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Up the Wazoo  
by Martie Benedict O'Brien

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"Backwater planet," Han Solo muttered. The object of his disdain was the view from the Millennium Falcon's cockpit: a moisture-drenched rectangle of cracking allocrete that served as a landing area. At its perimeter, he could just make out a sketch of urban dwellings before the omnipresent forest rose again into unguessed distances. The city of Caxaban, the world of Zadduc.

Backwater planets were not exactly a novelty in Captain Solo's experience. Freightng cargo, and occasionally smuggling it, on the fringes of the galaxy's restrictively governed sun systems had carried him more often than not to peripheral worlds where the cargo might be negligible by cosmopolitan standards but where the shadow of official scrutiny was refreshingly absent.

And the cargo, he reflected. At present, the cargo was sitting directly behind his Wookiee co-pilot in the person of one Hapthir, who had introduced himself as the ruler of a modest realm on the damp and unappetizing planet visible from the Falcon's cockpit. Exiled ruler, Solo amended, but ready to go home. At least that's what Hapthir had maintained back on Deveena where the ruler had engaged a starship for the homeward journey.

Han might have wondered why a king returning to his ancestral holding would hire a modest freight hauler to get him there, but the money had been so right that the Corellian could only nod enthusiastically and pocket the gratifyingly substantial stack of credits.

And now, he thought, I've earned them. Solo slapped at the remaining shut-down switch, then turned to his passenger. "Your Highness," he said with slightly mocking formality, "Welcome home."

Hapthir smiled, the same bland, inscrutable expression he had worn throughout the trip's short duration. On his round, small featured face framed with a

headdress of color and style, it appeared complacent and unthreatening, yet Solo felt a little twist of misgiving. The exiled king added a solemn nod to his smile. "Almost home," he amended.

Solo frowned. "Almost? Unless I really fouled up my calculations, we're at the only spaceport on Zadduc."

"Ah, yes," Hapthir agreed. "But in our contract, you see..." With a clink of wrist-rings, he gestured toward Solo's vest pocket.

The captain's frown deepened. He dug into the indicated pocket and pulled out the contract card he and the exiled ruler had formalized at the vending machine back on Deveena no more than an evening ago.

The Wookiee, sensing a possible problem coming up, growled a query.

"Don't know," his partner replied. "The contract's just a standard, says ... ah ... 'Safe passage and escort to his home on Zadduc.' That's what I signed on for, Your Highness," Solo looked up, "and as far as I can see, we're here."

"It is true that we are on Zadduc," Hapthir allowed, "however, I am not yet home."

"And just where is home?" That twist of misgiving tightened and Solo readied himself to be very stubborn.

Hapthir, still smiling, put up a placatory, and jangly, hand and shook his head, a mild admonishment. "My home is in Placea, the traditional dwelling place of the rulers of my land," he explained.

"And you can't get a ride from here to there?"

"That is not the point, Captain. The point is that you agreed to provide me with safe passage and escort to my home. And I am not yet home."

Han was beginning to understand why Hapthir had bypassed the commercial passenger liners and opted for an independent freighter. Independents were usually hungry enough to overlook possible imbroglios like this one was threatening to turn into, and see only the money. Like I did.

He made, however, a final attempt. "The contract wording's just standard. No one takes that literally," he said dismissively. Then, struck by a sudden thought, "Besides, as far as my charts show, this is the only spaceport on Zadduc. It's here or nothing." Satisfied he'd made his point, Han started to rise and head for the hatch, eager to escort his passenger, not home, but simply out.

Hapthir raised both hands this time, a cacophony. "The letter of the contract Captain. I insist. But..." he added to the narrowing of Solo's eyes, "I will offer to increase your transport fee by half." The smile became something closer to a grin and he rested his hands in his lap, even more satisfied than the Corellian had been a moment before.

"By half, huh?"

"By half. I shall give you the money now, if you wish, so long as you agree to honor the letter of the contract."

Han settled back into his pilot's seat. "Where, exactly, is this Placea?"

"A day's journey, no further. But one must travel by river and I require assistance. I am not so young a man as you," he pointed out.

Solo sighed mentally. From a technical standpoint, Hapthir had him on the letter of the contract thing. Though he was not above a bit of chicanery from time to time and routinely freighted proscribed cargo for profit, it was a point of pride with the Corellian that he deal in a scrupulously ethical fashion with paying customers. And there was the matter of the extra money as well as generous gesture. Hell the old boy probably could use a hand. Still....

"Up the river?" You sure there's nowhere I could set the Falcon down in this Placea?"

"I am afraid not Captain. It is the forest, you see. Very thick. And Placea is a place of great tradition, heritage. There are no ... ah ... modern implementations, such as here in Caxaban."

Solo looked out at the crumbling landing zone and antiquated city surrounding it, all equally deluged and seeming to warp visibly beneath the unrelenting downpour. If this dismal spot had what Hapthir regarded as 'modern implementations', then Placea, he decided, had to be a real treat.

He sighed, this time aloud, glanced in Chewbacca's direction. "You stay with the Falcon while I see His Highness home, okay?"

The Wookiee shrugged. He had a good book on the computer, it was all the same to him.

"Well," he turned back to Hapthir, summoning what optimism he could, "I guess we can head up the river then."

"Excellent, excellent," said His Highness, nodding happily. He withdrew the agreed-upon sum from his ornately decorated shoulder bag and handed it over. As Solo pocketed the extra cash, the king humming to himself made his way out of the cockpit.

Solo started to follow him then leaned back in and cautioned the Wookiee, "Don't get too comfortable, Chewie. I'll be back in a turn or two." He gestured at the Wookiee's console. "Keep the comline open. Let me know if we get any interesting incoming. You find anyone around here you can talk to," he gestured out at the primitive spaceport, "see if you can line up a consignment. I want to get off this ball of mild and get back to some real work."

The Wookiee concurred. Solo sketched a salute and headed back toward the main hatch, his right hand casually resting on the grip of his blaster. Going up the river, he thought like a line from a song, and wonder for the first time, exactly how that journey was going to be made.

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"By tow-boat, Captain," Hapthir explained. The captain and his passenger stood among a heterogeneous sprawl of cargo containers, lading sleds, and pallets piled with bales, stacks and baskets full of commercial goods crowding the Caxaban waterfront.

The rain had let up for the moment, tapering off to a warm drizzle. The omnipresent cloud cover began to break up into ragged gray patches and Han could see the river, thickly afloat with watercraft, flowing past them at a respectable pace. He looked in the opposite direction, upriver, where they were bound, and wondered what a tow-boat might be. Han could see, in the growing light a fair expanse of water, brownish choppy and wide enough to be a busy commercial thoroughfare. Hapthir was gazing at it with fondness, perpetual smile touched with nostalgia.

"The Wazoo," he said softly. Solo turned, regarding the shorter man frankly. "What?" he asked.

"The Wazoo," the king repeated, "the great river of my land. Its headwaters are in the high country beyond Placea."

Solo looked without much favor at the thick forest lining the river on both banks, giving way grudgingly to the low warehouses, narrow alleys, and quayside activity. "You haven't told me yet how we're going to get there."

"By tow-boat as I said before. Come." And Hapthir, shouldering his embroidered and fringed carryall headed up the wharf, bright caftan swirling in his wake and Han, bored and impatient but resigned, followed.

"What's a tow-boat?" he asked, but the little Placean appeared not to hear him and hurried on ahead.

They had not gone a dozen paces when there was a commotion off to their right; voices were raised and there was a flurry of activity among the piles of cargo. Hapthir strode on seemingly oblivious, but Han could see that, whatever the commotion was, it was heading their way. Instinctively, he sidestepped and swung in front of the little king, putting out a warding arm.

"Hold up, Hapthir," he cautioned. As he did so, several figures broke from the general confusion and dashed along the wharf toward the Corellian and his charge.

Females, their colorful garments billowing and long, dark hair flying behind them, came dashing on bare feet. To Han's growing amazement, the target of their furious charge appeared to be the Placean king cowering behind him. The women shouted in a high alien tongue; their leader brandished a long, curved blade. The sight of the knife abruptly changed Solo from puzzled observer to active participant. He drew his sidearm, still holding Hapthir back with his left hand, and thumbed up stun force.

The women were almost on them. The Corellian raised the Kletts-Rushak, irresolute. The idea of firing on small indigenous females was not at all to his liking, but at that moment their leader seemed at last to realize that the king was not alone. She skidded to a halt, eyeing the drawn blaster, then raised her gaze to Han's. Tallest of the group of seven, which put her at Solo's shoulder height, she was singularly unattractive, even by local standards, and her disagreeable aggressiveness minimized any redeeming quality she might have had by virtue of her sex alone. She looked at the Corellian for a smoldering second, then her followers crowded into her from behind, and the woman staggered forward.

Watching her carefully, his deep set eyes never leaving her face, Han sensed in her expression the withdrawal of immediate threat. He relaxed slightly, but kept his weapon trained at her waist. He could feel Hapthir trembling behind his back.

The woman took a deep breath. With a quick movement, she secreted the knife in the folds of her gown, tossed her hair back defiantly and, ignoring Solo, spoke in the alien language around his shoulder to Hapthir. Though unacquainted with the dialect Han would have bet not a few credits that the tone of her remarks was on the order of you 'win this one, but next time ....'

Having finished with the king, she looked at Solo again and, switching to Standard said quite clearly, "Pig bastard." Then she pirouetted, bare feet on damp planking, and stalked back the way she'd come, her entourage falling in behind her, one or two of them casting dark glances over their shoulders as they retreated, frustrated for the moment but obviously undefeated.

Han holstered his sidearm, looking around in such a way that the gawkers who had stopped to witness the confrontation quickly ducked their heads and went about their business. Hapthir ventured out from behind the Corellian, his countenance -- and it was a first in Han's experience -- entirely devoid of the little smile.

Solo watched the women until they disappeared into the general confusion of the crowd, then turned to Hapthir. "What the hell was that?" he wanted to know.

Hapthir spread his hands eloquently. "I've no idea, Captain!" He straightened his caftan, smoothing it with little, futile gestures.

"You were in exile, Hapthir, remember?" While he still intended to honor the letter of his contract, Solo was beginning to suspect that his agitated passenger knew a good deal more than he was admitting to, and self-interest dictated an immediate and indepth reappraisal of the situation.

"Indeed I was in exile. There were, you see, some rebellious elements," the king replied, looking anywhere but at the Corellian, "and my Vice Regent and I concurred that a short absence might be advisable. However, my informants have assured me that the, er, insurgency has been quelled and that I am returning to a kingdom both peaceful and secure."

"Those fems didn't look very peaceful."

"Perhaps they confused me with someone else," the king said hopefully-Han kept his opinion about that supposition to himself He looked around the wharf once more, wondering if the recent skirmish would prove to be an isolated event, or, annoyingly, set the pattern for the journey up river. He shook his head and decided that more than usual caution would be in order. He turned back to the king. "Better get that tow-boat," he said.

They continued up the wharf, Han on the alert for any threat, but without further incident they arrived at the tow-board mooring. Here, Hapthir set about bargaining for a boat while Han took the opportunity to look the craft over at close range. Perhaps a dozen were moored in a line beside the low quay, hawsers threaded through metal rings set into its planking. Made of native materials, rather than synthetics, they looked rustic but durable. He chose the nearest for closer scrutiny - a curve-sided vessel sitting low in the water, protected marginally from the elements by a thatched canopy. Beneath the canopy were several cushioned seats and room for cargo. His attention was drawn to the tow fines twisted around a metal cylinder, or capstan, at the prow. They looked to be plaited of natural fibers, their unsecured length trailing down into the water. Here, somewhat upriver from the brisk activity nearer the city,

the water was less murky and Solo could see them dangling some distance below the surface. He looked closer. Something was moving in the water. The tow lines stirred as though with the motion of the current. Suddenly the river's surface exploded with spray and something large broke the surface with a sound like a giant sneeze.

Han jumped back, his blaster out and aimed in the time it took for the spray to whip across the toes of his boots. Half expecting another contingent of crazed females, he looked wide-eyed at the churning waters.

There was a cry of dismay from the tow-boat vendor and at the same time Han felt Hapthir's fingers close on his wrist. "Do not shoot!" he warned. "It is only one of the Gaacos, the waterpeople, who tow the boats!"

"What the hell ... ?" Solo said softly, staring with frank astonishment at the creature emerging from the river. It was something wholly beyond his experience. A squat, broad head with the usual number of humanoid features, sat solidly upon substantial shoulders from which two sinewy appendages, which he supposed would do for arms, extended up onto the quay. The arms terminated in hands, long-fingered and webbed out to the first knuckle. They slapped the boards in a watery rhythm and the creature said, "Je-neek! It quit rainin' yet?" The absence of any neck made it apparently impossible to turn its head, so its entire upper body swivelled as it craned around curiously to see the sky. "Guess so," it answered its own question. Then, seeing Han, "Howdy! You gonna go boatin'?"

Han dropped his blaster back into the holster, put hands on hips and regarded the creature with a combination of amusement and disbelief. "Yeah," he said after a minute, "I'm gonna go boatin'. You gonna tow the boat?"

"Jee-neek! Tow the boat I am!" the Gaacos declared. Its outsized paddle-hands splashed noisily on the planking and it grinned, an exaggerated but friendly look. Without preamble it continued, "Been down doin' breath-holdin'. Got good lungs, me," it boasted. And grabbing a huge mouthful of air, the Gaacos disappeared beneath the river's surface.

Han smiled slightly, reminded of a big, friendly but not overly bright child.

"The Gaacos," said Hapthir, "are most adept swimmers."

"But a little slow on the uptake," the boat vendor supplied. "One does not attempt to discuss matters of a philosophical nature with them, but they can comprehend and obey simple instructions."

"And one of them can tow that loaded boat upstream?" Solo was skeptical.

"Certainly, and if it tires, there is always another. The gods must love Gaacos," he said as if quoting a local aphorism "they surely make a lot of them."

Solo nodded absently, trying to envision a day's journey upstream in a primitive boat towed by Gaacos. He couldn't.

"Your boat is ready, sirs," said the vendor and he indicated a large, brightly painted vessel several sips upriver.

On a whim Solo said, "What about this one here?"

"The other is more comfortable," Hapthir objected.

"Hell, Your Highness, it's only a day trip. Besides, I like this Gaacos."

"Like a Gaacos?" Hapthir was nonplused.

Han grinned as the natural stubbornness he'd overridden back at the ship returned, demanding that, if nothing else on this trip, he get the Gaacos of his choice. And as if summoned, the swimmer reappeared, with another splash and sneeze, out of the river depths. "That's the one," Han told the vendor.

If Hapthir thought of protesting one look at the Corellian's genial but steady gaze made him think better of it. He smiled politely and with a regal wave of his jangly hand, invited Solo to take whatever boat took his fancy.

"We going' now?" inquired the Gaacos, propped once more on the quay.

Ignoring the question for the moment, Han asked his own. "You swim pretty fast up-stream?"

"Swim faster down." The Gaacos rolled big green eyes in appreciation of its humor. Solo chuckled. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Paj, I am."

"I'm Solo," he told the swimmer. He grasped an upright at the head of the boarding ramp and swung down into the boat, planted his feet against the sudden dip and sway. He caught the king's colorful carryall and tossed it beneath one of the seats, then helped the Placean down into the craft where he settled onto the best-padded of the benches, grumbling quietly.

Solo ignored him. He caught the mooring line tossed him by the vendor, coiled and stowed it, then leaned over the bow. "Any time you're ready, Paj," he said to the Gaacos. "Want to get to Placea quick as we can, okay?"

"Straight on, boss!" Paj called back. It submerged and came up immediately, its broad shoulders now ensnared in a harness to which the tow ropes were attached. Legs spread for balance, Solo braced himself against the prow and watched in fascination as Paj turned the boat away from the dock and drew it out into the current. Head held up out of the stream and arms working in a powerful breast stroke, the Gaacos straightened their course. It hesitated for a moment and the boat began to drift, then with a suddenness that took Han completely by surprise, and a force that dazzled him, Paj took a deep breath, ducked his head, kicked out with great webbed feet, and sent the boat coursing upstream against the current.

It was a ride of a sort Solo had never imagined, no smooth passage up the river, this. They proceeded in a series of surges, to the cadence of Paj's occasional gasping breaths, that were at first unsealing, but once the Corellian got the feel of the swimmer's rhythm he felt a curious exhilaration in the unconventional ride. So much so that he failed to notice a second boat pull out into the current a quarter mile behind theirs, and the little rain of arrows that pattered down in its wake.

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"We missed the boat, Jellica," said one of the women, lowering her slender bow and sighing in disgust.

The taller woman nodded, her narrowing eyes watching the retreating skiff. "It is no matter," said at last. "We require his surrender., not his life. Unless, of course, he refuses to surrender. Then," and she looked around at her companions with an upturned palm, "then, honor must be satisfied all 'round."

As the Gaacos pulled their craft in pursuit the women, with practiced dexterity, swayed to the surging rhythm. They nodded quietly, eyes down.

"But what about the tall outworlder?" one of them ventured.

Jellica smiled slightly. "We will deal with the outworlder as circumstances dictate we must. Either he will be useful to us, or we kill him, is that understood?" There was murmured assent. "And now we must implement the next stage of the plan." She turned to the prow and tugged at the towing lines. Immediately the skiffs progress slowed as the Gaacos propelling it came up for instructions.

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"Captain?" Hapthir stiffed on the bench where he had achieved a semi-reclining position in order to doze. "Captain, have I been asleep long?" Han yawned and stretched. Prepared to defend the king against combative females, and alert to whatever alien dangers the river might provide, he had been gratified to find the biggest danger so far had been that of falling asleep himself, and had been on the point of drowsing when he heard Hapthir's summons. He leaned back to check the sun which still shone fitfully between drifting cloud layers, and replied, "Not long. Looks to be mid-afternoon maybe."

All around them, the forest had reclaimed the land- not even the small clusters of huts they'd seen for several miles after leaving the Caxaban waterfront displaced the towering walls of green that now rose on either side of the Wazoo. The river moved like a big, brown serpent in their shadow. Occasionally, other tow-boats passed them heading downstream. Han stood up and went to peer over the prow. "Damn," he said admiringly. Paj was still pulling them upriver with the same sliding stroke and thrusting luck.

"I would like to take a break now, if you please," Hapthir said, standing and stretching in turn. "If you will be so good as to speak to the Gaacos?"

"Sure. Anything special I tell him?"

"Just to find us a place to stop."

Solo nodded, tugged on the tow lines. At once the Gaacos slowed and drifted back to the skiff's hull its paddle-like feet treading water and holding them in place.

"Hey, boss," he said, and to Han's surprise it wasn't even breathing hard.

"Pull us in to the bank, will you. King needs a little break."

"Got to drain the ol' isquismal eh?" Paj grinned. "Sure, boss. Good little beachy spot 'round next bend." The Gaacos ducked back into the water and off they went again.

A click later Paj pulled the tow-boat into a small cove protected from the current by a tumble of logs that lay far out from the bank, testimony to the violence of seasonal flooding. In the cove, however, the water was calm and, when Paj had pulled the skiff close to the grassy bank, Han splashed out into the shallows with the mooring ropes and secured them to an out-stretched root that forked down into the water. Then he helped Hapthir disembark, a complex task as it turned out, for the little king fretted, unnecessarily Han thought, about getting his garments wet. At last, however, they were on dry land and the Placean scurried off into the dense underbrush.

"Mind if I unhook for a minute, boss?" Paj asked from where it was basking in the shallows.

"Huh? Sure, sure, make yourself comfortable."

"You pretty good boss," it said, shucking the harness and emerging from the water. Six foot, maybe, Solo thought, and a uniform grey-green from the hairless head to the webbed paddle-feet, the Gaacos was a curious but not threatening figure. Amphibinoid. Its only garment was a belt from which was suspended a small pouch that might have contained personal items. If the species had any sexual differentiation, it wasn't evident at a quick glance, and Solo had no wish to gawk. The swimmer stretched its arms wide, as though to relieve tension in those broad shoulders.

"You hungry, Paj?" Han asked it. He was rummaging around in Hapthir's carry-all into which they'd thoughtfully put a few provisions for the trip.

"No, boss," the Gaacos replied. "Been eatin' my way upriver." It grinned. "Fish good this time of year."

Han snagged himself a package of quick-dried fruit. "Do all your people tow boats?"

"Some. Most hang in the river and eat. Me, I work. Paj work. Gonna buy boat one day. Be own boss."

Han nodded. "Sounds good to me." He thought about how his life had changed when, years back, he'd gotten a ship of his own. Nothing like being your own boss, he privately agreed. Restless, he paced back and forth across the narrow strip of earth between river and forest. How the hell much business did Hapthir have in the woods, anyway? Get to Placea, deliver the king, be gone. The delay was starting to gnaw at him, and he chided himself for impatience. A moment later, he realized the source of the irritation - intuition was stirring up his nerves, something was going to happen very soon. Or had already.

Abruptly, Solo turned on his heel. "I'm going after him," he called over his shoulder. "Wait here for me." Four long strides took him into the deep tree-shadow. "Hapthir!" he called.

Nothing replied but an alien bird. "Hapthir!" he tried again, louder. He moved off in the direction he'd seen the Placean go, looking for any sign of the king. He knelt, removed a small shred of brightly colored cloth from a spiny bit of under-growth. He stood, eyes trying to pierce the ever-present gloom beneath the forest canopy, and if his nerves had been uneasy before, they were raging now. Which way to go? Solo drew his blaster.

Suddenly Paj shouted from the riverbank. "Boss! Boss! Come quick!"

Han swung around and ran back toward the clearing. He came out of dark shade and splashed to a halt in the gravelly shallows. Fifty yards out into the water, a canopied skiff was moving swiftly downstream. He could see the taut towlines as the Gaacos raced ahead of it, and, aboard, the flash and swirl of gaudy garments that immediately brought to mind the angry women on the docks; in their midst, his headdress making identification positive, was Hapthir.

"ON shit," Han muttered. Instinctively he aimed his blaster, couldn't think of what or whom, to shoot, and dropped it back into its holster. "Gear up!" he commanded the swimmer and while Paj hustled into its harness, Solo loosed the hawser and tossed it over the gunnel then caught a canopy support and pulled himself aboard (the boat. "You said you could swim fast downstream, pal. Well, do it now! Get us level with them!")

"Jee-neek!" the Gaacos replied. "Straight on boss!" Plunging into the current, Paj hauled the boat around and headed downstream, bettering the current's speed as he strove to catch up to the fleeing skiff.

Wasn't kidding, Han thought marveling at their pace. More quickly than he could have hoped they gained on the women and the captured king. Solo fished around on his gunbelt and came up with a spool of filament attached to a little grappling claw. As they drew nearer, he hefted it experimentally, remembering the feel of its weight then began to swing it in a widening arc. Paj was coming even with the stem of their skiff when the women became aware they were being pursued. They screamed and pointed, and the tall one pushed her way to the back, shaking a fist at Solo. "Go away!" she yelled. "He is ours. You have no business here!"

"I got business," Solo said, more to himself than to the woman. He leaned across the gunnel and flung the grappling hook out over the water. It sailed high, then dropped neatly onto the thatched roof where it dug into the thick vegetable matting. Solo whipped the other end around the hawser pin, then unholstered his blaster. He sighted carefully against the rhythmic pulling motion of Paj's stroke and fired.

The lines connecting the women's boat to their Gaacos flared briefly, then parted. Startled, the swimmer popped his head out of the water further downstream, looking around for his missing boat.

"Hold it, Paj; hold us right here," Solo called and both boats came to a n@lling, drifting halt in midstream. The Corellian leveled his blaster at the group in the opposite boat. "Hand him over," he said. At the same time, he

thumbed a tiny lever on the grappling spool and, like a miniature winch, it began to reel in the women's boat.

"He is ours," Jellica insisted.

"The man's paying me to see him safe to his home, ladies. That's what I'm gonna do."

"We will kill him first!" she threatened, and pulled the curved blade again, making a choppy stabbing gesture in Hapthir's direction.

Han cursed softly. "I was afraid you'd say that," he sighed. Reset for stun and wide dispersal, the blaster pulsed with another sort of energy, and everyone aboard the women's skiff dropped, quite gracefully, Han noted, to the decking. He put his gun up, and, balancing carefully, stepped into the second skiff, which now bobbed in the water and butted hulls with theirs.

Hapthir had landed comfortably enough atop one of the better endowed women. Han lifted the much smaller man, kneeling to hoist him over a shoulder, then made his way back to their boat and settled the king onto his accustomed couch. He moved another lever on the grappling spool and the claw retracted, backing out of the nest it had made for itself on the other boat's canopy; it was tumbling toward the water when the winch sucked it back up to the spool. Han smiled briefly at the tiny appliance.

Small wonders, he thought, hooking it back on his belt. He watched for a minute as the skiff drifted past them on the current heading, he judged for a rendezvous with the river's north bank. Han could see the Gaacos, with no one to give it orders, swimming slowly at the skiff's side; he didn't expect to see the women again and was grateful.

The Corellian checked the sky and was annoyed to note that Zadducan day was quickly giving way to dusk. So it wasn't going to be a day's-trip after all. He went to the bow and spoke to Paj. "You good for a few more clicks up-stream?" he inquired.

The Gaacos grinned. "Sure, boss. But.." and its expression became sober. "I don't swim after dark, okay?"

"Can't see so good in the dark, huh?"

"See good. It the frogs. Big fuggers, them. Come into river when sun go down. Make a Paj-pie outta this swimmer."

Han had never seen a frog that could intimidate anything man-sized, but then, he reasoned, he hadn't seen it all yet. "Okay, Paj, go as far as you can, then pull us over onto the southbank and we'll camp. How's that?"

"Okay, boss," the swimmer said, and Han heard, finally a note of weariness creep into his voice. The Gaacos turned and began to tow them up the river once more.

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The western sky, what could be seen of it past the trees, was still glowing but stars were visible in the east behind them when Paj drew the skiff up onto a sandy shoal and worked its way out of the harness. Han tied the boat up, then lifted the still-sleeping king out and deposited him among the tree roots.

"Paj gonna sleep now," the Gaacos announced, and without any further ado it curled up beneath some bushes growing well back from the waterside.

Left alone in the dark, Han stood a moment, feeling and relishing the solitude and quiet. Well, relative quiet, he amended. The riparian night sounds were growing in volume as the daylight faded. He thought a minute, then mind made up, he activated his comlink. "Chewie?" He spoke softly so as not to disturb his companions. There was only silence on the other end. He tried again, louder. "Chewie, talk to me." Persistent silence. The furball was probably in the galley. Where else, at dinner time? Solo switched to message relay. "Chewie, we got a couple of problems up at this end. I want you to take the Falcon and follow the river west. You'll see us. I'm gonna set up some rhodium fight to guide you in. You won't be able to land, but you can tractor us on board. I want to get off this friggin' river." He shut down the link and got busy with the small rhodium illuminator he carried on his belt.

There was a circle of soft light on the shoal when Hapthir's came around and asked, predictably, "Where am I?"

Han moved to help the Placean to a sitting position. "Still on the river. Let me give you a hand," he said.

Hapthir sat up with Solo's help, adjusting his headdress and patted down the folds in his caftan. "What happened?" he wanted to know.

"The women had you, remember? When I caught up, I hit all of you with a stun. You've been asleep since then. You work off a mm pretty slow, Hapthir, you know that?"

"Not really, never having been stunned before."

"Sony, Your Highness, but it was that or let the ladies have you." Han grinned. "Cheer up, Hapthir, the women are way the hell down-rive. You want some dinner?" Solo handed him a packet of quick-dried fruit and tore into a second for himself.

"The women, yes..." Hapthir took a deep breath, sighed. He began to fumble with the fruitpack.

Han gave him a sidelong glance. "You want to explain about those women now?"

"I had rather hoped they'd given up," the king said. "My informants assured me that they were no longer in the area, that it was perfectly safe for me to return home."

"Your informants were kind of optimistic," Han said dryly, then asked, "Who are those women, anyway? What do they want with you?"

Hapthir looked embarrassed. He cleared his throat. "They are ... ah ... they are my wives," he said quietly.

That raised Solo's eyebrows. He turned to look at the king directly. "And they want to kill you?"

"Well, no, although that is an alternative that will probably occur to them. What they want," and he made an impatient gesture, "what they want is to, er, be deflowered, to put it baldly."

Han nearly laughed. "So, what's the problem?"

Hapthir smiled his bland smile, shrugged. "Captain, it is SUCH a task." And finally it sank in: the flowing caftan, the bracelets, the airy gestures.

"oh," Han said, and snuck a glance skyward, composing his features into a semblance of sobriety, although the urge to guffaw was near irresistible.

"You are wondering why I have seven wives I don't want even one, correct?"

"The thought had occurred to me."

"Custom demands I have so many. Their honor demands defloweration." He put out both hands palm up. "A knotty problem indeed."

Han looked away grinning into the darkness, shaking his head in appreciation for the absurd subtleties of convention. Well, very soon it would longer be his problem at all. Chewie would on the way, and Hapthir would be home. Even@the Falcon couldn't land in Placea, they could tractor the king down onto his castle

rooftop, or whatever. He chided himself for not having thought of the alternative earlier and saved himself the trouble of the river journey. Hapthir dealt with his nagging wives something Solo had no desire to discover. There was the matter of the Gaacos, however. "Hapthir," he said nodding toward sleeping swimmer, "do they always just pass like that?"

"It is their circadian hiatus, yes," the king replied. "They come out of the water at dusk, sleep and go back at dawn. During the dark hours, the frogs rule the waters."

"Then it won't wake up if we leave?"

"No, but how can we leave without it to tow the boat?"

"I made some other arrangements while were asleep," Han told him. He stood up, dug a roll of red credits from a vest and counted out what seemed to him a suitable tip for the Gaacos' efforts. He placed the roll of slips in Paj's belt pouch. Get yourself that boat, pal. Be your own boss, he told the sleeping figure. He returned and dropped to sit cross-legged next to the king. "I called my partner to come pick us up," he explained. "He'll find us by the heat from the rhodium flash, and then we'll ..."

Shrieking, the women leaped out of the forest darkness into the circle of light, blades flashing, and before Solo could draw his blaster, they were on him. It was a short, nasty little tussle that ended with the Corellian, bound hands behind his back and minus his sidearm, wishing his nature permitted him the luxury of using his fists on females.

Jellica held the Kletts-Rushak awkwardly, but dangerously set to ka pointed in the general direction of his belt buckle. "I told you twice to stay out of this, outworlder," she hissed. "Now you must answer to me, Jellica, the First Among the Queens."

Han thought frivolously that that title belonged more rightfully to Hapthir, but he said nothing and instead kept a wary eye on the muzzle of the gun. "You want to point that thing somewhere else," he told the woman. Behind him, Hapthir, again a prisoner, spoke in an alien tongue and, as she listened Jellica's expression slowly changed from one of hard-eyed anger to something more like speculation. She replied in the same language, then turned hell attention back to Solo. "We will spare your life for the time being" she said and stuck the blaster into her waist sash. "But now we go to Placea. There is a forest trail."

"What about the Gaacos, Jellica?" asked one of the women.

Their leader took Solo by the arm and shoved him in the direction of the darkness. "Push it into the river, let the frogs have it," she replied.

"Hey!" Solo didn't know if he was reacting to hell officious treatment of him or the casual cruelty, with which Jellica had condemned the good-natured Paj, but something was goddamn wrong with everything. "It didn't do anything to you," the Corellian protested. "Leave it alone!"

Jellica sneered. "It's a Gaacos, offworlder. Mind your own business, as I keep telling you."

"Gods, you do need to get laid, you crazy bitch" he shot back, but two of the women had him by the straps around his wrists and, staggering he was hauled out of the light and into the dense blackness of the forest night. "Paj!" Han shouted "wake up!"

"It will do no good, Captain," said Hapthir, suddenly close by him, being led docilely along by one of the women. "Besides, it is only a Gaacos."

"Shut up," said Han. "Just fuckin' shut up."

The forest was dark, almost palpable in its depth, and it was full of sound-whirring, cluttering and alarming hoots surrounded the small party as they made their way along a narrow path. They went necessarily by feel and the collective memories of the women who had obviously used the path before. There was little conversation and what there was passed among the women in their own tongue. To buoy his sagging spirits, Solo set his mind to figuring a way out of his predicament. He'd tried the bonds several times and sensed no give at all. They'd need to be cut or untied. So, what might get that accomplished? he wondered.

"Hey, Jellica!" Solo called. "How about letting a guy take a pit stop?"

"We will not untie you, if that's what you are thinking. Perhaps Hapthir could ... assist you," she added maliciously.

"Get bent," Han muttered and Jellica only laughed. A moment later another notion penetrated his gloomy thoughts and he turned to the Placean king, invisible in the darkness, but still walking beside him. "What did you tell Jellica back at the river anyway? When she was going to shoot me."

There was the small throat-clearing and pause that Han associated with Hapthir's discomfiture over a delicate subject. "I said that perhaps, this matter could be settled amicably if we could agree upon a dauptoran."

By now used to the king's evasive mariner, Han sighed and put a measure of patience into his obvious question. "What's a dauptoran?"

"It is a substitute for something else, in this case, a substitute for the anagamolie."

"Goddamn it, Hapthir, talk to me!"

There was a silence that covered half a dozen steps along the trail, then the Placean said softly, "I offered you to them as their honorable deflowerer." Solo's curse was lost in the general forest clamor.

Some time later, dawn began to pale the sky in the east, the forest opened out, and Placea was before them.

If Solo had been expecting a setting of impressive ancientry, he was disappointed. Placea was a small community built so far as he could tell, entirely of logs harvested from the surrounding forest which had been cleared to create a townsite and provide building materials. He recalled Hapthir's remark about the lack of "modern implementations" and found it a vast understatement.

If the shabby capital city, Caxaban, was rapidly falling into urban decay, Placea appeared never to have aspired to urbanity at all.

The forest trail turned into a primitive street as they passed the first modest dwellings. Jellica walked proudly at the head of the group. "Alrocat targeban!" she called to the first doorway. "Barrancalia u beshetsa!" And she repeated this periodically as they proceeded up the dusty way.

Han, still bound and guarded by several of the king's wives, was near the end of the line. "What's she saying?" he asked Hapthir. There was something ominous about the way their entourage was beginning to draw a following crowd, and a crowd, he noticed, that had a rather predatory, if festive, air.

"She announces my return and proclaims the barrancalia," and, before Han could prod he interpreted, "the barrancalia is the ritual of deflowering."

Furious as he was, a pleading note crept into Solo's voice when he whispered, "Hapthir, you gotta get me out of this!"

"I'm not in a position to do anything."

"Well, how about just doin' what you should have done a long time ago, damn it! Why bring me into it? You satisfy their damn honor!"

"Ah, that is not possible, Captain, I..." He was cut short by the arrival of a personage apparently coming to meet them from the town proper. It was a Placean

whose headdress and gown were a match for Hapthir's, though a shade less brilliantly hued. "Otees!" Hapthir cried plaintively. "You clearly told me that the queens were gone and it was safe for me to return! How could you be so wrong?"

The vice regent trotted to the king's side. He knelt briefly, then fell into step beside them, wringing bejeweled hands. "I don't know where they came from, Majesty," he began. "After you left, they hung about in the women's quarters for a season, then they disappeared. When they didn't return in another season, I assumed they had, well just gone," and he flipped one hand in a gesture reminiscent of someone ridding himself of an unpleasantness stuck to his fingers.

"You fool Otees!" Hapthir scolded. "They simply removed to the spaceport at Caxaban and awaited my return."

"Majesty, I am most apologetic..." Otees began, then, perhaps for the first time, noticed Hapthir's companion. "And who is that?" he asked with interest.

"The captain of the ship which brought me from Deveena, if you must know," the king replied, "and you can just put your eyes back in your head -- he is the anagamolie."

"He's rather delicious."

"Otees, you are such a whore."

Solo had heard more than enough. "Will you two knock it off long enough to tell me what the hell's going on?" Though the situation didn't feel life-threatening at this point, the Corellian thought with a sinking heart, that the comic possibilities were legion. Like some ribald situation farce, and he thought, Why me?

"The queens are taking you to the Town Center," Otees answered with apparent relish "there to perform the barrancalia in the king's stead."

"In the middle of town? The middle of the goddamn town?"

"Well," the vice regent said, as though explaining something to a child, "if the people can't witness the event, then the queens' honor will not be satisfied."

"It was all I could think of to save your life, Captain," Hapthir put in. "All in all, I think a bit of gratitude would be in order."

A primal scream seemed imminent. Solo clenched his teeth and glared at the head of the woman in front of him and thought some very dark thoughts.

Presently the queens' party arrived at what had to be the Town Center - a small park dotted with trees, the village commons, surrounded by a low wooden fence - and word must have gone on ahead of them, for it had been hastily decorated in Placean fashion to celebrate the coming festivities. Solo could see a Pavilion being erected upon the grass at the center and he had little doubt as to what its purpose might be. He worked vainly at his bonds.

Dozens deep, Placeans crowded around the fence, excited, laughing, and gesturing. At knifepoint, Han and the king were taken into the enclosed area. There followed some preamble in the alien language, the only recognizable words being "dauptoran and "anagamolie," that left Solo unenlightened; but as obscure as the ceremonial monologues might be, he was sure of one thing: no one was getting deflowered here today. Not by him. "Isn't gonna happen," he muttered stubbornly.

The end of the talk and the beginning of the action was signaled by Jellica drawing Han's blaster from her waist sash and pointing it at him. "I am the First Among the Queens," she announced in Standard, "and you will honor me first."

"I feel a headache coming on," Solo said to no one in particular.

"Now," Jellica prompted, and she waved him toward the pavilion with the muzzle of his blaster.

The group of wives, the greater crowd gathered at the perimeter, Otees, and even Hapthir were watching with avid anticipation. It struck Solo as one of the more absurd moments in a life so far filled with wonders, both great and small...

"Someone take my gunbelt off," he said. He looked around at the women. "Come on, I can't do it myself with my hands tied, and if you want me to do anything...."

One of the lesser wives looked to Jellica for confirmation. At her nod, the Small woman approached and reached out to unfasten the metal buckle that locked Solo's guntrick in place. Behind him, he felt it slide sideways past his fingers, then as the woman released the tie-down it fell away, but not before he had appropriated the grappling claw.

One thumb activated the mechanism and the claw began digging into the woven straps that bound his wrists.

Jellica gestured again. "Now, offworlder, or I shoot you where you stand." "You shoot me, who's gonna pop your..."

"Pig!" Her eyes blazed, "I will eventually find another anagamolie to satisfy honor. You will be dead!"

Solo seemed to consider that for a moment; then he nodded in agreement. "Okay, Jellica, you got a point, and you got the gun, we'll do it your way." He walked toward the tent, head down. As he drew level with the woman, he suddenly dipped his right shoulder, appeared to stumble against her. Then, so swiftly that whatever reaction she might have made was lost in the swirl of motion, Jellica found herself held fast about the neck, the blaster positioned snugly against her spine. "Ain't love grand?" Solo whispered from behind her.

Jellica screamed; the queens screamed, Hapthir and Otees screamed and backed off, the crowd surged forward angrily against the fence as a huge shadow blotted out the sun and the draft from the Falcon's high gravity drive Backed up dust.

Yes! Solo thought with savage pleasure. The gods' own timing. "Everybody get back!" he yelled over the noise, pushing Jellica away from him. He ignored her as she scampered over to the group of queens clustered around Otees and the king. Han reached for his fallen gunbelt, slung it over a shoulder, turning to keep the village covered. "My ride's here now," he told them all, "so I'll just say so long."

Hapthir and Otees were glaring at each other, another tiff looked to be in the offing. The women shouted alien imprecations, and Han thought how well they all deserved one another. He glanced up, wondering when the Wookiee was going to activate the tractor. The comlink was on his belt. He looked down for it, heard Jellica shout over the engine noise.

"Pig bastard!" she yelled, and Han turned to see her bending a bow with an arrow already fitted to the string.

"Oh shit!" he muttered, firing in front of her feet. The laser cut a smoking swath on the earth at her toes, but her aim never faltered.

"Die!" she screeched and loosed the quarrel. Astonished, Solo felt the metal tip thud into the leather of his guntrick and, passing through it, pierce his shoulder. He staggered backward with the impact and the blaster tracking his antagonists wavered for an instant. Jellica rushed forward, knife drawn, just as a dark shadow dropped from the Falcon's hull between him and the woman.

A familiar voice hollered, "Not hurt boss, you don't!"

The Gaacos took the full force of Jellica's charge. It fended off the knife and relieved her of it with one swipe of a half-webbed hand, then flung it off toward the fence. With a shriek the tenacious queen went scrabbling after it.

More quarrels came arcing their way as the villagers' hesitancy to interfere gave way before their own sense of heroics. Ignoring both the arrows and the thin but steady stream of blood flow from his left shoulder, Solo went for the dropped grappling claw. He shifted the blaster to his left hand and with his right he whipped the claw up and over the edge of the hovering Falcon's outer hull.

Arrows pinged off the metal struck the earth at their feet and quivered there. "Paj!" Han called. "Grab onto the line."

The Gaacos looked around. "Grab?" it asked.

Solo cursed. Impatient, he shoved his blaster into the swimmer's hand.

"Hold this," he commanded, wound his right hand into the grappling line and put his other around Paj's middle.

He thumbed the spool and it began to winch the pair up toward the starship's Metal belly. At once, the swimmer got the idea and grabbed onto the slender line. "Rope gonna bust, boss," Paj objected. "Won't hold us both. You let me go, save boss."

"Bullshit," the Corellian snarled. An arrow hit and stuck in the sole of his boot. The knobbed metal run was no more than half a meter away. Paj hissed as one of the quarrels grazed his side. It looked down, pointed the blaster and fired; the archers beneath the ship scattered.

'Nice goin'," Han gasped as his hand met metal and he began to pull himself up and over. Paj followed his lead and, scrambling and fighting for purchase, they made their way over onto the wide, pale expanse that was the Millennium Falcon's upper hull. Invisible from the ground below, they sprawled for a moment, catching their breath.

"Paj, you are one tough sonofabitch, you know that?" Solo said, pulling the arrow from his boot.

Too weary for the moment to wonder how the swimmer might have escaped certain death by frog, the Corellian simply marveled at its uncomplicated loyalty and heroism. The compliment was possibly lost on the Gaacos who only looked around him. "We plenty high off ground," it grined.

Solo grinned back. Then he winced as the shoulder wound, nearly forgotten in the last few minutes of excitement, made itself known again. He carefully slipped the comlink out of his gunbelt and hailed the ship beneath them. Chewie's throaty voice replied with a good-natured query about what land of crazy mess they'd gotten themselves into this time.

"Chewie," Han said, "release the topside hatch, then shut up." He clicked off the communicator on the Wookiee's howl of mirth. As the Falcon slowly rose and swung her bow mandibles back to the east, Paj and the Corellian descended into the ship's interior. Arrows still snapping on her perndwm skin as she cruised above the treetops and headed downriver.

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Back behind the controls of his ship, off the ground and out of the water, Han Solo relaxed for the first time since he'd left the sanctuary of the Millennium Falcon a day and a half before.

The nagging wound in his left shoulder would require attention soon, but first his curiosity needed to be satisfied. "The frogs, Paj, how in hell did you get away from the frogs?"

Chewie laughed noisily.

"Huh?" Paj had scarcely heard the question, so busy was it enjoying the novelty of powered flight.

"The frogs?" Han prompted.

"Oh, them." Paj turned reluctantly away from its fascinated scrutiny of the treetops beneath them. "I wake up in water, frogs comin' fast upstream, but this big light be on shore, see?"

"The rhodium lamp."

"Whatever, but them frogs they keepin' back from it, so Paj get back on shore and sit close to it." Its voice lowered and it said almost shyly, "Got time to see you leave me tip money, boss. Paj grateful. Anyway," it went on more briskly, soon big skyboat" and it gestured around at the cockpit "big skyboat come down and this one," it pointed at Chewbacca, "he haul me up. Fuggen' scared, I was."

Han grinned at Chewie. "You use the tractor?" he guessed, and the Wookiee nodded. He then proceeded, with several guttural declarations, to fill in the gaps in Solo's knowledge.

"So Chewie flew upriver to the village where you found me."

"Straight on, boss. That one not talk much, but he run skyboat good."

"Yeah," Solo agreed, giving Chewie a slap on his hairy shoulder, "he runs the skyboat good, all right." The Wookiee chuckled. So far, the unfolding of events had tickled his risibility, and he had a fairly good idea that the rest of the story, when his partner got around to telling it, would be very funny indeed. "So, where can we drop you, Paj?" Han asked.

"In river be good," the Gaacos replied.

"Any particular place in the river?"

Paj thought a minute, then brightened. "Drop me by boat we leave behind. I tow it back, then buy it! Got 'nuff money now." It patted its belt pouch.

Han laughed. It wasn't often that random events fell together in such a way as to produce the perfect outcome, but this felt like one of those times. Plenty of profit and, except for his shoulder, no damage to speak of. He spared a thought for Hapthir and Otees and the angry, undeflowered queens and found that apt as well.

"So," he said to the Wookiee, "now that our Gaacos friend here knows where it's going how about us? You scare up anything while I was gone?"

Chewbacca nodded reassuringly; he hooted and gestured.

"Cryogenic comestibles?" Solo frowned, "for a grocers' consortium on Danis? What the hell are we gonna be carrying?"

Chewbacca replied, and the Corellian's burst of laughter filled the cockpit. The Wookiee stared at his partner for a minute, then shrugged. If he lived to be three hundred, he was certain the man's sense of humor would remain obscure to him. Try as he might, Chewbacca could find nothing at all humorous about a cargo of frozen frogs legs.

End

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