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THE WARLORD
by Marti Schuller

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"Now, Captain Solo, one more time, please. How do you know Kun Weezel?" questioned the gray-clad Security man with practiced casualness.

Han shifted in the metal chair to ease the numbness beginning in his shackled hands behind his back. "Where's Chewbacca?" he asked again, snarling.

"Your Wookiee partner is fine. In fact, he's enjoying the peace and quiet of one of our best isolation cells." The Security agent leaned back against his own chair across from the Corellian. "The sooner you cooperate, the sooner you'll be treated more hospitably."

"Sure," mumbled Solo under his breath. "Look, I've told you fourteen times already. I don't know Weezel character. He hired my ship to bring him here to Azzia. I had reason to be passing near this planet on my way elsewhere and I figured I could use the extra credits. That's all."

"And where was it you picked up Weezel again?"

Glancing at the name on the Security man's i.d. badge, Han sighed. "Andorra. Check my flight records, Security Agent Ost. They'll confirm it."

"Flight records are notoriously unreliable, Captain. But I'm sure a smuggler of your renown knows that," replied the man with a self-satisfied smile.

The Corellian crossed his legs. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come now. Must we play games? Very well. According to Intergal you served two Standard years on Feerna."

"Ancient history," dismissed Solo. "I was just a kid. I've done nothing but ferry a passenger. You can't hold me."

Parel Ost rose to his feet and deactivated the surveillance panel recessed in the wall to his left. Han frowned but allowed no other signs of his increasing nervousness to show. When the Security man turned back to face him, the Corellian was once again the picture of outraged innocence.

"Let's be honest, all right?" began Ost. "Records show you've only been to Azzia once before and that was across planet, not here in Yokto. I'll give you the benefit of doubt that you aren't familiar with our laws."

"Thanks," sneered Solo. "Why?"

"Straight to the point, is that it?" Parel laughed, leaning his muscular frame against the wall. "Very well. This is how it is. Kun Weezel is known to us, as I'm sure you surmised upon your arrest. He's a lackey for a man we've been after for years. Weezel isn't the brightest thing on three legs, but his boss is one rotten character. He's up to something and we aim to find out what that is."

"Good for you. What's that got to do with me?"

"Shut your smart mouth and listen," growled Ost, returning to his seat opposite Han, "and you might learn. Weezel was bringing something to his boss. That much we discovered a few days ago. We've watched every ship coming on-planet since, waiting for him."

"So, now you've got him," the Corellian pilot said, his lip curled. "I repeat what's that got to do with me or my ship."

"Weezel was carrying a stolen datachip. At least, we think it was stolen. He went to great pain -- literally -- to hide it, at any rate. Unfortunately, the chip is encoded and our experts haven't been able to break it.' Seeing Solo's mounting irritation, the Security man hastened to make his point. "We can hold Weezel on a number of lesser charges, but that won't get his boss. That's where your situation comes in."

Han leaned forward, wiggling his fingers behind his back to keep the blood flowing. He had a very bad feeling about this conversation. Yet, he also realized he had no choice but to hear Agent Ost out.

"You may be telling the truth about your connection to Weezel," Parel continued. "Our records don't show any immediate tie between you and Gneg."

"Who?" the Corellian interrupted.

"Hiska Gneg. Weezel's boss," supplied the Security man.

"Never heard of him."

"Well, he's stayed fairly local in his illegal activities so far, but our informants assure us that is about to change. Whatever he's up to, it's big. And we have to find out what that is and stop him. Weezel's datachip is our first real break."

Solo's internal sense of self-preservation began to itch. "Happy for you. About me?"

"I'm coming to that," Ost replied. "You're good at what you do, Captain." He raised a hand to halt Han's protests. "Our sources aren't limited to Azzia. Once you were in custody, we learned all we could about you. Seems you're either well-liked or truly hated, but your reputation and record prove you're an excellent pilot, a fair shot, a good card player, and a resourceful man. Though you've only been caught once, as you said, a long time ago, you're suspected of some highly suspicious dealings. Your known associates, clients if you prefer, include some of the galaxy's most unsavory characters, including Kargan Lant of Mastil, Fukor Bey of Strada, and Jabba of Tatooine."

Han's mouth had turned dry, but he maintained the expressionless visage that had won him many a sabaac game.

"We're also aware of just how much your Ship means to you," added Parel Ost as a seemingly offhand observation. Without warning, he produced a small sonic key from inside his uniform shirt, depressing the button and releasing Solo's manacles. They clattered to the floor, freeing the Corellian's hands. As he watched his prisoner resentfully rubbing his wrists, the agent sighed. "I'm hopeful that we can work out a deal, Captain."

"And why is that?" laughed Han mirthlessly. "You've held me and my partner here for damned near a full day, you've locked down my ship, and you've questioned me without food or water for hours. Why should I deal with you? My story checks out. I've never met Weezel before he paid for passage on

my ship. I don't know his boss, and I'm not a regular to Azzia. If you found something illegal on him, that's his problem, and yours. Not mine. I know nothing about it."

"I'm inclined to believe you," Ost replied amicably. "A man with your reputation is smarter than that."

"Then, you have no reason to hold me or my partner.'

"True. I'll have your Wookiee friend processed for release immediately."

Solo frowned in spite of himself "What's the catch?'

"As I said, a smart man," acknowledged the Security agent. Watching the Corellian closely, he explained, "While you and your partner will be free to leave our custody, I'm afraid we will still have to keep your ship under impound. You may be innocent of any wrongdoing, but Weezel was a passenger on your ship for several days. Who knows what else he may have hidden while aboard?"

"You know better," Han complained, his muscles tightening.

"Perhaps, but I assure you that I am fully within my legal rights under Yokto law. I can order your ship disassembled bolt by bolt. I've certainly done, so with other ships. Sadly, even if we should find nothing, our crews are better at taking things apart than at putting them back together again, I'm afraid. It can take months, even years. Truthfully, though I can't prove it, I suspect some of the crew members make a nice little profit by selling crucial ship components to other pilots. But maybe that's just hearsay."

"You can't do that!" argued Solo angrily. 'I've done nothing illegal."

"I promise you, Captain, I can!" Lowering his voice, Ost smiled. "Of course, if we find nothing, you'll be given an official apology with our regrets for your inconvenience. It won't hasten the reconstruction of your ship, but it will be all the compensation you'll receive.'

Recognizing a losing hand when he was dealt it, Han sank back against the metal bars of the chair. "All right, let's hear it. What do I have to do to keep the Falcon in one piece?"

'See, I knew you could be counted on to be reasonable," Parel Ost said smugly. "Before I go into details, let me get some refreshments ordered for us."

"Just get on with it," pushed Han, frustrated to the point of aggravation.

"Nonsense. This will take some explaining and there's no reason we can't be civilized."

Solo's shoulder muscles knotted. Every time the word 'civilized' was mentioned, he knew he was in for one colossal screw job. Yet his options had evaporated so he sat back and waited as calmly as possible for the axe to fall.

Despite his hunger, the Corellian ate sparingly, knowing that a full stomach meant lassitude, and sensing that he would need his wits at their sharpest. Forgoing the offer of local brew, he drank thirstily of citrus-flavored water, however.

"Are you sure you've had enough?" questioned Parel Ost, eyeing the half-touched plate of food before his 'guest.'

"Really sure," snorted Han, convinced his double-meaning was lost on the humorless Security man. "Get on with it. What do you want from me?"

Hesitating only a moment, Ost locked his gaze on Solo as he spoke. "We need an insider in Gneg's operation. I'm convinced you're the man for the job. We've kept Weezel's arrest under tight wraps. No one knows he's returned, and we'll keep it that way. We want you to take the data chip he was carrying and deliver it to Gneg yourself. We'll provide a cover story he'll believe. Once inside, convince Gneg you know more than you do, get close to him, whatever it takes. He's a suspicious sort but not as clever as he'd like people to think. Impress him with your contacts. He's a hotshot here on Azzia, but his ambitions are boundless. Find out what he's planning and report back to us. We'll take it from there."

Han remained silent for several moments, staring at Ost with an unreadable look in his eyes. Finally, he began to laugh. It started as a mad chuckle, quickly escalating to full guffaws as Solo slapped his thigh. The fierce glare on the agent's face only heightened Han's hilarity.

At last, his fury scarcely contained, Parel exclaimed through gritted teeth, "This is hardly humorous, Captain. If you want your precious ship back in anything less than a million unrecognizable pieces, you'd better take my deal very seriously."

The repeated threat to the Falcon sobered the Corellian immediately. Wiping a laughter-generated tear from his eye, Han's face turned to stone. "I don't like ultimatums, Ost," he scorned.

"No ultimatum. A promise. We need you, but if you refuse - and that is your choice, of course - I promise on the oath of my office that by this time tomorrow your ship will be scattered across the impound hangar for at least three years."

"This is insane!" growled Solo, all sense of absurdity vanished. "Why should this Gneg trust me? It'll take him one second to order me dead. What'll that get you? Why not use one of your own people?"

"Gneg would know our personnel instantly," replied Parel quietly. "Your record will hold up against his scrutiny. In short, Captain, you're the only one available for this job. Fortune smiled when she sent you into our hands."

"Not on me," muttered the Corellian.

"Gneg won't order you killed because you'll have two things he wants, the data chip Weezel was carrying and connections to criminal sources Gneg doesn't have," explained the Security agent patiently. "It won't be a cruise run to Hamba, I'll grant, but I'm sure you've dealt with worse than Hiska Gneg. Like I told you, your record says you're very resourceful."

"All right, even if I succeed, he's bound to be suspicious of me. How do I get word to you without ending up worse off than I am now," resigned Han.

"We'll fit you with a tracker device. Though we can't stay close, we'll know your every move. We'll also give you an emergency retrieval signal. Once you have all the information we need, find someplace isolated and activate it. We'll get you out in five Standard minutes, I swear."

Solo sat motionless, his back rigid. "Thought of everything, haven't you?" He stared at the blank holding cell wall, his mind in turmoil. He'd done some dangerous things in his life, taken some foolhardy chances for little gain, but this was idiocy. His chances of success were negligible, his survival instincts at full alarm. Yet no matter how he struggled with it, Han knew he had no way out unless he was willing to sacrifice the Falcon. There was no shade of doubt in his mind that Parel Ost would destroy his ship. If only for spite. That thought brought the bitter taste of bile to the back of the Corellian's throat. He was trapped and he knew it. Though he might very well end up dead, Han accepted his situation with grudging admiration. He'd been set up beautifully, and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it but play out the game.

With a sneer curving his mouth, Solo faced the Security agent. "What's so important about this Gneg? What's he up to that you'd go to these lengths to get him?"

Parel, realizing that Han had made his choice, paced the small room. "Hiska Gneg has been running things around this district too long. Every time we think we've got him, he slips out of our grasp like an Eigorian eel. We know he runs drugs, supplies weapons to young thug wannabes, heads a sizable thieves' ring, and a whole list of other crimes. But this time... Well, this time, it's big. Our informants are scared, but they don't know much. What they do know is Gneg. If they say this latest scheme of his is big, you'd best believe it's more than just global and that it's very frightening."

"Why not bring the Imperials into it, then?"

"I wanted to. I'm not exactly a fan of the Empire, but I know they could shut Gneg down without a second thought. I've heard of their handiwork. Unfortunately, so has our government. So far, Azzia has had only a passing acquaintance with the Empire. We have few resources of interest to them. That pleases our officials, and they'd like to keep things as they are. Ask once for help and we're likely to find our planet overrun and under Imperial control. Or so they think. Besides, Gneg's pretty small pickings for the Imperial forces. Without proof of what he's doing, there's no sense even speculating on bringing the Empire into this. All I know is that I've been in Security too long not to listen to my instincts. And they're telling me Gneg is working on something huge this time. My ulcer never lies."

"If I agree to do this," demanded Han, "and I haven't said I will, what happens to Chewie?"

"Your Wookiee friend? He'll stay here on Yokto, of course." Parel quickly added, "Not here, naturally. We'd set him up in a safe inn we keep on retainer. He'll be under guard only to prevent his interference, but otherwise he'll be free. The inn is really a nice place, good food, comfortable accommodations. He'll be treated well so long as he makes no attempt to contact you. You have my word on it."

"And if I fail?" asked Han, not voicing his opinion of Ost's word. "If Gneg isn't as polite about my intrusion on his plans as you think and he kills me? What then?"

"Then, we inform your partner with sincere condolences and allow him to take your ship and leave," promised Ost earnestly. "But I have a good

feeling about you, Captain. Frankly, I have to. You're our last chance to stop Gneg. Whatever he's up to, it's nasty. I feel it. You're our best hope of stopping him."

"I wish I shared your optimism," groused Han. "All right, fill me in. If I'm gonna do this, I need to know everything you can tell me about Hiska Gneg and his operations. Then, I'll need some time with Chewie to make him understand. Otherwise, trust me, you won't stand a prayer of keeping him here. Once I get what you need though, I am out of here. I want the Falcon fully fueled and cleared for take off the second this mission is over. Got that?"

"Agreed. Once your debriefing is over, you'll be free to go with no record of your stay here, if you like. Only one thing more."

"What?" the Corellian moaned.

"Don't come back."

"Wouldn't dream of it," swore Solo with feeling.

Han memorized the narrow scarred face on the holoscreen before him as he sipped at the tepid caffa in his plastic cup.

"Not exactly vid-star material is he?" remarked Parel Ost from Solo's side. "He's killed a lot of people, but he always gets away with it. That jagged scar on his forehead," the Security man pointed to the reddish streak running raggedly from center brow to the hairline, "got that during the old Azzia warlord wars. Gneg survived an attempt on his life by a rival when his hovercar blew. That was years ago. Since then, he's bought out or slaughtered all his competition in this sector of Azzia. Nothing illegal goes on anymore unless Gneg authorizes it. Step out of line and your life's the penalty. He's mean, but he's not usually too smart."

"Why haven't you caught him yet then?" skewered Han.

"Because he's tricky and lucky," grumped Ost. "He never does anything without relays, if he can help it. We've captured plenty of his people, but they never connect directly to him. Even the few we have gotten were useless. They were either too scared to tell us anything or met with untimely deaths before they could. I do know Gneg isn't above doing his own dirty work, though. We just can't catch him with blood on his hands."

"If he's that cautious," inquired the Corellian skeptically, "What makes you think I'll ever get close enough to even meet him?"

"I keep telling you. Gneg's never been able to spread his poison off Azzia, but he wants to. He wants to be the next Jabba, the next Kargan. You know those crime lords, and he'll know you know them. Don't ask me how, but he will. He keeps tabs on things, even if he isn't part of it -- yet. Whatever he's doing this time, it's my guess this is the ticket he figures will buy him into the galactic criminal cartel. It's his chief ambition."

Han remained dubious, but he swallowed further objections as he turned back to the holoscreen. Hiska Gneg stared back at him from black, dead eyes. Solo had met a lot of criminal types in his life. Technically a criminal himself, he usually avoided the warlords and crime lords and petty tyrants who ran larger organizations, but on occasion he'd found specific contracts with them too lucrative to pass up - usually when he was desperate. Like now. Gneg looked dangerous, all right, but no more so than a dozen others the Corellian knew first hand. Greedy, ruthless beings, but as Ost had pointed out seldom great thinkers.

"Does Gneg have a second?" questioned Han when he'd studied the holo long enough.

"No," answered Parel. "He doesn't trust anyone that much. He has maybe three, four people he considers semi-reliable, all but one, a local. That one is Estrel, no other name known. She's from Tamnu. Ever met her kind?"

Han shook his head.

"Tall, -- nearly as tall as your Wookiee partner. She has yellow skin. I don't mean pale, yellowish skin. I mean, yellow, like a nemol fruit. Her eyes are the same color - all four of them. Tanmus have two faces, sort of, one in front and one in back. No hair. No mouths either. Just eyes and noses. They communicate with each other by a combination of telepathy and hand signals. Estrel has been seen with Hiska about as often as any of his other favorite cohorts, but we suspect she may also be his lover. No proof of that though."

"And his headquarters?" Solo pushed, digesting the information he was being given.

"Gneg holes up in a city called Nichan. It's an ancient city just south of Yokto. Legally, it's in our jurisdiction, but there are limitations to our authority there. Due to some ages-old pact, Nichan is pretty much

self-governed. We aren't allowed to interfere in their domestic rule unless laws are broken outside their walls.'

"Walls?'

"Yes. Nichan is entirely enclosed by a centuries old, very thick, very high stone wall. No ships ever land there and all traffic, vehicular or pedestrian, must pass through one of four entries heavily patrolled by city guards. No weapons, except for knives, are allowed within Nichan limits. Don't ask me why they allow knives because I don't know, except that it's some religious thing. Everyone in Nichan from age three on up, carries a knife. Not even Hiska Gneg or his people are armed with blasters or the like."

"Not much comfort," decided Solo aloud.

"The city rulers aren't any happier with Gneg than we are, but he's been too careful. They've had their hands tied as effectively as we have when it comes to getting hold of him. They have the only airships under their control, and patrol the city fairly well, but they can't arrest Hiska for just breathing any more than we can. We'll use those patrols, however, to get you out when your retrieval signal is received. We've already contacted the Nichan Security Force about that. I'll personally be going there to await hearing from you and to follow you on the tracker. My cover will be, should anyone notice my appearance, that I'm there on a routine intercity visit

"Once you have the information and proof of Gneg's plans, we'll have you out before you can spell the Emperor's name. You've got your story on Weezel memorized? Good. Now, here's the only holo we have of Nichan. I thought it might help you get familiar with the layout of the city. It was taken decades ago by an old satellite that accidentally filmed the city and then transmitted the image just as its decayed orbit sent it burning up in the atmosphere. Not even the Nichan officials know we have this. They like their privacy. The city hasn't changed too much though." He handed Han a slide to insert in the holoviewer.

As the grainy image of a moderately-sized city came into focus on the holoscreen, Parel continued, "The Nichan Security Force knows that Gneg resides there, in that large building." He pointed to the rooftop of an imposing structure. "It was built by the founders of Nichan as a temple, but Hiska took a liking to it and persuaded the religious leaders, with a large sum of credits, that they really needed a more modern facility here in this section." Once more, Ost pointed to a sprawling complex of connecting buildings on the screen image.

"What are those patterns there?" Solo asked, indicating a curious thin mixture of lines along one section of the holo-picture.

"Some sort of old gangway or walkway system, I think," Parel responded. "Long ago, there was talk of putting a dome over Nichan, but the idea passed when the expense proved too high. There've also been repairs to the wall from time to tune, and before there was flight here on Azzia, armed patrols guarded the city inside and out from great heights, according to what history I remember. Those patterns could be any of those things or none.'

"Why does the wall look sort of funny?"

"Probably because one side of it, the side near those patterns, in fact, is higher than the other. You can see that the wall is sort of circular on this image, but from ground level it's easy to see that one section was built up much higher long, long ago. Why, no one remembers. Some think it had to do with the strong winds that blow from the south every spring. Others think it was a protection measure, meant to include the entire wall but abandoned before it was complete."

"And that's Gneg's headquarters right below that higher wall?" queried Han, though he knew the answer.

"Yes, but it's purely coincidental, not significant. Why?"

"No reason," Han dismissed. "Just getting a feel for things." He reached out and terminated the image, handing the Nichan slide back to Ost. "Now, about tracker ..."

"This is the finest piece of equipment our lab has produced in years," announced the wide-eyed pale little man as he displayed a transparent circuitry sheet the size of Solo's fingernail. "Easy to conceal, undetectable by electronic or tactile search, reliable over one hundred units distance, with a lifespan we estimate at sixteen Standard years. Its signal can penetrate every known substance, yet can only be received by our special receiving link." He patted a small box with his free hand.

"Fine, Dr. Sorme," Parel Ost congratulated. "I know how it works. Now, have you rigged the emergency retrieval signal I requested?"

"Of course," huffed the little man, brushing his hand against his white overcoat. "Six-D is completing the installation now." He turned and led the Security agent and Han toward a closed-off permaglass room. Inside,

the Corellian saw a modest droid assembling the final pieces of an intricate blade handle. Once finished, the droid inserted the lethal-looking black, silver-lined knife into the handle. At a rap on the permaglass window, Six-D brought the weapon to a sliding drawer and laid it inside. Then it turned to tackle a new project, oblivious to the men beyond its sterile cubicle.

Retrieving the knife, Dr. Sorme held it gingerly out to Parel. Once the agent had taken the weapon, the little scientist inventor proudly pointed out its special feature. "Where I dislike tools of destruction, this one is quite unique. The blade is made of titronium, the hardest substance yet discovered. Virtually nothing can damage it or stop it. Shaped into this form, it can stab through metal, bone, or rock. It's exceptionally sharp and un-breakable. Within the handle is disguised the retrieval signal device. Simply push the end aside, depress the indentation inside with your thumb, and the emergency retrieval signal is activated. Be careful, however, because once set in motion the signal cannot be turned off. I've rigged the tracker receiver to also respond to the emergency signal, thereby eliminating the need for two separate receivers," he said proudly.

"Good," Ost approved. Taking a specialized sheath from Dr. Sorme, the Security agent informed Han, "You'll carry the blade in your boot. That's customary. This sheath will protect your leg. You'll get it when you're ready to go."

"I'm ready now," argued the Corellian.

"Afraid not. We still need to conceal the tracker strip on you and get your story in place." Grabbing the tracker, Parel steered Solo out of the lab, across the hall, and into what looked and smelled suspiciously like a medical facility. Directing Han to a stool next to a long counter cluttered with bottles, tubes and other machinery, Ost addressed the rail-thin female occupant of the room. "Here's your patient, Dr. Cabo."

"What?" exclaimed the Corellian. "What are you talking about? There's nothing wrong with me!"

"Not yet," conceded Parel. "But your story has to be convincing regarding Weezel. I know him, and I know Hiska Gneg. Weezel always carries a vibroblade. If you and he fought, you wouldn't have escaped unharmed, trust me. He's a slimy little character, but he's quick and dangerous. Besides, Gneg will have you searched - thoroughly. You'll need to hide the datachip before you meet with him, outside somewhere. I'll trust your resourcefulness to find a proper place for it. In the process of searching

you, who knows if he might not find the tracker were we just to hide it in your clothes? This way, your story's intact and so is the tracer strip."

"What way?" frowned Solo.

"Remove your shirt, please," the scrawnily-built woman requested casually.

"Just do it, Captain," ordered Ost. "I promise no permanent harm will be done."

Reluctantly, Han shed his shirt, watching with horror as the doctor made a long cut in the inside left arm with a narrow vibroblade.

"Extend your left arm, please," she instructed coldly

"You have to be kidding! Do I look stupid?" Han bolted off the stool, defiantly folding his arms across his bare chest.

"Trust me on this, Captain," repeated Parel. "The pain will be over quickly, and Gneg will be a thousand times more ready to accept your cover. Don't be such a coward."

"Easy for you to say," the Coreellian grumbled. "Why don't you offer up your arm instead?"

"Because I'm not the one going to Nichan or the one with a ship awaiting disassembly,' the Security man reminded him bluntly.

Han, however, stood his ground. "There's got to be a better way of concealing the tracker."

"Oh, for crying out loud," Dr. Cabo announced. Shoving Solo backward toward the stool, she seized his left arm by the wrist. Turning her back to him, she kept a durasteel grip on his arm as she sprayed the flesh just above his elbow with an icy anesthetic. Seconds later, she spun away, ducking and slicing up at him with a vibroblade hastily snatched off the counter. The blade sliced into Solo's arm, sending a spurt of blood onto the floor.

Han yelled aloud out of shock, feeling no real pain from the wound. Yet before he could do more than open his mouth to protest, Dr. Cabo was already administering a crude form of aid to his injury. Within moments, she had the bleeding stopped and a thin bandage, with the tracer hidden among the gauze, wrapped securely around his arm.

"There. Now, was that worth all the fuss? What did you think? That I was going to implant the tracker. Please. I'd do a better job on that bandage, but you're supposed to have cared for the wound yourself. You don't strike me as being especially tidy about such things," she stated without emotion. "When the spray wears off, the injury will sting some and probably throb, but you're a big strong boy. I'm sure you'll cope."

"Thanks," murmured Han sarcastically.

"Ready to go?" Parel asked. "We've got a rental transport standing by." As he and Solo left the smirking doctor and entered the halls on their way to the Security garage, Ost said, "Here are some credits for lodging and meals. I'll be in Nichan this time tomorrow to monitor your whereabouts, so lay low tonight and get used to the city. Starting tomorrow your real job begins."

The Corellian skidded to a halt his hand on the agent's arm. "Let's get this straight, Ost. I'm not doing this as a job for you or to save the galaxy from one more warlord. I'm in this because you gave me no choice. I'll play it through, but only for Chewie and my ship. You got me?"

Parel nodded. "Never doubted it, Captain. Nonetheless," he added as he resumed walking, "you're doing a good thing here."

Behind him, Han grumbled under his breath. "And never again if I have any say in the matter."

The wall surrounding the ancient city of Nichan was even more unimpressive when viewed from its base at one of the city's four entries, decided Solo. Waiting his turn to pass through the blaster-detector scanners, he studied the somber-faced, silver-garbed patrols. Except for the fluidity of their movements, they might as well have been droids, never speaking, methodically passing the hand-held scanners over every person seeking entry. In place of the more traditional sidearms, each carried a stun baton in a loop on his belt.

As Han advanced through the line, he felt the empty weight of his holster on his hip. I must be crazy, he thought for the hundredth time. But his mind conjured forth a mental picture of his beloved Falcon spread across a dirty hangar floor. Swallowing past his regrets, and ignoring the dull throb of his wounded arm, the Corellian stoically underwent his turn beneath the probing scans.

Waved through at last, he entered the city of Nichan. Parel Ost had detailed the area near Hiska Gneg's residence, suggesting a couple of boarding places. However, Han preferred his own judgment. Grabbing a for-hire transport, he surveyed the buildings and residents as the driverless vehicle maneuvered the smooth roadways. Aside from the lack of apparent blasters and the colorful native attire, Nichan inhabitants looked like the usual blend of local and offworlders Solo would have expected to see in any modern city. The structures, however, were more unique. In spite of the ancient wall surrounding it, Nichan appeared as up-to-date as possible. Scattered here and there were relic houses of bygone days, but for the most part Han felt more at ease than he'd expected.

What he'd thought he would find, he wasn't sure, but it certainly hadn't been the city he was seeing. He relaxed, giving only a passing thought to his missing weapon, as he gazed up through the clear dome of the hired transport. Off to his right he could scarcely make out the curious network he'd seen on the secret satellite image. Perched near the highest section of the wall, it looked almost like a pattern of unattended cracks. Only foreknowledge and gifted eyesight allowed the Corellian to distinguish the nearly derelict pathways. No one had bothered to either maintain or remove the curious structures and that alone peaked Han's interest.

As his transport neared the higher wall and the temple home of Gneg, Solo noticed a slow decay begin to set in outside his window. Far from a slum, this area of Nichan was, nonetheless, obviously not as affluent as its neighbors. The hired vehicle halted at last at the intersection provided by Han earlier. Inserting his credits into the appropriate slot, the Corellian exited and stretched his long legs after the cramped ride.

For perhaps an hour, he wandered in seeming idle curiosity, memorizing alleyways, sleeping facilities, taverns, and eateries. He studied shop windows offering everything from foodstuffs to exotic female under-garments. He got a feel for the people's attitudes as he was reading body language, catching snatches of sidewalk conversation. And, of course, he found Gneg's residence.

After stopping to eat at a small place just up the street from the vaunted warlord's headquarters, Han felt he'd learned all he could for now. Returning the way he'd come, Solo chose a nondescript boarding inn and took a room for one night only. After inspecting the shabby but clean lodging, he went back to the street. After a brief, unobserved stop, Han entered one of the noisy taverns he'd noticed earlier. Directly across the street from the once-religious temple, the tavern seemed out of place, but business was brisk and the clientele such that the Corellian felt strangely at home.

Taking a window stool after ordering a mug of cold local ale, he pretended to be staring at the imposing edifice opposite him. In reality, he was watching the tavern patrons. After less than fifteen minutes, as he'd hoped, a woman slowly approached his small table.

"You a stranger to Nichan or just new to our tavern?" the middle-aged woman asked in a confrontational manner.

"Why? Do you know everyone around here?" Han smiled.

"Pretty much, yeah. I own this bar," she informed him. "I make it a point to remember faces. Helps me identify trouble, and you look like trouble to me."

"Not for you," Solo promised.

The woman frowned, her lips drawing together in a tight line. Finally, she said, "Good. Keep it that way. You got business around here?"

"Maybe. I hope so."

"Let me guess." She eyed him up and down. "Smuggler. Yeah, you look the part. Miss your blaster, don't you?" She grinned and winked at him. "Smugglers always do. Assassins, they don't much care. Thieves got more of a slickness to 'em. Sex dealers, well, them I can smell a parsec away. Yep, my guess is smuggler."

"You' re good," complimented Han with genuine appreciation for the woman's deductive skills.

"Free lance too, aren't you? Lookin' to pick up or drop off?"

"Perhaps a little of both."

"Best check with Gneg, then. He doesn't like free lancers much, though he tolerates a few. Depends on what you're carryin', ya know?"

"That's what I was told," Solo admitted. "That's his place, right?" He tipped his head to the side to indicate the window and the building beyond. "Keeps a low profile, doesn't he?"

The tavern owner laughed. "No need. Long's he does nothin' illegal in Nichan, locals don't care. They can't catch him anyway, and they know it."

Han leaned closer to the woman. "Is he really that powerful around here?"

She laughed again. "I wouldn't recommend tryin' it," she confided. "Tell you what, you order another and somethin' more expensive than brew, and tell me your name. I'll see word goes out. Come back in two nights, and I'll let you know where you stand."

"Reasonable. Solo's my name. Han Solo, captain of the Millenium Falcon, and I'll have a glass of Corellian Sureshot if you've got any."

Two nights later, Han returned to the tavern and his rendezvous with its owner. Taking the same stool near the window and ordering the expensive Corellian drink of his last visit, he settled down to wait. He'd moved from inn to boarding house to lodge, and his senses were as sharp as ever. The data chip was secure, and he was about to enter the next phase of his mission.

"Welcome back," greeted the older tavern owner. "Sort of hoped you'd be in before now."

"Been busy, and you did say two nights."

"Sure, but I got a business to run, too."

Han slapped some credits atop the little table's surface. "For my rudeness," he offered

"A smuggler and a gentleman. Now, that's a rare combination. There's someone I want you to meet." She pocketed the credits swiftly as she turned and waved two fingers at someone across the crowded room. Moments later, a hollow-cheeked man with the soft walk of a professional burglar approached. "Tummis, this is the guy I told you about captain of the Millennium Hawk. "

"Millennaim Falcon," corrected the Corellian politely. "Han Solo." He nodded at the swaggering newcomer.

"Well, I'll leave you two to discuss business," the woman announced, "and I'll get you another Sureshot while I'm at it." She winked at Solo and left, working her way through the densely populated space as only one with years of practice could.

Tummis leaned against the stool opposite Han, but he chose not to sit.

All right, so I'm supposed to be impressed with you, Solo thought, struggling to keep his distaste from showing.

"Ryba says you're interested in work," the greasy man finally said, studying his manicured nails instead of looking at Han

"Maybe. Maybe I've got something your boss wants. Maybe I'm just looking at future possibilities." The Corellian leaned back, sipping at his fiery drink and missing the backup of his copilot. Once again, the empty holster strapped to his hip felt strange and awkward.

"You've checked out so far," admitted Tummis, curious despite his best effort not to reveal it. "Hiska will see you tomorrow. You'll be searched, so don't try anything. If you don't like that idea, you're free to leave Nichan, by tomorrow night."

"What time is the meet?" was all Han said.

"An hour after midday. Oh, and don't be late. Hiska is a busy man, and he hates tardiness."

"Does he hate familiarity, too?" smirked Solo. "You and I both know you've never called Gneg by his first name to his face, so cut the bantha poodoo."

The lackey's eyes narrowed, but he kept his cool. Han gave him some small credit for that much. Without another word, Tuminis left the tavern, his sense of dignity trailing after him. As Han finished his drink, the Corellian smiled slightly. If all of Gneg's people are that stupid, this could be easier than I figured

Ryba, the tavern owner, returned a short time later. "Got your appointment, I see." It was not a question. "Look, Solo, you seem like a straight dealer, so let me give you a word of caution. Don't mistake Tummis for more than he is. Gneg uses him strictly as an errand boy. Don't let that pompous minnow fool you. You're about to enter dangerous water."

"Thanks," replied Han sincerely. Though he'd wanted to believe otherwise, he hadn't really accepted his own hope.

"Take care. I don't have so many good customers that I can afford to lose one," laughed Ryba.

The next day, at precisely one hour past midday, Han presented himself to the two guards outside Gneg's temple headquarters. Escorted inside, he was led to a small side room and ordered to strip. His knife was taken, of

course, causing him a moment's concern that the emergency retrieval signal hidden in the hilt would be discovered, but the guards set it safely aside after only a perfunctory examination.

"What's that?" questioned one of the burly body- guards, stabbing a finger at the bandage on Solo's arm. "Unwrap it."

Wordlessly, Han undid enough of the wrapping to reveal the ugly wound along his left arm. The bandaging was caked with enough dried blood and brownish ointment to produce a faint odor and prove its authenticity. Before he'd finished, nearing the secret tracker in the next to last layer of gauze, he was ordered to cover the injury again, the guard satisfied.

"You should see a med-tech about that," suggested the second guard.

"Haven't had time. Besides, I've had worse injuries than this making love," scoffed Solo. The guards laughed as he'd hoped.

Passing his clothing through a highly sophisticated scanner, the first guard tossed them back to the naked Corellian. "He's clean," he announced unnecessarily.

"All right, this way," instructed the second man. Opening a secondary door, he led Solo through a maze of narrow corridors, finally stopping at an imposing set of carved double doors. At his announcement of their arrival to the house comm beside the entry, someone inside activated the doors to swing slowly inward.

Han entered, his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the dimmer light of the grand hall. The guard remained outside as the doors silently closed behind Solo. A gold carpet ran the length of the room from the doors to a plush, oversized chair behind a massive inlaid gold and scarlet desk. As Han moved cautiously nearer, however, he recognized the object as the temple's former altar and not a true desk at all. The chair swiveled slowly around as four golden-clad guards, long knives at their waists, emerged from the heavy drapes on either side of the altar. Two took up positions on each side, flanking their boss.

"Han Solo," greeted Hiska Gneg from his seat, "welcome to my humble office."

The Corellian had rarely seen so opulent a display of wealth or would-be power, especially so tastelessly exhibited, but he held his opinions to himself and merely tipped his head in acknowledgment of the greeting.

"I understand you wish to do business on Azzia," chuckled Gneg, whose scarred face was even homelier than his holo-image. In addition, he deliberately wore an open vest with no shirt beneath it to reveal the numerous other scars crisscrossing his chest and arms. Whatever else he was, thought Han, Hiska Gneg was a survivor. 'You were wise to seek me out, Solo. I reward respect like that. Now, tell me, what sort of trade were You interested in conducting on my planet?"

"For starters, I believe I have something you want," Han began.

"Oh?" Gneg mocked. "What might that be? As you can see," he waved his scarred arms to include the rooms art and other riches, as well as the temple itself, "I want for nothing. Your reputation is an interesting one, I'll give you, that but I hardly think you can offer me anything of real value."

"I might just surprise you," replied Solo evenly. "For instance, I happen to have made some pretty lucrative runs for Jabba on Tatooine. I could do some nosing around, drop the right suggestions, see if he'd be interested in expanding to cut you a deal with him."

Hiska's lower lip moved upward as he smiled to consider. Nodding repeatedly, he asked, "Tell me, Solo, does Jabba live as fine as I do?"

"Well," hesitated the Corellian, "Jabba is a Hutt. What's rich to you wouldn't be to his preference."

"Of course," Gneg accepted, pleased. "An intriguing proposal but rather vague. Anything else to offer?"

Han stepped nearer, but not so near as to alarm either his host or the guards nearby. "I believe you've been expecting someone. I'm here to tell you that he won't be coming."

Gneg's eyebrows drew closer together. "Who might that be?"

"It might be anyone, I suppose, but I'm referring to a little sleaze named Kun Weezel," answered Solo casually.

Hiska's eyes widened, then narrowed to slits. "You can go, guards," he rasped angrily to the other four men present. When they faltered momentarily, Gneg shouted, "Get out! Now!"

Once the room was empty of all but Hiska and Han, the scar-faced man rose and walked around the altar-desk. His movements were fluid, almost graceful, with a lethal undercurrent that set the Corellian's battle

instincts on alert. "I think you'd better explain," Gneg said slowly, menacingly, fingering a small knife in his broad waistband.

Solo shrugged, shifting his weight so that if he was forced to fight his stance was prepared. "First, I'm curious. By your reaction, I'm guessing I was right about that little ... let's call it 'package' that Weezel was carrying for you. But if it was that important to you, why send a petty operative after it?"

"Why do you think?" the warlord replied, copying Han's insouciant manner. "If you indeed have my... 'package', as you call it, I see no reason why I shouldn't deal with you. Kun Weezel is - was? - a loyal, none- too-bright servant The kind of man who draws only passing interest, if any at all. I wanted no attention drawn to his dealings. Is he alive?"

"Let's just say I wouldn't be counting on his services any longer if I were you," suggested the Corellian obscurely.

Gneg considered Han's reply a moment, then accepted it with a slight wave of his hand, a gesture one might make when shooing away a minor pest. "No matter. If you have my merchandise, Kun will hardly be missed. His sort are a credit a gross. Before we get down to the tedious details of your fee, I should warn you that the item Weezel was bringing to me is of little value to anyone else. I hope you didn't go to too much trouble to obtain it"

"Not really," Han said with a minor shake of his head. "Your man had a taste for cheap Corellian dovka. Not a good habit for a courier. It's a long flight from Andorra to Azzia. A single passenger aboard ship with all that time and only me and my Wookiee partner to talk to. Didn't take much to get him to bragging about how vital he was to you. I may not be a genius, but I've been around long enough to know what's what. Weezel was obviously carrying something of interest."

"My research about you said you traveled with a Wookiee. Where is he now, may I ask?"

"Not far. Wookies are very fond of their bow- casters and highly superstitious beings, though. Nichan's laws wouldn't have allowed him to keep his weapon here. He knows where I am and what I'm doing. He also knows I can take care of myself. He'll stay with my ship for as long as necessary. Wookies aren't overly intelligent," Han lied, "but they're loyal to a fault."

"Useful," Hiska responded, his interest clearly waning.

"Oh, one other thing. The 'package' Weezel was bringing to you is well-hidden. Should anything happen to me, you'd find your life taking a considerable turn for the worse."

"And why is that? Short of not obtaining my merchandise, that is?"

"Ever hear of Kargan Lant of Masfd?" Solo caught the faint stiffening of Gneg's shoulders only because the crime lord had momentarily turned his back to the Corellian. Without waiting for a reply, knowing Gneg knew the truth anyway, Han added, "He's a rather well-known businessman with some far-reaching contacts. I've known Kargan a long time. In fact you could say we're practically pals. He owes me for saving his life once or twice." Inwardly, Solo cringed at the exaggeration of his lie.

Hiska turned back to Han a thoughtful expression on his ugly, battle-marked face. "You seem to travel in some intriguing circles," he said, but the Corellian noticed that Gneg was no longer toying with his knife.

"I get around. I'm fast, good, reliable. I'm not bragging, but I find it helps if new, er, associates know up front where they stand."

"In other words, you're not easily impressed nor intimidated. I like that. I'm sure we can do business." Gneg returned to his desk-altar and produced a crystal decanter of blood red wine. "Would you care to toast our negotiations? This is Crafin vintage, expensive but worth it."

Han declined, saying, "I never drink until a deal is struck, but keep it handy for later.'

Hiska laughed. "A prudent man. I'm beginning to see why you are so valued. There aren't many in our trade like that. Perhaps, after this transaction is complete, you'd consider working for me. I assure you that you'd be amply rewarded."

"I like free lance work, but maybe we'll see."

Gneg studied his opponent carefully as he sipped at the dark liquor. "Your arm is injured,' he observed. "I know someone who could tend it for you."

"Your courier liked to play with nasty toys," replied Solo nonchalantly. "Even drunk he fought pretty well but not too many can hold their own against a Wookiee."

"Or you alone, I'd guess," complimented Hiska. "Weezel did love his vibroblades."

Han shrugged again. "I can usually manage one on one."

"I'm sure." After a few moments of silent scrutiny, Gneg seemed to relax. "Tell you what Solo. I'm a fair judge of people. You have to be to survive in our line of work. I like you. Why don't we set aside our business for a few days. I'm in no immediate need of what you offer. Stay here, in my home. The food is good, the accommodations luxurious. I'd like to get to know you better, and give you the chance to know me. Never know when you might need to speak with your... 'friends' on my behalf. What do you say?"

"Beats renting a room" answered Han. "I'm not in any particular hurry, but I do have an appointment elsewhere in a couple of weeks."

"No problem. I'm sure we'll successfully conclude our business well before that." Using a hidden call buzzer, the warlord summoned his welcoming committee of one. The tall yellow-skinned female Solo had seen at Security in Yokto entered the room through a side door concealed in the paneling. "This is Estrel. She's from Tamnu. She's not much on conversation," laughed Gneg, thoughtlessly, "but she's useful in so many other ways. She'll show you to your room. Feel free to wander the temple, but please refrain from descending below this level. We all have our secrets, don't we?"

"Sure," the Corellian answered, his curiosity instantly aroused.

"See you at dinner, then. I look forward to the discussion of your travels," dismissed Hiska.

Over the next several days, Han spent many hours with the warlord. Gneg was everything Parel Ost had said and more, but the Corellian had also formed his own opinions of the man. Hiska had some small power, to be sure, but his ambitions were much grander than his current controls. Gneg was definitely dangerous, but he was also full of his own self-worth, arrogant, given to rapid mood swings, and needy in a way Solo hoped to exploit. Intelligent, but not overly so, Hiska was ruled more by his drive, aspirations, and emotions than any other crime lord Han had dealt with. Gneg was hungry for details of the other, greater galactic warlords, pumping the Corellian nightly for any and all information. Solo gladly complied, keeping specifics vague while still satisfying his host.

While Hiska conducted his day-to-day operations, Han wandered the temple and grounds. On occasion, under the valid excuse of having gotten lost amid the labyrinthine passages, Solo had found the two entries leading to

the lower level of the residence. More than once he had heard strange sounds or seen equipment being delivered though each time he'd been careful not to be spotted. Of an evening, Gneg had hinted at something glorious he was undertaking, something that would assure him a place among the likes of Kargan Lant and Jabba. Yes when Solo had gently pressed for more information, Hiska had changed the subject deftly.

On his fifth evening under Gneg's roof, Han was growing restless. He'd successfully memorized the routines of the household and all the passageways. He knew Hiska's lackeys by name, face, and ability. It was time to push the business at hand to the fore.

After evenmeal, while Han, Hiska, and Estrel were relaxing in the spacious anteroom next to Gneg's grand hall, Solo broached the topic they'd not discussed since his arrival.

"Much as I've enjoyed this little respite and your hospitality, Hiska," the Corellian began, crossing his long legs as he spoke, "I think it's time we talked about the purpose for my being here."

"I believe you're right," agreed Gneg surprisingly. "I'll be in need of my merchandise soon anyway. However, I've decided that you'd be a welcome asset to me. Didn't I have your knife returned to you as a gesture of confidence?"

Han nodded.

"I know," continued the warlord, "that you enjoy free lancing. But what if I told you that I'm working on something so incredible that it will forever end the days when a man of your talents will be allowed to continue without a Long affiliation with a specific leader?"

"I'd say that I need to know more."

"And so you shall. Bring me the datachip you got from Weezel by tomorrow morning and I will make you richer than your wildest dreams," promised Gneg. "It's time you and I formed an alliance. With what my people are working on and your contacts that will guarantee me access to the most powerful warlords in the galactic cartel, I'm about to wreak havoc. No one, not even the Empire, will be able to stop us. In six Standard months, we'll own this galaxy. How does that sound to you?"

"Delusional," admitted Solo honestly.

Hiska started, then burst into laughter. Even Estrel with her mouthless face, managed to appear amused.

"See why I like you, Han? You're not afraid to speak your mind. Of course it sounds like fantasy. I assure you," he added, sobering quickly, "it is not. Bring me the chip and I'll prove it."

Well before sunrise, Han shed the garments loaned to him during his stay at Gneg's. Donning his own comfortable clothing and strapping on his empty holster out of habit, he secured the knife in his boot and made his way quietly to one of the few exits he knew was unguarded. Slipping into the predawn darkness, the Corellian eluded detection by Gneg's watchers, gaining the street a good two blocks from the warlord's headquarters. Retracing his earlier steps from his first arrival in Nichan, he entered a narrow, litter-strewn alley. Prying out the loose brick he'd found days ago, he removed the carefully wrapped datachip under the curious gaze of only scraggly feline out hunting vermin.

Tucking the chip inside his boot, Solo returned to Hiska's temple home. Once again, he evaded the guards, passing his room and moving up the narrow stairwell his previous explorations had revealed only the day before. At the top, he eased open the small door and stepped out onto one of the mysterious walkways that zigzagged this portion of the city.

As he gingerly picked his way across the openwork flooring, he tried not to think of how high above the streets he was. Perfectly at ease with the vast heights of space travel, Han disliked elevation when on foot. Tugging loose the cap of one of the support rails, Solo set the datachip inside. Then inching his way back the way he'd come, he prepared to meet Gneg, his bargaining card near at hand.

Skipping the morning meal, Han paced his room in Hiska's home and temple. Touching the bandage still wrapped around his left arm, he ignored the itch of the healing wound inflicted on him by Yokto Security's precautions, hoping that Parel Ost was true to his word and still keeping watch on the tracker signal hidden in the wrappings. Likewise, his thoughts flitted to the knife in his boot and its recessed emergency retrieval signal.

Over the past few days, Solo had witnessed few of the local Nichan air patrol cars, always operating at some distance from Gneg's headquarters. Small, two-man crafts, they were the only blaster equipped weapons within the city wall, according to Hiska, though the warlord also had said that the patrols preferred the use of gas to laserfire.

A knock on his door brought the Corellian out of his concentration. Opening the portal, he came eyeball to chin with the mute Estrel. A waggle of her fingers and a tilt of her head said he was to follow her. Using one of the two lifts available within the temple, they descended for the first time to the lower level. As the lift doors opened, Gneg rushed forward to meet them.

"I believe you have my chip," he stated without preamble. The permacrete walls of the lower level gave his voice an amplified effect. "Don't deny it. I know you left early this morning, though I'll admit you gave my men the slip."

So, I wasn't 't as smooth as I thought, eh ? "I didn't need a sitter,' Han said aloud. I wonder if he knows where I hid it? "Did you think I wouldn't come back, or did you maybe hope to get the chip without paying for it?" he accused, using offense as defense.

"Neither, I assure you. You're a businessman, not unlike myself. You know I'm not given to idle boast." Han knew nothing of the sort but he remained silent, ignoring the statement and the earlier unflattering comparison between himself and his 'host'. "I've promised to reveal something revolutionary to you and to make you rich as well." continued Hiska. "You wouldn't turn your back on that." Gneg began to walk through the maze-like underground, drawing Solo along with him, Estrel remaining several paces behind the two men. "Do you have it?"

"It's safe, where I can get it once you let me in on this big secret of yours," admitted the Corellian.

Curious sounds grew louder as they neared their destination though the noise was still muted enough not to penetrate the walls of the subterranean passages and the rooms directly overhead. At last, Gneg halted before a set of metal doors, two guards posted beside them.

"What you're about to see is known to less than four others. I confess, only two entirely understand it," announced Hiska with pomp showmanship. At a nod from the warlord, the doors were opened, and he led Han inside.

The room was huge, as large or larger than the grand hall above. Floor to ceiling along all three walls were rows of bottles, bumers, tubes, large containers of liquid, and computer, reminding the Corellian uneasily of a med facility. Two white-coated, gray-bearded men bustling about amid three multi-appendaged droids only added to the effect.

"Please forgive the good doctors," excused Gneg, smiling. "I'm afraid they're totally absorbed by their work. Well, what do you think?"

"I'm not sure," answered Han truthfully. "What is it? You creating a new drug?"

Hiska laughed heartily, fingering a raised scar along his chin. "Hardly. While lightly profitable, the drug business would scarcely gain me the place I will hold once this technology is put to use. I'm showing you this so you can report to your allies in the cartel that I am not some deluded fool. They know you. Your reputation, your word, seems to be trusted. Once I have the chip, we'll be able to begin and then you can take my proposal to the others, to Kargan Lant and Jabba and Cinnell of Xenor."

"We'll see," hedged Solo. "First, you'll have to tell me what this is and convince me it's worth sticking my neck out."

"Are you familiar with the cloning process, Han?" grinned Gneg ferociously, his dark eyes glinting.

The Corellian snorted derisively. "Only enough to know that not only would it be a galactic crime, but that the technology was destroyed by the Old Republic immediately following the Clone Wars. Every piece of equipment was dismantled and demolished, every record ,wiped out irretrievably, every scientist involved either killed by the clones themselves or subjected to mind- wipes, every clone slain either in the war or by mass annihilation under the Mutual Galactic Governing Body later." Though he'd not yet been born at the time of the wars, Han - like all schoolchildren - knew the historic significance of the insane cloning experiment.

"Your information is mostly correct," conceded Hiska. "However, not long ago I discovered some information that led me to believe the Old Republic had not been entirely honest about the destruction of the cloning technology. After a careful, exhaustive, and expensive search, I found these two good doctors. They'd been inhabitants of two separate asylums for many, many years. With the fall of the Old Republic and the rise of the Empire, they'd been virtually forgotten. These men are the last surviving scientists who worked on the original cloning process. The mind-wipes you mentioned were not entirely successful, you see. Aside from being quite mad when left alone, these two still retain the necessary knowledge to once again create clones. After I assembled what you see here, they settled into work quite eagerly. Though neither man is capable of even a day without heavy medication, I assure you that their scientific genius remains intact."

"How did you. . ." Han was horrified, but he feigned admiration to cover his shock.

"How did I find the technological pieces?" chuckled Gneg. "It wasn't easy. I've nearly exhausted my considerable funds, raising prices on goods, selling some of my treasures, cutting corners here and there. With large bribes, I gained access to the information that much of the cloning technology was so advanced that even the Old Republic saw its potential. While declaring it destroyed, staged elaborate news coverage of the event to appease a nervous populace, they actually dispersed the components throughout the galaxy. Many of the recent industries that have produced such wonders as the long-range communications units, the increased shielding for ships traveling the galaxy, the faster computers of today, even the very food processors used aboard luxury space cruisers, have come about due to that supposedly demolished technology.

'Bit by bit piece by piece, I bought stole, bribed away every last part of it. All I lack is that seemingly innocent datachip you possess. Once the doctors have that, the last segment of the puzzle will be unlocked. Think of it, Han! The greatest criminal minds of our time cloned to operate freely, each clone identical in appearance, cunning, knowledge. We'll have our own form of immortality! With the accelerated growth and mental duplication transferral data on that chip, we can own this galaxy in months!"

"Why share this with the others,' stalled Solo, his mind reeling with the enormity of what was before him.

"I'm greedy, Han, not stupid. No one crime lord, no matter how many clones he makes of himself - and there is a limitation to maintain integrity of the brain cells, you know - could ever hope to run the whole thing. No, I figure there's more than enough for us all. Split perhaps among myself and the five biggest members of the galactic cartel we can overrun the Empire in one, two Standard years. We'll be in charge. Do you see?"

"Yes I see." I see a power-hungry lunatic with delusions of grandeur, thought the Corellian woefully. If the Empire ever got its claws on this resurrected technology, and Han had no reason to doubt that it would, life throughout the galaxy would be forever under the Emperor's steel talons. He couldn't allow that to happen.

"Now, the chip, my friend," urged Gneg.

"It's hidden. I'll have to get it," Solo explained.

"We'll go together," Hiska stated, a frown accenting the jagged scar along his brow. "Where?"

Han's brain felt ready to explode, his heart pounding heavily, but he kept his voice even. "On the old gangway system, near the wall. Not far. I'll show you."

Accompanied by the two guards who'd been on duty outside the lab and Estrel, the Corellian and Gneg made their way to the narrow stairwell Han had discovered high in the temple attic.

"How interesting," remarked Hiska as they climbed single-file up the confining steps, leaving Estrel at the doorway below. "I'd forgotten this existed," Gneg confessed as he brushed a cobweb aside. "Resourceful of you to find it."

"I had several days to explore, remember?" replied Solo over his shoulder. He pushed open the rusty door and stepped out to the tiny landing beyond. As he'd hoped, there was no room for more than he and the war-lord, the guards remaining trapped in the constricted stairwell. "It's this way," he said, stepping onto the widely spaced boards that comprised the walkway's flooring.

"Get it and return," ordered Gneg, clearly less at ease than Han himself.

"Sure you can trust me?" the Corellian challenged. "I might drop it, and then where would you be?"

"Fine," growled Hiska. "I'm afraid of nothing, least of all a little height." But his bravado didn't reach his eyes as they darted to the city streets far below where traffic was at mid-morning minimum.

Backing onto the gangway, Solo felt every muscle in his body tense. Behind Gneg, the two guards positioned themselves on the landing, watching. "I'd order your henchmen to stay back," suggested Han. "This framework's pretty unstable. I don't know how much weight it can hold."

Reluctantly, Hiska shouted at his guards to stay where they were. Turning to face Solo, he pulled two long, double-bladed knives from his boot and rear waist-band. "I don't know what game you're playing, Solo, but I won't be trifled with. Produce the chip now or I'll filet you and toss you over the side. My men can always rip this thing apart board by board, if need be."

"What makes you think I haven't lied to lure you up here?' questioned the Corellian, stooping to pull his own knife free while depressing the bidden emergency retrieval signal for Security Agent Ost. "Don't let me down," swore Solo beneath his breath.

"Oh, did I forget to mention that Estrel is a telepath? Not especially gifted, mind you, but she can spot a blatant lie easily enough," Gneg bragged, proud of his secret. "Besides, why bring me up here alone? You're no match for me in a knife fight, Solo. If even inept Weezel managed to cut you, I'd kill you before you could scream."

"Maybe I have reinforcements on the way," hinted Han "Maybe your whole, sick operation is about to come to an end. Maybe I'm not as greedy or as ambitious as you thought.'

"Then you're a fool. I own this city. They wouldn't dare move against me on the word of an offworlder with dubious criminal connections."

"Maybe not," acknowledged Solo, "but what if Agent Parel Ost was involved? Think they'd go against Regional Security?' The stricken look that flitted across Gneg's homely face was Han all the answer he needed.

Shouting over his shoulder, the warlord commanded his guards, "Get to the lab. Get the computer records and the scientists out of here. Now! I can handle this scum." As the guards scurried to do his bidding, Hiska turned a hate-filled glare on Solo. His lips pulled back to bare his teeth in a feral grin. "I'm gonna enjoy cutting you, you traitorous piece of slime."

"Traitorous? Me? Why? Because I've got the good sense the gods gave an insect? You're the fool, Gneg. The Empire would take over your grand experiment before you knew what hit you. Don't kid yourself. You'd plunge this galaxy into an even blacker depth than it already knows. Aren't things bad enough already?" He dropped into a fighting stance, his left hand gripping the railing near where he'd hidden the vital datachip. "Even those in the cartel, those you so desperately want to be like and never will, even they aren't stupid enough to do what you're trying. If I went to them with your scheme, they'd skewer and barbecue you themselves.'

His words had the desired effect at last as Gneg lunged forward with his blades. Han released the rail and slashed with his own knife, dodging Hiska's second blade with less than inches to spare while his right arm struck aside Gneg's first and Solo's own knife found flesh. Blood squirted from the slash the Corellian left in Hiska's upper arm, but the warlord seemed only further frenzied by the pain.

Several times more, they slashed and lunged at one another, neither gaining the advantage necessary to end the conflict. Hiska's blade nicked Han's left forearm, Solo getting no further strikes against the flashing dual knives of his opponent.

Backing away, Han felt his heel slide between two of the boards at his feet and become wedged. In front of him, Gneg recognized Solo's dilemma and charged, fury blinding him. The warlord was good, and on level ground, without the ashes of his greatest dream clouding his thought, Han admitted that he would have been no match for Gneg. Behind him the Corellian could hear the approaching engines of the Nichan air patrol, but he knew by the sound that they would not reach him before Hiska struck.

Clasping the unsteady rail, desperately relying on the Corellian good fortune that so often had let him down, Han kicked out with his free right leg. The toe of his boot caught Gneg squarely in the throat as the force of his rage carried him headfirst at his quarry. Choking, gasping for air, the warlord struggled forward a few steps more, cutting the air inches in front of Solo's face. Almost regrettfully, the Corellian plunged his knife into Gneg's chest driving it upward and sending Hiska toppling backward as his knives slipped out of his lifeless grasp to clatter through the gangway toward the streets below.

Panting and shaken Han worked his trapped heel loose. The air cars were hovering above the temple now, at least a dozen coordinated patrols storming inside from street level. But Han was not finished. Retrieving the datachip, he deliberately put it in his mouth and swallowed. Then, edging his way past the dead Hiska Gneg, he regained the narrow stairwell.

Racing through the many corridors, Han found the one he sought at last and rushed down it. He heard his name called out by Parel Ost's voice as he ran, but he couldn't hesitate. The house was in chaos as battles were being fought and Gneg's lackeys rounded up, but Solo had only one thing on his mind. Reaching the lower level he ran on knife in hand, toward the secret lab and its monstrous secret.

Rounding the final bend, the Corellian skidded to a halt. The floor was slick with blood, and he nearly fell, but Han regained his balance rapidly. The two guards sent to secure the scientists and computer records lay sprawled like broken dolls in front of the lab doors, their throats expertly sliced into macabre grins. Beyond the doorway, Solo spotted the lifeless body of one of the scientists, his chest a sea of red, the floor beneath him a bed of blood.

Moving cautiously now, the Corellian side-slipped into the forbidden lab. The lights, so bright only a short time ago, were now dimmed. Adjusting to

the reduced illumination, Solo crouched, ready to prevent the departure of anyone left inside. A quick glance revealed the demolition inflicted on the room. Broken glass littered the floor, tubing snaked crazily along countertops, equipment was smashed. Even the droids had been de-activated and lay where they'd been heaped together in a mass of mechanical limbs. Computer screens had been shattered and their disks snapped in two.

A shadow moved at the rear of the room diverting Han's attention from the ruin around him. "Come out whoever you are," he ordered. "It's over."

It is not over, he heard clearly in his mind, though no voice had spoken.

"Who's there? Show yourself. Security will be here any second."

You must go. Get everyone out. The words echoed in his brain. I am about to annihilate this room and all its secrets. The temple will collapse.

"Estrel? Is that you?"

Yes, go! Quickly! The words formed in his mind.

"What about you?" Han pushed.

I will die. My life is complete, thanks to you. Cloning must never happen again. I remember You do not. My family died in the Clone Wars. Now, go!

"I can't leave you."

You have no choice. Nor do I. No one else must see. GO!

Hesitantly, then accepting the continued urging in his head, Han sped back to the upper level. Shouting at the top of his lungs, he warned the others. "Out! Everyone get out! This place is gonna blow!"

No sooner had the Security personnel and their prisoners reached the street outside than a muffled explosion shook the ground. Moments later, a second, louder explosion erupted from within the building, spraying permglass and stones dangerously close to the onlookers. With a deafeningly loud groan, like that of a dying prehistoric beast, the temple caved in on itself.

"That was it?" questioned Paret Ost dubiously when Han finished his report.

They were back at Yokto security, Chewbacca having greeted his friend with a long, angry tirade broken only by the security agents intervention. Now, Solo had completed telling his story to Ost and the recording droid.

"Yeah, that's it," the Corellian said. "Why Estrel turned on him, I haven't a clue. That's your problem, if it matters."

"I guess not. Are you sure you've told me everything, captain?' the agent pushed. "It's hard to believe that this whole thing was over the creation of a new drug."

"A mind-controlling drug, don't forget,' insisted Solo emphatically. "Had Gneg succeeded, and he was damned close, the implications could have been catastrophic.' He shuddered with genuine fear for the close call the galaxy had just unwittingly escaped.

"I suppose so. A lot of folks have tried to create just such a drug for a long time. It doesn't sound like something Hiska would've loved. All right. Well, I have your statement. Thank you for your cooperation and for helping us put an end to Gneg's myriad plots."

"You left me no choice, did you?" grumbled Han. "Is my ship fully fueled?"

"Per our agreement, yes," replied Parel Ost. "May I ask where you're bound?"

"Sure, you can ask', Solo laughed. "Good-bye, Agent Ost. I doubt you'll ever see me again." He rose and went to join Chewbacca for the ride to his ship. He couldn't wait to put Azzia and all its nightmares as far behind him as possible.

Epilogue:

"That's one planet we're never going back to, Chewie," announced Han solemnly once the Falcon had cleared Azzia's atmosphere. "Punch in the coordinates for Tatooine, will you? No relaxing for us yet. I'd better go and explain to Jabba about that shipment we were forced to dump before he puts a price on my sorry head. Soon as that's straightened out, you and me are going on a nice quiet vacation. We've earned it."

While Chewbacca tapped in the necessary calculations, Solo leaned back, his hands laced behind his neck, and sighed. "If I ever', he thought

aloud, "am tempted to take on passengers again, I swear I'm charging them triple the rate. At least!"

Beside him, his Wookiee partner chortled and shook his head.

End

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