee -- where is he?"

Solo was angry now. "Sleeping off a whopper, which you would have known if you'd stuck around with the rest of us."

"Rian." It was Trella again. Softly, but with great authority, she said to the commander, "These two are blameless, whatever has happened. Quiet your suspicions."

"It is my job to be suspicious, Madame," Rian reminded her, eyeing Solo darkly. He returned to his scrutiny of the room.

"What does your ransom note say?"

"No ransom. It just said that by the time we read it, the children will be in M'Zeel's custody. The price for their freedom is me. She offers to exchange them for me."

"Will you do it?"

"It's the one thing I can't do, Han. I know M'Zeel. If she gets her hands on me, all three of us are dead. No. Their lives depend on me staying clear of her. As long as I'm free, she'll let them live -- as bait."

"Let me see the note."

Ben at once handed over the single sheet. Rian was still surveying the upper windows and muttering "...something, something..." He glanced at the paper, back to the window again, then finished the brief note. "That's it," he said quietly, "look. It's written with a pilot's push-feed pen. The air raid yesterday..." They were watching him, puzzled. "You don't see, do you? Remember the one pilot who jettisoned? The whole pack took off like spooked plains grazers as soon as he was out. It was just a diversion. Didn't anyone pick him up?" The silence said it all. "There's your kidnapper, Ben. A jet-harness jump from the escarpment to the roof, in that window, and a jump out. They probably had a rendezvous all arranged. So," he turned a slight smile on Rian, "you can relax, Commander, and start thinking of ways to get them out of Adrick-Er."

"Han's right," Ben said at last. "I can't do it. Randi would be willing, but he'd be recognized at once."

Ben looked tired, afraid, and, suddenly, old. Trella was leaning against the doorway arch, hands pressed to her face.

Han thought, \*If you put your foot in it you'll be sorry. You won't respect yourself in the morning. Hell, you probably won't even be around in the morning to kick yourself which is what you ought to be doing right now. If you keep your mouth shut, you won't say it. Say it now before you change your mind.\* He concentrated very hard on a little boy who had Ben's eyes and a small redhead who wanted a fox... "Let me give it a try."

\* \* \* \* \*

The vegetation in those latitudes of Yaniwess' western hemisphere was undergoing a seasonal color change. Brilliant swathes of crimson and shimmering gold covered the hillsides, and in the meadows on either side

of the riding track grew low shrubs of a rich brown dotted with bright orange berries.

Mounted on a pair of tall, elegant riding animals, Solo and Rian made their way north through the gentle hill country outside Adrick-Er. The lifter had dropped them and their mounts a dozen kilometers out and had returned to Sentinel South to report that the two riders were safely on their way.

They were dressed in traveling clothes suitable for the landed gentry -- belted tunics, leather pants and boots, and long flowing cloaks, fastened at the shoulder with detailed clasps.

The sun was warm, the sky fair, their pace was leisurely, and though their mission was a desperate one full of dangers, both the ones they anticipated and the unexpected pitfalls which surely lay ahead, Solo set his mind to enjoying the ride as much as possible.

"So you were the rebel leader before Ben came back," he said conversationally.

Rian regarded him briefly. She no longer seemed to suspect him of complicity in the kidnapping, yet her manner was as coolly formal as ever. "That's right. My family has been loyal to the crown for generations. But when the old King died and that monstrous M'Zeel usurped the power with Bar Adrick as figurehead...my father declared our allegiance at an end. For that Bar Adrick killed him."

There was a bitterness in her voice that surprised Solo with the pain it appeared to camouflage. Trella's tears, and now heartbreak from this icy commander. He remained silent.

In a moment she continued. "There is a blood feud between our houses now," as if this should convey something significant to him.

He answered, "Seems like this whole planet is one big blood feud."

"Randi and I were betrothed."

"Oh..."

"Am I cold, Captain Solo? Have I no emotions?" Her eyes were very bright. She turned her face away. "I have given my heart to the rebellion now. Our code is a life for a life and the house of Bar Adrick owes the house of Shas Terellian one life."

Solo considered the antiquated business of codes and feuds about as valid a guideline for running a life as the Corporate Sector Authority trade regulations were for running a profitable freight hauling operation, but her explanation made things easier to understand.

"OK. Thanks for telling me. I might've made a play for you..." She whirled to face him, shocked, "and I don't think my ego could've stood the rejection," he finished. She stared a moment, then began to smile, as he'd intended. The tension ebbed away.

As they rode on through the morning they discussed possible plans of action and strategies. All that had been definitely agreed upon before their departure from Sentinel South was that Ben, Chewie, and Randi in the Falcon would establish a round-the-clock watch from a vantage point near Adrick-Er. The rebel troops were to be marshaled, ready for a massive assault when and if Solo gave the signal. Having no way of knowing what Chance might toss in their path, he'd not elaborated on the signal -- he'd simply told Ben to be on the lookout, and promised a diversion of some sort if at all possible. They discussed the tower-keep, Star Reach, where Rian was certain the children would be held, a bastion in the center of the palace complex.

"Won't you be recognized?" he asked.

"It's possible, of course, but we were outcountry nobles, seldom at court."

"Have you always braided your hair like that?"

"Why yes."

"Let it down. It'll give you an edge."

Surprised at herself, she reached up to obey immediately, unfastening the long loops and combing them free with her fingers. Her hair was very long.

He surveyed her judiciously. "Now you don't look like old blood-and-thunder Commander Terellian at all."

And when she smiled, he didn't.

\* \* \* \* \*

"First, we gotta get in."

Rian and Han stood together across a broad paved roadway from the main gate of the palace. Rising up from the imposing architectural monstrosity

of the complex proper was Star Reach, a four-sided tower of stone that fell short by a hundred meters or so of being impressive. It was, however, sturdy-looking and dishearteningly impenetrable. Upon its spacious flat roof, Solo could see half a dozen of what looked to be large balloons, sprouting like giant puffballs among the antennae of a weather station.

"Getting in, at least into the palace, won't be a problem. Today's a festival. Ritual hospitality is the order, and even M'Zeel can't disregard tradition for fear of alienating what followers she has -- I mean the Yaniwanes, not the TREC hirelings."

Han rested his palm on the butt of his blaster. As became a lady from the Provinces, Rian was unarmed.

"So we just walk in?"

"There will be security snoops and palace guards, but it is against the spirit of the festival to hinder anyone who wishes to enter. Even the poorest do this. It's the custom."

"Well, let's go slumming."

They joined a crowd outside the gate and presently found themselves inside an enormous reception area. Its domed ceiling disappeared in the shadows. A few meters above their heads a mezzanine made a sweeping circle of the room. About them and above them milled a crowd of visitors.

Rian took Solo's hand and headed toward an archway leading further back into the palace when a man's voice from the mezzanine called out, "Terellian!" Rian looked up before Han could stop her. Bending low over the railing a man peered down shouting, "It is the daughter of Shas the Outlaw! Arrest her and the companion at once!"

"They popped us quick enough," Solo muttered, drawing his weapon.

"Quickly, this way," Rian urged, tugging him along toward a side door as several authority-types began to converge on them. No one had fired yet.

"That was a useless experience," said Solo. "Getting back in there a second time's gonna be like cracking Pluvo's safe!"

They ran down a corridor and back out into the sunshine, through a small gate, down an alley and, scrambled over a wall to drop onto a side street, the pursuit hot on their heels.

"What we need is some power under us," Han panted. They careened around another corner, cloaks billowing behind them, and suddenly Han saw a possible solution to their immediate problem. Leaning against a wall ahead of them was something with an engine and wheels.

He pulled Rian into a side street then into a recessed doorway, finger to lips. Scarcely daring to breathe, they froze until the noise of the guards pounded on past the mouth of the alley. Then, very quietly, they moved back out to the street and approached the vehicle. It was a roto-crosser.

"Can you operate this?"

"What would you think if I said 'Dead Drop'?"

"Of course, forgive me."

Han swung astride the saddle and kicked the bike to life. "Hop on and hang on," he said over his shoulder. The engine roared as Han cranked the hand grips and the bike shot away down the street toward the group of palace guards who had momentarily lost their quarry and were standing indecisively in the middle of the narrow way. Solo aimed straight for them and, at full torque, crashed into their midst, sending them scattering like domestic fowl. Then they opened fire.

Rian had the great good sense to plant her boots firmly on the pegs and wrap her arms tightly about his waist, making herself as much as possible a part of his body and letting him handle the balance and finesse. In this manner they negotiated a series of tight backstreet turns and emerged onto a broad thoroughfare hoping to outdistance the pursuit.

The military hovervan which raced toward them in the opposite lane of traffic, skidding into a U-turn and lifting across the lane divider to fall in on their tail, cut that hope in half, but Han figured they still had a chance if they could get far enough ahead to make a detour, ditch the bike, and lie low for a while. They needed something to slow the van down.

He felt Rian loosen her grip and wriggle around behind him. "I know I shouldn't ask, Captain," she shouted as lase-fire streaked past them, "but can you do a front wheelie?"

"On a 2x2? Sure!" Han hollered back.

"Well, do one when I say ... Now!"

Solo hit the torque-front with a touch of lift and the forward wheel raised off the pavement a few inches. Lateral stabilizers locked the bike into lift mode and Han twisted maximum power out of the hand grips. The bike raked forward momentarily, and as the rear wheel, along with the exhaust cylinder, lifted clear of the pavement, Rian took the opportunity to unclasp her cloak and drape it over the back of the bike where the powerful blast from the exhaust caught it, filled it out, and as she let go, blew it back against the windshield of the hovervan.

There was a flatulent sound of brakes frantically applied and a metallic scream as the van made sudden contact with the road surface.

Solo gunned the engine and the bike leapt away from the discomfited pursuer. But for all he pushed the roto-crosser, the van began to gain on them again.

He swung left, cutting across a busy traffic lane onto an intersecting boulevard. They were racing through a park area now, along wide curving avenues overhung with colorful trees.

Han felt Rian slide a hand down his right hip and, tugging at the retaining strap of his holster, pull the big gun free. Taking a firm grip on his gunbelt with her left hand, she leaned dangerously far back, swinging around to peg shots at the hovervan. The occupants ducked and the van swerved as she connected, but they kept coming.

Then it seemed as though someone aboard finally got tired of playing games. The van's roof vent slid back and a grenade launch platform whined up into position.

Rian saw the maneuver and yelled something to Solo, who couldn't make out what she was saying, aware of the heavy artillery tactic only when an enormous chunk of road exploded in front of him. Fire flashed. Pieces of road surface whistled past them and a gaping hole appeared, smoke curling at its raw, jagged edges.

Solo threw the bike into a skid, slewing it around, fighting for control with his entire body. He felt the disorienting weight shift as Rian was thrown clear. He leaned into the steering bars to compensate. Scenery flashed past him at odd angles, but he thought he could still save it until, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a guard leap to the top of the van. Taking a spread stance and a two-handed grip on his pistol, he hit Solo with a massive neural paralyzer, and just before the stun took effect, Solo thought with surprise that getting back into the tower wasn't going to be difficult at all. Then the whole world became a moment frozen in time.

\* \* \* \* \*

The return to consciousness was swift. Han was thankful, not for the first time, that his early training had included the physical and mental discipline necessary to throw off the effects of a stun charge. His mind leapt to alertness ahead of his body, waiting and analyzing as his physical senses began to function again.

Dark, but not pitch, a cell in the tower. Shallow breathing nearby. Rian. Willing his muscles to respond, he was gratified at the tingling sensation which began in his extremities. It gave him an idea of his position, which was sprawled inelegantly, probably in a corner.

When he found he could turn his head, he looked for the girl. She was lying a few feet further toward the cell door in the boneless attitude of neural paralysis, her dark hair pooling beneath her on the stone and radiating outward like water.

Her tunic was dirty and torn, and even in the dimness Solo could see her face was bruised. \*Poor kid,\* he thought. She must have had a bad fall when he swerved the bike to avoid the grenade crater - - and still they stunned her! He thought disgustedly what an unnecessary act of retribution that had been.

He made no attempt to wake her. Instead he experimented with regaining control of his body. Presently he was able to drag his right hand up over his hip. His blaster was gone, of course, probably still somewhere out in the park, but he was interested to note that they had left him his belt -- not only cloddishly cruel, but not overly bright -- it contained a number of useful items.

Han was up and moving somewhat shakily about the cell when Rian began to moan softly. He circled back and knelt beside her, taking her hands and rubbing them between his, massaging her circulation back to normal. In a moment she opened her eyes.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Oh, all right, considering..."

"We got one piece of luck -- they left me my belt."

"Good. Now your pants will stay up." She closed her eyes again.

"C'mon. Get up. You've got to get moving." He pulled her arm around his shoulders and hoisted her to her feet.

"Say, can you sing?" Solo asked.

"Sing?"

"Yeah. 'Oh, I am a roamer I wander alone, a footloose free spacer..." he began in a surprisingly good baritone, "you know, sing?"

"Why, I suppose so...but whatever for?"

"Because it helps shake off the stun. Don't ask me why."

For a few moments they shuffled about the cell singing an old space chanty, and Rian was surprised at the speed with which her strength returned.

"Now," said Solo when they felt reasonably steady once more. "Besides keeping me decent, my belt carries a detonator clip with 3 charges. That takes care of the door. These old lockups are a cinch to blow."

"You've probably had plenty of experience there, so I'll take your word for it," Rian said dryly.

"Smart," he replied, busy compressing the tiny explosive module and tucking it in the ancient keyhole. "When we get out we'll split up. I want you to stay in the tower and find the kids. Here." He tossed her a comlink. "Keep in touch and let me know when you locate them."

"And where will you be?"

He grinned at her over his shoulder. "The troops'll need a break, and we'll need a diversion."

With a brief flash and sizzle, the detonator charge burst the lock. The cell swung open onto an empty, silent corridor of stone.

Han stepped cautiously past the threshold, looked both ways and gestured for Rian to stay put. On cat feet he reached the far end of the hallway, hugging the wall with his shoulders. He peered around the corner. Ducking back he beckoned to the girl to follow, and pointed her up the stairs on the left. Then he held up his right hand, the first two fingers crossed. With an elaborate wink he disappeared around the corner.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aboard the Millennium Falcon Chewie hunched over the board, head thrust forward straining his farseeing eyes to pierce the hazy distance between himself and the amorphous sprawl of Adrick-Er. The comms board was open on full-band reception in case his partner's signal should be auditory. He had grounded in a clearing on a thickly wooded bluff a half dozen kilometers from the city, and now he waited anxiously.

Above him on the hull, Randi and Ben Adrick sat together, probing the palace area with binoculars. Presently, Randi shifted restlessly and laid his glasses aside. "Uncle," he said, squinted up, frowning at the leaves that canopied the starship with sparkling gold. "Uncle, there is a thing I must do."

Ben interrupted his perusal of the city. He turned a worried face to the younger man at his side. "Intuition, son?" Randi nodded.

"There's something coming. I can feel it, and I must be ready. Do you understand?"

"No," Ben answered truthfully. "But I learned to trust your feelings." He raised the binoculars again. "Go on. We'll wait for the signal. And Randi..."

"Yes, Uncle?"

"Clear skies."

He nodded, spun on his heel and skipped away over the hull onto the starboard bow mandible then, dropping to swing between the two forward arms, vanished from view.

Ben continued to scan. Chewie monitored. They waited and worried.

\* \* \* \* \*

The single guard at the entrance to the computer area was already full of festival wine when Solo approached him, cloak over one arm.

"This where the Magician's Guild is meeting?" he asked.

"Huh? What magicians? You a magician?"

"Sure! Watch this!" Solo flourished the cloak, executed a rapid veronica and suddenly whipped it over the befuddled guard's head. He appropriated his laser-rifle and clipped him briskly alongside the head, all in an abrupt swirl of motion that ended with the guard's collapse on the floor.

Han dragged the body inside the computer room, stashing it behind a bank of units. Then he set to work.

Rian, meanwhile, had almost reached the tower's top and was despairing of finding the children when she heard the music -- a sad little wail of a baffle pipe. Young Ben's baffle pipe, the one he loved so much that he slept with it.

She held perfectly still, trying to locate the source of the plaintive melody. It led her further along the corridor to an unmarked door. Dropping to her knees she pressed her cheek against the lock with her lips near the keyhole. "Prince Ben," she whispered. The music stopped. Suddenly her heart leapt. What if there was a guard in there with them? Adrenaline coursing, she scarcely dared to move.

There was a rustle on the other side of the door. "Mummy? Is that you?" It was Hana.

"Darling, it's not Mummy. It's Rian. I'm here with Captain Solo and we're going to get you out and take you home to Mummy."

Hana started to cry. "I want to go home now."

"Ben," Rian whispered frantically, "make Hana stop crying. They'll hear you."

Then she heard the little boy saying, "Don't cry, Twink. Rian'll get us out. Here, you can play the baffle pipe..." and the sobs subsided into sniffles.

Huddled against the door Rian discovered that Twink wasn't the only one whose composure was slipping. She swiped angrily at the moisture under her eyes.

Pulling out the comlink she keyed it open and said in a rush, "I'm very near the top of the tower, outside the children's cell. They're all right for now, but this luck can't hold. There've got to be guards along soon. Han, where are you?"

About a meter behind you," said a voice over her shoulder. "Some commando you make. A herd of nugroots could've snuck up on you."

"Oh! Where have you been?"

"Me? Hanging out in the kitchen. Did you know that this place is fully automated? They've got an archaeologist's dream up here for a prison, and a slicker food prep setup than the Emperor himself."

As he spoke he shoved the laser rifle into Rian's arms and began compressing another detonator charge, fitting it into the keyhole. "Hey, you kids in there! Get away from the door! Move!"

He waited a moment then set the charge. The door jumped on its hinges and a wisp of smoke curled from the keyhole. The door swung outward.

"Fox! Fox!" chirped Hana, clapping her hands. Her face was dirty and tear-streaked, and she was still in a lacy night-shift. Han wondered angrily if they'd even bothered to feed them -- but she was smiling, and he was glad for that.

Rian was bending down, wiping Ben's smudged face with a corner of her torn sleeve, when they heard the sound they'd dreaded all along -- the tramp of booted feet further down the passage.

Grabbing the rifle, Solo gave Hana a gentle push in Rian's direction. "Double quick! Up the tower as far as you can get. Here," he flipped her the third detonator charge. "Whatever it takes, get to the roof."

"Roof?"

"Don't argue. Go!"

Half-leading, half-dragging the children, Rian hurried off in the direction of the stairs. Solo followed them for a few paces then ducked into the shadow of the stairwell.

The sound of the guards' approach grew louder. When he was certain they'd turned the corner onto his level, he swung out firing, raking the hallway with a burst of energy. Not waiting to assess the extent of the damage, he whirled and took the stairs two at a time. As he did so, answering fire splashed harmlessly off the stairwell beside him.

Sprinting, the agile pilot followed the zigzag course of the towers' access systems, turning every so often to lay down a field of fire obliging his pursuers to keep their heads down. In this manner he at last reached the top flight of stairs.

The door leading onto the roof was open. Rian and the children waited in the shadows just to the side of the sunny rectangle.

"Han!" she said nervously, "there's no way to secure it from the outside. I had to use the detonator to blow the lock."

"I'll take care of it. Get the kids over to those balloons."

Her eyes went wide. "You can't mean...?"

"Oh, yes, I can. You wanna fight your way back through the hospitality committee, go ahead, but me and the kids are gonna fly!"

"Oooo..." she began, then found she had nothing to say.

Solo kicked the door shut with a crash just as streaks of lase-fire came whistling up the stairs. He aimed several bursts directly at the locking mechanism and several more at the antiquated hinges on the opposite side, fusing what metal there was to the stone of the door jambs. It wouldn't hold them for long, but long enough, maybe...

The balloons were large white bulb-shaped bags swaying gently in the breeze and straining at their moorings. Beneath each was a telemetry unit guyed to the balloon's undercarriage by tough fabric webbing. Rian scrambled onto the telemetry box and Solo put Ben on her lap.

"Where's my daddy?" he wanted to know. The poor little guy was scared to death.

Han took a precious moment to reassure him. "You know that ship I came in with my hairy friend?" Young Ben nodded. "Well, your pop's in that ship right over there." Pointing to where he fervently hoped not only the Falcon and her temporary crew, but a fighting mad rebel army were in place. "And they're gonna come and save the day," he finished with more conviction than he felt.

He ruffled the Prince's hair, then faced Rian. The sounds of concentrated fire at the doorway were growing louder. "OK, it looks like we're gonna BE the attack signal, so hang on..." There was really nothing more to say.

Rian impulsively reached out and touched his cheek. "Good luck," she whispered. Solo nodded, hit the release and immediately the balloon began ascending, the wind tugging it out over the parapet and into the upper air.

"Now, Twink, it's just you and me," he told the little redhead. He swung her up onto a telemetry box, released the mooring line and jumped aboard as the balloon lurched upward. He put the girl between his knees, told her to hang on, and then he tangled his left arm in the fabric rigging. Just then the roof door gave way and guards tumbled out into the sunshine. Bracing the lase-rifle against his shoulder he fired down on them as the balloon cleared the roof and began to sail out over the city.

"Chewie!" Ben bellowed, "This is it!"

The Wookiee howled an affirmative as Ben clattered across the hull and dropped through the top hatch. In moments he was in the cockpit, manning the copilot's position while Chewie took the main controls. Chewie wuffed a question which Ben thought he understood.

"Yeah, I fly better than I used to. Took a lesson or two."

The Wookiee shook his head, and raised ship while Ben hailed his field commanders and gave the order to attack.

The balloons were high above Adrick-Er, moving slowly toward the hills when Solo's gamble in the computer room paid off. An enormous explosion burst open an entire quarter section of the east palace wing at ground level, smoke and flame belching up from subterranean depths. He jammed the laser rifle into the webbing and used his right arm to hold the little girl close to his chest, shielding her from the heat and wind of the updraft. "It's OK, kid. It'll be OK," he repeated. Twink seemed impervious to further shock. She knotted her fists in his shirt front and shut her eyes.

With the Millennium Falcon setting the pace, Adrick's rebel air force began to fill the skies to the south. From his vantage point Solo could make out the massed ground effect armored vehicles and troop carriers emerge from the woods and begin converging on the city, long range missiles coruscating before them. It held his attention so that at first he didn't hear the aircraft approaching from the north. Then it was too late.

Someone in the palace had scrambled a squadron of fighters and they bore down on the balloon riders with furious speed. Solo fumbled for the laser-rifle, realizing how futile a gesture it was, but determined to go out armed. Twink clung to him like a leech.

He shouted to warn Rian, but the explosions from below and the roar of the incoming slant wings overpowered his voice.

Rian herself was screaming, not daring to let go long enough to point, but watching some by-play off to the left with either great fear or excitement. Solo twisted around to follow her riveted gaze and saw a sleek scout ship appear out of nowhere, needle-nosed and shining in the late afternoon sun, and at the same moment some trick of the wind shift brought Rian's voice clearly to him. "Randi! Randi!" she cried, and as though her voice could reach the pilot as well, the scout ship opened up against the slant wings with an awesome arsenal of firepower.

He engaged the entire squadron in the most daring and wildly acrobatic display Han had ever witnessed. Despite the danger, he watched with admiration as the blond youth threw his flashing scout ship into maneuvers worthy of Han himself: attacking, evading, scoring and darting away only to return at once with another well-placed fire barrage.

One of the scout ships broke off suddenly and circled for a shot at Rian's balloon. Randi saw the action and pulled his ship into a vertical mode, firing directly at the small ship's unshielded exhaust port. He scored but not before the slant wing had torn a projectile hole in the balloon. It began to collapse, losing altitude fast.

At once the scout ship dove to follow it, and Solo wondered uncomprehendingly what the crazy kid thought he could do.

The scout's pilot matched descent speed with the balloon, his ship at right angles to it, then -- and Han shouted in appreciation for his next maneuver -- he flew his ship into the gaping rent in the balloon's side. Piloting on instruments, he vectored south, towing the wounded craft with him. And Han could see Rian, clutching the little boy with one arm, hanging onto the rigging with the other and looking up at the belly of Randi's ship with the most joyous expression he had ever seen.

Still, things might have gone worse had not the Millennium Falcon appeared, with several smaller ships in her wake, and sent the remaining slant-wings off in a more profitable direction, into the heart of the furious battle going on over the palace.

Solo felt the sudden tug as Chewie engaged a cargo tractor on their telemetry box. Then he shot out the balloon above them to cut drag and, locked together, the big freighter and the very small passenger platform followed Randi's ship.

Solo patted the little girl's head. "It's OK, now, Twink. Your dad's here. Hey! You held on real good!"

Hana opened her eyes, blinked, then snuggled back against the pilot's chest.

Wind whipped tears into their eyes as they sailed in the Falcon's wake toward the russet hills to the south, leaving the battle far behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

The heroes' welcome following the battle of the escarpment couldn't have held a hand-flash to the one in celebration of the taking of Adrick-Er.

With a brief setdown in a quiet field outside the city to take passengers aboard, the Millennium Falcon and Randi's scout ship, Madrigal, had flown directly to Sentinel South. Here Ben remained in long distance communication with his rebel generals who were overseeing the mopping-up chores in the capital city.

Seeing which way the wind was blowing, the TREC troops, with no particular love for M'Zeel, had retreated in their big interstellar ships aiding neither the Yaniwanes loyal to M'Zeel nor the rebels, in effect fastidiously washing their hands of the whole affair.

Most of M'Zeel's minions had given up: the ones celebrating festival in the palace when they found themselves both outmanned and outgunned and their stronghold exploding beneath them, and the outcountry followers as soon as news of the crushing defeat reached them at their estates.

There was little left for the rebel soldiery to do but to station guards to prevent looting, and inform the populace who was now in charge. That he was the rightful heir to the throne, and victor as well, delighted them greatly and the mayor of Adrick-Er proclaimed a two-day extension of the festival. Except for enthusiastic carousing, things pretty much came to a halt in that part of Yaniwess for a standard week.

Han, Chewie, Trella and the twins were relaxing in an apartment just off the communications center, from which Ben's voice carried every so often. Rian and Randi were nowhere to be found, and Han wished them well. The kid had style all right. Han couldn't imagine a better way to repay a life debt and win a lady's hand at the same time. It pleased him to think of Rian helplessly smitten with the dashing Randi Adrick. Women *should* be smitten, and if not with him -- well, Randi would do.

"Oh, yeah? ... Right, I'll tell him." Ben left the console to a lieutenant and strode into the room, stretching and yawning happily. "What a day, Han, what a day." He dropped into a lounge and was immediately covered by wriggling children.

The moment was very mellow.

Chewie growled a query at his partner. "The explosion? Oh, that... I figured they'd be throwing a big party, and the kitchen's all controlled by computer, so I just made a little change in the program for the banquet, that's all."

"And the change was...?" asked Trella, who knew how Solo loved to play out his jokes, especially the really bad ones.

He smiled beatifically. "Number of guests. I told it to fix a sit-down for five million."

"Well," Ben said over the groans, "that explains what happened to M'Zeel. I suppose you ought to know...you took her out, my friend."

Han was not about to lose sleep over it, but he gave Ben a mildly inquiring look. "Yes," Ben continued. "You see, she was engaged in her favorite sport at the time of the explosion."

"So what? I didn't blow up the jetball courts, I blew up the kitchen. What's her favorite sport?"

"Eating."

More groans.

"Han," said Ben, cradling a now-sleeping twin in each arm, "I said it before, and I'll say it again. I owe you. I'm King of Yaniwess. Got a TREC board chair. My kids are safe. What can I give you? I feel expansive. How about an earldom? Would you fancy a viceroyship? Name it!"

"Not on your life, dustbuster! I've had enough of royalty to last me forever." Han laughed lazily. "Twink there's as close to a princess as I ever want to get. No titles... How about the key to the TREC Control executive washroom?"

"Han, be serious!" said Trella.

Solo turned slowly, looking Trella up and down with an expression of exaggerated incredulity. She subsided, muttering, "I guess that was a stupid thing to say...."

Satisfied that the Queen of Yaniwess was thoroughly chastened, the Falcon's master returned to a leisurely communion with his Mancet brandy.

END

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