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THE WHITE FEATHER

by T S Weddell

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Prologue

The steambath heat of Corell's summer had ended, and the more clement weather of autumn had brought a chill to the early morning air. A cold breeze was blowing, driving bits of paper and other debris before it in little whirling eddies through the twisting alleyways of Port Cor's docking facilities. Yet it was not the temperature that made the hurrying figure shiver and pull his jacket more tightly around his body as he made his way through dawning twilight. It was the weight of the horrible knowledge he carried that froze his blood.

As a member of the newly formed Alliance to restore the Republic, he had come to Corell six months earlier to work as a computer technician in one of the planet's largest shipyards in hopes of picking up useful information about the latest design in Imperial fighting ships. He had been successful beyond his wildest dreams, or in this case, nightmares. Only a few hours before, he had come across evidence of a project whose sheer scope of evil was unprecedented even for the Empire. The weapon was still in its initial design phase, and he had been unable to get any further details, but even the mere news that the Empire was planning to build such a monstrosity had to reach the ears of the Rebel command, and quickly. It was imperative that he get off planet with his information, and yet, as he hurried through the chill, grey early morning half-light, he knew it might already be too late for him.

As he ran, he kept nervously patting his breast pocket, feeling for the security key to the docking bay where a small space yacht lay berthed, put

there in secret six months before for just such an emergency as this. A turn of a corner brought him within sight, and a fleeting glimpse of white shelled troopers made him duck back, flattening himself against the cold plasteel wall of the alleyway. The news had preceded him.

He removed the magnetic key card from his pocket and dropped it into the gutter, grinding it to fragments beneath his foot. It was only a danger to him now. He would have to find some other way into space; far more than his own life as at stake. Grimly, the young man turned and melted back into the shadows.

Part 1

"A friend of mine made a decision once. Thought he was doing the moral thing "

On the day that it all blew up in his face, Han Solo was a young man who seemed to have life by the tail.

At just two months past his nineteenth birthday, only a slight ranginess of build lingered to recall the skinny youth Solo had been, and he had about him the self-assured, competent look of the professional soldier he had worked so hard to become. Thanks to his two years of cadet training, Solo was a proficient pilot and navigator, able to fly anything from a speeder bike to a heavy class Star Destroyer, although it was with the smaller craft, the one-man snub fighters, that his talents lay. He had even seen battle on one or two occasions, handling himself well in situations where mere survival was an accomplishment. His fellow pilots had given him a nickname, Slick, and it was well-earned.

The Corellian Starfleet, which Han had joined at age sixteen, no longer existed as a separate entity, having been absorbed by the Imperial Star Fleet at the same time as the nationalization of the shipyards the previous year. At the time, the upcoming takeover had been a source of apprehension among the ranks, especially the enlisted men unable to follow the example of their officers, a number of whom had resigned their commissions rather than become sworn Imperials. So far, however, the worst fears had not materialised; other than the transfer of most of the remaining Corellian officers and their replacement by seasoned Imperials, little had outwardly changed even the uniforms; for the moment, remained the same.

Solo, who had a little less than a year left to serve of his obligatory four-year stint, had decided to stay on with the service after his time was up, for his military career was flourishing. His abilities had impressed his commanding officer and he had been unofficially taken under the man's wing, with all the pleasant perquisites that such a patronage afforded. Han was aware that his name topped the promotion list: "Captain Solo" it had a nice ring to it, he thought.

Han had a good reason for looking forward to his advancement. Officers of Captain's grade and above qualified for on-base family quarters and extra pay allotment, and he was expecting to have a need for such amenities in the near future. For the first time in his life, Han was head-over-heels, unreservedly in love. The girl in question was beautiful, polished, the daughter of one of Port Cor's patrician families, not at all the sort of woman Han was used to. He had met her at an officers' club function he had been invited to by virtue of his friendship with his C.O. So far, he had done little more than give her a chaste goodnight kiss, due in part to his respectful awe of her, but mainly to her skilful parrying of his advances. In spite of this, Solo's almost legendary patronization of the portside pleasure houses had ceased entirely. That had to prove he was pretty far gone over her, Han thought amusedly but in any case, he had something to save his money for now. As soon as he had his Captain's braid, he would pop the question, and he knew the answer would be yes. With her beauty and breeding, Darla would make the perfect officer's lady, and with her at his side, who could predict how high his career would take them? Han hadn't done badly for a poor street kid from the wrong side of the river not badly at all.

Han was friendly and outgoing with his fellow pilots and was in turn well-liked by them, but the love of solitude that had marked him as a child had not disappeared. Often, in the few hours of free time between reveille and the beginning of his duty shift, this need for privacy drove him to shun the noisy camaraderie of the barracks and take solitary walks throughout the city, going wherever the mood struck him. On this particular morning, his path had taken him down to the river, where he had sat alone on the levee, tossing in pebbles and watching the play of the clear yellow autumn sunlight on the slowing moving waters. The river was brown and it smelled, polluted by the chemical runoff from the shipyards and the overloaded sewers of the slums beyond, but that had not stopped Han and his friends from swimming in it in years past during the worst of the summer heat, splashing naked in its murky currents until they were spotted and chased out by some passing policeman.

Often, as he sat, Han directed his gaze across the river to the high bluffs which rose on the other side. The high grounds to the west of the

river was considered to be choice, and the more affluent citizens of Port Cor made their homes there, away from the dirt and noise of the yards and the space port that lay in the city proper. Somewhere, in one of the comfortable houses to the west, Darla was just now waking, no doubt yawning prettily and stretching beneath her soft satin quilt. Han savoured the mental picture of her blonde hair strewn abundantly over her pillow and down the gentle curves of her chest, until a sensation approaching discomfort in his groin made him banish the scene from his thoughts. Sometimes chastity, even self-imposed, had its drawbacks .

On his way back to the Starfleet landing field, Han took a shortcut through the civilian section of the port facility. Solo knew the maze of docking bays and alleyways like the back of his hand, having come there often as a child to watch the big ships taking off and maybe to beg a half-credit or two from the embarking passengers. Of all his buddies, Han had showed the greatest genius for it, melting the hearts of the older ladies in particular with his large, mournful hazel eyes, and he had invariably come away with his pockets full.

Han was still grinning faintly at the memory when he noticed a minor obstruction up ahead. A group of dockhands were attempting to manoeuvre a large anti-grav sledge full of machine parts around a tight corner. For the moment, the sledge blocked the entire alley. Han checked his wrist chronometer. He had more than enough time left before he came on duty; there was no point in doubling back and trying to find an alternate route. He lounged back against the open doorway of a nearby bay to wait the jam out.

There was a ship inside, an old, battered passenger freighter making preparations to take off, and for some reason, it caught Han's eye. It was larger than any of the ships he had had the opportunity to work on in Bars Freejer's repair shop, and it had obviously seen a lot of action. The hull had been patched in so many places that the welded-on metal gave the ship a weird piebald look. Her captain, a tired-looking man in his middle sixties, stood at the foot of the landing ramp, supervising the loading of passengers and the stowing of cargo.

Han surveyed the man's shabby clothing with a hint of smugness. Ship's ownership was the ultimate achievement of a spacer's career few were lucky enough to attain it and look what it got you! And to think that if he hadn't played his cards right, that was the same sort of fate he himself might be heading for, Han told himself with an air of self-congratulation.

The old freighter's passenger roster was as motley as she was an elderly couple who held hands with an air of suppressed excitement as they walked up the gangway, perhaps off on their first space voyage as a kind

of second honeymoon; a tall young man in a dark jacket who kept glancing nervously over his shoulder as he boarded; a little girl clutching a worn-looking stuffed bantha as she trailed after her luggage-laden parents. Yes, a real mixed bag, Han thought as he watched the procession up the landing ramp. Not the kind of rich passengers or luxury ship that would have made good pickings during his panhandling days.

He would have watched longer, but he saw that the anti grav sledge had negotiated the turn and the way up ahead was clear. Quickly, he turned and went on his way.

* * *

Telzer Kreth, Imperial-appointed Chief of Planetary Security, looked up with annoyance as a nervous-looking junior entered his office without pausing to knock. Kreth was not a man who was used to such disturbances. The Chief of Planetary Security reported directly to the Sector Governor himself, and with the authority of the Corellian High Council becoming increasingly curtailed, Kreth was the closest thing to real power on the planet.

"Forgive me, sir," the young man began, "but we have a matter which requires your immediate attention. Last night, a computer technician at the design division of Incom Yards disappeared without authorization from his work shift. A check of his living quarters showed that he had moved out in a hurry. We have reason to believe that the man may be a rebel agent."

"Incom? That's the Empire's top secret think tank! Who's the idiot who gave the man security clearance? I'll see that he's assigned to permanent duty of Kessel!"

Kreth glared while the young officer continued. "It's even worse than that, sir. The people at Incom fear that a computer malfunction may have allowed him access to information concerning the initial design specifications of something they called 'The Project'."

Kreth stiffened. "Have you issued an order for his arrest and notified the Port?"

The assistant nodded. "As soon as I heard, sir. We checked the Port Registry. He had a space yacht berthed in one of the long term storage bays. Under an assumed name, of course, but that was easy enough to cross check from the retina scans. I posted troopers outside the bay, but he never turned up."

"Of course not, you fool! I should have been told about this long since." Kreth fumed. "Have you checked the commercial passenger listings?"

"Yes, sir, but it took a great deal of time. The volume of traffic at the post is 27% above normal at present. He booked last minute passage aboard a tramp freighter called the Mimban Lady."

"Then send troopers to intercept him and this time don't frighten him off!"

The young man began to sweat visibly. "It's too late for that. The Mimban Lady took off five minutes ago. I came to you as soon as "

Telzer Kreth cut him off with a look that would have vaporized solid neutronium. If news of Tarkin's little toy got out, the poor nameless fool who had been responsible for the rebel spy's security clearance wouldn't be the only one serving a tour on Kessel. He stabbed his comlink button. "Get me Commander Danzer at Starfleet immediately!"

"Telzer, old boy. What can I do for you today?" Reg Danzer's voice held a note of pleasure. Both members of the growing class of so-called "new men", those who had hitched their fortunes to the rising star of the Empire, Kreth and Danzer had become friends upon their simultaneous transfer to Corell the previous year.

"No time for pleasantries. We have an emergency." Kreth snapped. "A ship called the Mimban Lady took off from Port Cor about six minutes ago with an Alliance spy on board."

Danzer quickly punched his desk computer for information on the ship's physical description and flight plan that had been filed with Central Port Control. She was old, slow moving. Nearly ten minutes remained before the freighter could climb far enough out of the system's gravity well to attempt to jump to hyperspace. "No problem. I'll send a cruiser to intercept and take the man into custody."

"That's not good enough. He's in possession of some extremely sensitive information. We can't take the chance that he might have already have passed it on to someone else on board the Mimban Lady. Do you take my meaning?"

Danzer swallowed. "That's a civilian ship, Telzer. Do you know what you're saying?"

"That information can't get out. It'll be both our careers if it does."

A pause. "I understand. I'll send my fighters. One group the fewer men who know about this the better."

"Good." Kreth answered grimly. "Are you certain that three fighters can do the job?"

Danzer nodded. As head of the planet's star fleet, he commanded many men and vessels, but he had started out as a pilot himself and his fighters were his real love. "Don't worry. Solo's group is up today. I know the man personally. He's a good soldier he'll follow orders."

* * *

As his snub broke free of Corell's gravity, Han Solo felt the familiar rush of exhilaration that always came over him in space. This was where he was the happiest, up above the mirk and goo of the atmosphere, with only the hard-edged stars for company. Strange as it might seem to the planet-bound, it was only in the airless void of space that Solo could breathe freely.

Han flew his ship as if it were an extension of his own body, subliminally taking in the glowing array of gauges and dials on the panel before him, enjoying the smooth feel of the controls under his hands. The Headhunter was a sweet ship and he was going to miss it, even though he was looking forward to flying its replacement, an Imperial designed and built flying called the TIE. Rumour had it that the TIE was more responsive, more manoeuvrable, faster all in all, a much more deadly weapon of war than the snub. Its only flaw was that it lacked the natural stability of the older, Corellian designed ships, making it extremely difficult to handle when damaged, as frequently happened in the course of a battle. Among the test pilots, the TIE had a nasty reputation they called it a widow maker. Solo wasn't too worried about that. It was his considered opinion that any man with his balls on straight ought to be able to fly any ship under the worst of conditions.

A beeping noise from the telesponder broke into Han's train of thought. His eyes dropped to the instrument panel, taking in the flashing letters as the on-board computer translated the incoming coded message: "See ship on heading 119 degrees mark 17. Code 23X."

Solo came alert. Code 23X indicated a hostile military target to be intercepted and destroyed.

Han activated his ship-to-ship radio. "Willi, Tex, we've just received a 23X. Do you copy?"

The answers came back quickly. "Affirmative." "Aye, aye, Slick." Both voices were calm and cool, as was Han's, but Solo knew that his men were sharing the surge of adrenalin that was charging into his own blood. All of them had seen battle before, but never over their home planet. Han pulled his ship out of its high synchronous orbit about Corell and sent it streaking out toward interstellar space, his men following after.

* * *

"Captain, the aft sensors show a blip several thousand kilometers astern coming up fast."

The co-pilot, a chunky, pleasant-faced middle-aged woman turned in her chair and grinned. She took a long drag from a smoke-stick that, much to the distress of the rest of the bridge crew, smelled exactly like burning rope. "What's the matter, Cap forget to pay your docking fee again?"

"Sweet gods, I hope it's nothing like that," Captain Nils Darkrunner replied wearily. He was an old man and could remember the day when a free trader could fly from one end of the galaxy to the other without having to bribe a port official or be hauled to by some Imperial patrol vessel for "random inspection". All that had changed since the coming of the Empire, but Corell hadn't gone that way at least not yet. "Can you tell what type of vessel it is?"

The co-pilot adjusted her sensor scope, frowned, and shook her head. "Chewbacca," she said to the engineer's mate. "see if you can get me more resolution."

The giant Wookiee turned to his console and began to twiddle several dials. No result. He growled with annoyance and gave the instrument panel a surreptitious thump with the flat of his hand. Immediately, the co-pilot's expression brightened.

"Thanks! That's better. It isn't one ship, Cap; it's three, flying in close formation. Can't be bigger than snub fighters."

Darkrunner grunted. "Then it's nothing to worry about. They can't have anything to do with us."

* * *

Flying the forward position as group leader, Solo was the first to make visual contact with the target vessel. As yet, the fleeing ship was just a tiny glowing point of light against the seemingly motionless starfield, but she was growing fast. Feeling a familiar tightening of the muscles of his stomach and spine, Han activated his computer assisted gunsight. As a Code 23X, the ship would be heavily armed and hostile; speed and manoeuvrability were a tiny, unshielded snub's only defense. One hit from those big guns and the show was over. His thumbs ready on the firing buttons, Han began his first run, wondering if this was the morning the famed Solo luck would run out.

At the last minute, close enough for the first time to get a good look at his target, Han saw the familiar piebald pattern on the hull. Something froze, deep in his gut.

"My god," he whispered in horror, wrenching his fingers back from the firing controls. He shouted frantically into his radio. "Abort! Abort the run!"

Too late: his men were following closely behind him. First Willi, then Tex fired, and bolts of pure energy tore into their target.

* * *

"Holy shit!" The co-pilot hastily stubbed out the remains of her smoke-stick, which she had bitten through in the shock of the moment. When it had become apparent that the approaching fighters meant business, she had barely had time to activate the deflector shields. As it was, the force of the second bolt had taken out the communications panel in a burst of sparks and smoky fire, which Chewbacca was busily hosing down with a small hand-held chemical extinguisher. "Are they crazy? We've got passengers aboard!"

Captain Darkrunner looked grim. He had heard disquieting rumours of actions by the Empire that went beyond mere petty corruption summary confiscation of ships, midnight "disappearances" of citizens critical of the government, and other vague incidents whose details were barely hinted at, all adding up to a sinister pattern. Previously, conditional by a sense of security fostered by years of living under the Old Republic, he had dismissed it all as idle talk, but now "It may not be a mistake. Even if it is, we have no way of telling them."

"Do you want me to fire back, Cap?"

The old man shook his head. "This old tub's guns against them? You might just as well suit up and heave bricks at them off the hull! Nope,

save the power for the shields. Our only hope is to make hyperspace before they blow." He sighed. The snubs could fly rings around his old, lumbering ship, like tiny, darting sparrows harrying a ponderously moving Gliderbird. And there was still so far to go.

* * *

"What the hell's the matter with you, Slick?" Tex's voice demanded. "Why did you hold fire?"

"It's gotta be a mistake," Han shouted. "That's a civilian ship!"

"How could you know that? Headquarters doesn't make mistakes. We got the order. The course is correct."

"I know, dammit! I saw the ship on the ground." Han said.

"Disobeying a 23X is a capital offense!" Willi's voice breaking in over the radio sounded frightened.

There are women and children aboard that ship!" Han insisted.

"What's that to me?" Tex's transmission held a new icy note. "Orders are orders."

To Han's horror, his men began to circle back for another run.

* * *

"Here they come again!"

Once more, the Mimban Lady rocked as she took a hit. This time, the dials and gauges on the co-pilot's panel told a sad story.

"That tears it we've lost the shields." The old ship was limping along as best she could, rapidly nearing the point where she could escape into hyperspace, but the escape would not come soon enough. The co-pilot turned to her old friend with a look of disbelief. "What the hell's going on here, Captain?"

Darkrunner shook his head. "We may never know." He said sadly.

The sensors showed another fighter coming in fast; the Mimban Lady was totally defenseless against it. The Captain watched its approach with an eerie sense of calm. Strange, he thought, that it should come to this. Long ago, when he had first taken to space, during the old days of peace

under the protection of the Republic and the Jedi Knights, he had thought that if he ever met his end under the guns, it would be at the hands of pirates or hostile aliens, not the authorities themselves. He waited for the energy bolt that would tear his ship wide open, wondering with dispassionate curiosity if his last conscious sensation would be the searing pain of explosion or the suffocating cold of the vacuum.

* * *

"My gods, he's really going to do it," Han whispered helplessly as he watched Tex begin to make his final run. Willi's ship had gone first, and Solo had seen the tell-tale flare of failing shields, as the shot hit home. The old freighter was now a sitting duck for the next hit.

"For the gods' sake, Tex!" Han pleaded.

"You can do what you like, Solo," Tex's voice cracked coldly back. "I'm doing what I'm told."

For the next few seconds, time seemed to stand still for Han as he hovered on the edges of the fight. He agreed with Willi: the idea of disobeying a top priority order frightened him. Such an order was never issued without good reason. Perhaps the destruction of the ship and her passengers, civilians though they might be, was necessary to the safety of the planet in some inconceivable way. It would be all too easy to stand back and let it happen the innocent blood would not be on his hands.

It was the memory of the little stuffed bantha that made up his mind for him. A howl of negation forced its way up and out of him as he wrenched his controls around hard and pushed his ship to full throttle, sending it hurtling sunward directly into the path of Tex's snub, which had already begun its final, fatal strafing run. The deadly game of chicken forced the startled other pilot to turn aside, but not before one of his shots hit Han's Headhunter, taking out the starboard stabiliser.

"Goddammit, Solo, are you crazy? Start another run, Willi! Don't let her get away!"

But it was too late. As they watched, the old freighter made the jump to hyperspace, leaving them staring at an empty starfield.

* * *

As the stars of Corell streaked out of existence, the only sound heard on the bridge of the Mimban Lady was the relieved exhalation of three pent-up breaths.

"I think I can die happy now; I've seen everything." The co-pilot said slowly. "First, they do their damndest to blow our asses out of space, and then one of them lets us get away. What was that all about, Cap?"

"I don't know what all that was about, and I don't want to." Darkrunner said with an air of finality. "But if we have any brains at all, we'll take this ship as far away from the Corell system as we can go, and we'll stay there."

Pausing only to light another smoke, the co-pilot said, "I know this ain't no democracy, Cap, but I agree with you!"

The Wookiee's brow furrowed as he heard what the two humans said, but, ever one to keep his own counsel, he turned back to his board in silence.

* * *

With a terse, "It's your funeral, Solo!" Tex and Willi had cut off radio communication and sped off sunward, leaving Han alone in the blackness of space. He was too preoccupied with getting his crippled snub back home to worry about the ramifications of his actions. Tex's shot seemed to have damaged more than the stabilizer; the smell of burning wire filled the cockpit, and every so often a dial on the control panel winked out with a spitting noise and a shower of sparks. It was a long, lonely journey back from the outer reaches of the solar system and the bright globe of Corell as it grew larger and finally filled his viewscreen had never looked so welcome.

As Han entered the planet's atmosphere, the trouble began in earnest. The control felt heavy and sluggish beneath his hands and the snub pitched and fluttered like a falling leaf as it fell toward the tiny speck of Port Cor far below. It took all of Han's strength to keep control of his ship, and as he got near enough to Port Cor to make out the lazy bend of the river and the grid pattern of the yards, his breathing became rapid. From here on down there was no bailing out; the unwritten code of the fleet said that a pilot ditched his crippled ship in the river or rode it out to crash in the countryside rather than risk dropping it on a crowded section of the city. Not for the first time, Han cursed the custom of having a large population center adjacent to a busy port.

Luck was with Han that day. The damaged Headhunter skidded to a stop on the runway just as the controls gave out for good with a final puff of smoke. Han cracked his cockpit canopy and leaned back with a shaky sigh, coughing and fanning the acrid fumes away from his tearing eyes. The material of his flight suit was soaked with sweat right down to the elbows.

With the natural elation that came of getting back down safely, Han's basic sense of optimism began to resurface. "It hadda be a mistake," he told himself, thinking back on the recent battle and the disaster he had so narrowly prevented. "They'll thank me for it once I explain."

But as he saw the black helmeted military police swarm out onto the tarmac and rush to surround his ship with their laser rifles drawn, Han knew for a certainty that it had been no mistake.

* * *

Part II

"Who's going to believe a Wookiee?"

Telzer Kreth's hand was still shaking from the monumental dressing down he had just received, as he reached out to stab his comlink button. It was a disaster; total disaster. In the Imperial lexicon, Corell and Telzer Kreth along with it were no longer "trustworthy", and several lucrative jobs, including "The Project", had been taken away from the planet's shipbuilding industry, to be bestowed elsewhere most likely on the less well established shipyards of Corell's rival planet, Botha. As for Kreth's career, he doubted that much could be salvaged, but he would try.

A small light came on in his comlink set, indicating that his call had gone through.

"Danzer," he stormed, "that pilot of yours that Solo this is all his fault! I want an example made of him! I want his execution to be public and I want it to be soon!"

Reg Danzer's holo-image looked as if he had aged ten years in the space of one day; Kreth was not the only one with troubles. "I don't like it, Telzer;" he said. "You and I both know that the order we issued was necessary, but legal? I doubt it. This is Corell, not Imperial Center there'll be a public outcry if it comes out. And Solo has the right to a trial."

"Good. A public trial will focus the attention on Solo and away from us."

"There may be trouble about that. God only knows how, but Solo found out the truth about the Mimban Lady. He'll talk."

"Let him talk. There'll be no one not one shred of evidence to corroborate his story."

Danzer nodded. "Believe me, Kreth," he said with the sincere air of one who has seen salvation and grasped at it, "I'll see to it. By the time we're through with him, we'll have made Solo look so bad that no one would believe him if he said the sun rises in the morning."

Kreth's lips pursed with grim satisfaction. "Good. I want this trial to send a message to the Emperor. This won't happen again."

* * *

Captain Nils Darkrunner looked up from his desk as his engineer's mate knocked and entered.

"Yes, Chewbacca. How can I help you?"

The old man's brow furrowed as the Wookiee stated his business.

"You want to leave? I'm sorry, Chewbacca; I don't understand." In the year or so that the giant creature had been with the ship, Darkrunner had learned only enough of the Wookiee's language for the most rudimentary sort of communication.

Chewbacca removed a small slate from his side pouch and scrawled a brief message, repeating his previous words slowly: "Must return to Corell. Barzoun at the Krayt Dragon tavern in Por Cor holds my IOU."

"I see; you have a debt to repay and to do that you have to leave us." Darkrunner smiled inwardly. It was a testament to the Wookiee's character that the money had been lent in the first place. Most spacers would have thought nothing of skipping out on the debt. "I'm sorry about the change in our itinerary, but you understand that the Mimban Lady can't risk going near the Corell system again. Not after what happened."

The Wookiee nodded.

"You're a good man, Chewbacca. I'll be sorry to lose you."

Chewbacca held up his slate. "Sorry, too. I must do this."

"I'll see to it that your pay is ready." The Captain held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Chewbacca, and good luck."

* * *

If Han Solo had been so naive as to entertain any doubts that his conviction by the hastily convened military tribunal was anything but a foregone conclusion, having one of his own judges step down off the bench to testify against him certainly should have dispelled them.

Commander Reg Danzer rose from his seat, walked over, and sat down in the witness chair with the placid air of a fat house-tabby settling itself onto a sun-warmed cushion.

"Commander Danzer," the Prosecutor General began smoothly, "you personally oversaw the incident in question, did you not?"

"Hey that's illegal. Shouldn't you be objecting or something?" Han whispered to his court-appointed advocate, a thin, wispy little man who spent most of his time in court silently fiddling with his pencil and doing his damndest to appear invisible. Solo couldn't very well blame him the man was between a rock and a hard place. Losing this case would look bad on his record, but successfully defending a man who, it was fast becoming apparent, was being turned into a planetary scape-goat would look even worse. True to form the man acted if he hadn't heard Han at all and continued to stare steadfastly down at his hands.

But someone else had heard. "The prisoner is instructed to remain silent." Snapped one of the other judges, a full fleet admiral. The Starfleet had spared nothing when it came to Han's trial. There was enough brass at the front of the courtroom to blind you if you looked at it too hard, Han thought sardonically. It was almost funny, except that it was his life that hung in the balance.

"And now, as I was asking before we were so rudely interrupted " the prosecutor prompted.

"I was appraised of the, ah, situation at approximately 0900 hours, and I immediately instructed the comp operators to issue a Code 23X order to the fighter group on patrol."

"For the information of the court, Commander, what does a Code 23X signify?"

"A Code 23X is issued only in the circumstances of the gravest risk to the security of the planet. It indicates an armed and hostile military

target to be destroyed at all costs." Danzer paused to let the information have its effect on the courtroom spectators and to direct a disapproving glance in Han's direction. "The action took place out of direct radio communication, but as soon as I became aware of Lieutenant Solo's mutinous and cowardly behavior, I saw that he was taken into custody immediately upon landing."

"What can you tell us about the accused's service record and general character?"

Danzer seemed to consult a personnel folder he held in his lap. "From the beginning of his career, Lieutenant Solo has been a disciplinary problem and a prime example of a poor soldier."

Oh, yeah? Han thought indignantly. What about the citations for valor, his position at the top of the graduating cadet class, the goddamn Good Conduct medal? Danzer was the man who had patted him on the back and assured him an early promotion, and how he was lying through his teeth. Han nearly protested again but thought better of it. He would have his chance to speak for all the good it would do him.

After further characterising Han as a mediocre pilot and a malingerer in general, Commander Danzer stepped down and reclaimed his seat as presiding judge, which although he was outranked by the other members of the panel, was his by right as the commanding officer of the local arm of the fleet.

The next prosecution witness was Tex. Han's eyes narrowed as he spied the new insignia on the shoulder of his erstwhile friend's uniform.

"Captain Texor, you were flying patrol on the day in question, were you not?"

"Yes, sir," Tex replied, with an air of modest composure.

"Describe the incident in your own words, please."

"Our fighter group was up that day. At slightly after 0900 hours, we received a Code 23X. We gave chase and made visual contact with our target at approximately 12 AU. We then proceeded to make our attack run."

The prosecutor interrupted. "Captain Texor, are you aware of Lieutenant Solo's assertion that this was not indeed a hostile vessel?"

This piece of information was met with a buzz of interest from the back of the courtroom.

"Totally ridiculous, sir," Tex replied. "The ship was of military type, heavily armed and returning our fire."

Han could not restrain himself. "That's a god damn lie, Texor, and you know it!"

"I won't caution you again, Lieutenant Solo," warned Commander Danzer from his presiding judge's seat.

"We will produce evidence of laserfire damage to Lieutenant Solo's ship." The prosecutor said dryly. "Now, please continue, Captain Texor."

"As I was saying, sir, we made our initial run, coming in under heavy fire. Solo's snub took a hit and I guess he panicked. He broke formation and refused to fire. Before Willi that's Lieutenant Netz and I could regroup for another run, the enemy ship made the jump to hyperspace."

"And so, in your estimation, Lieutenant Solo's actions allowed the escape of a hostile vessel, putting the security of the Corell system at grave risk."

"Absolutely, sir."

"Thank you, Captain Texor. You may step down."

"Thanks a heap, buddy." Han muttered as Tex passed by. "You earned that Captain's braid real well, didn't you?"

If Texor heard, he gave no sign.

Han craned his head around, expecting more of the same testimony from his other wing man, but Willi was conspicuous by his absence.

As if in answer to Han's unspoken question, the prosecutor said, "Lieutenant Netz has been transferred. His account of the incident is substantially the same as Captain Texor's."

"Yeah, I'll just bet!" Han thought bitterly. So Willi had declined to perjure himself against Han and the Starfleet had transferred him out. With a sinking feeling, Han began to see what really deep trouble he was in.

* * *

The giant Wookiee came in out of the rainy darkness, pausing in the doorway of the tavern to brush the clinging beads of moisture from his russet pelt. His nostrils flared wide as he drew in the smoky warmth, the smell of liquor mingling with the varied scents of the bodies, both human and alien. Barzoun had been paid off. Kaszhyykian honor allowed Chewbacca to do no less, although he vowed from then on to be more careful at shooting craps and to never become so sure of the future that he would allow himself to fall into such a debtor's situation again. He regretted the loss of his berth aboard the *Mimban Lady*. All that remained now was to find another job to replace it. He would go to the hiring halls tomorrow. In the meantime, Chewbacca meant to have a drink to warm himself before returning to his rented room.

He was halfway through a litre sized mug of dark brew when he was distracted by a loud conversation drifting over the partition from the next booth.

"I don't care if he's a ports brat who made good; he ain't one of us any more," a man, obviously well into his cups, was exclaiming loudly. "I hope they tan his lousy hide and nail it up on the doors of the halls of government!"

Chewbacca didn't hear his companion's reply, but the loud one's next statement could not be missed.

"What's it to me? I'll tell ya what's it to me! Some fighter jock fucks up and lets a ship fulla terrorists get away. Next thing ya know, Incom Yards loses three fat Imperial contracts and has to lay off half of its workers. Don't take no genius to put the two together. And now I'm out of a job with a family to support!"

Becoming interested in the conversation, Chewbacca began to listen more attentively. This time he was able to make out the soft spoken human's words.

"I've heard it wasn't terrorists that the ship wasn't even shooting back."

"Do the other pilots back that story up? Hell, no. Solo's only sayin' that to cover his yellow ass! I've been watching the holocasts of the trial, now that I'm home all day and got the time," the loud one said bitterly. "and it's all goin' against him. I'd bet you a week's pay, that is, if I still had a week's pay to bet that Solo can't find anyone to testify for him."

The conversation moved on to other subjects, leaving Chewbacca both intrigued and puzzled. The situation sounded too close to be coincidental and yet The Wookiee resolved to be in the courtroom the following day.

* * *

By midmorning, the prosecution had rested its case and things looked very bleak for Han Solo. Since the previous afternoon, after the presentation of two dee photographs and actual samples of burnt metal from his damaged Headhunter, the testimony had consisted of a numbing, seemingly endless parade of junior officers recounting past infractions and breaches of discipline on Solo's part. Nothing was left out if he had so much as farted in the officer's mess, some cheerful little bootlicker was there to describe it in full, gloating detail. He had been portrayed as the sort of man who could be, at worst, a traitor, at the very best, a goldbrick and a coward.

Glumly, he prepared himself to tell his version of the story, knowing it would be a waste of breath.

One thing remained to be done before Han took the stand, and it was merely a formality, called for by a last vestige of Corellian law left in the military code.

Commander Danzer cleared his throat. With the perfunctory air of someone who expects no response, he said, "Is there anyone present in the courtroom who wishes to speak in behalf of the accused?"

It was a toss up as to whether Han or Danzer was the most surprised by the loud roar from the back of the room. Han twisted around in his chair for a better look as a large, hirsute figure made its way towards the witness stand.

Solo's curiosity was piqued. A Wookiee! Wookiees were not an uncommon sight in the busy ports of Corell, attending to their business and travelling in clan groupings of several individuals. This one seemed to be a loner, which made him unusual to say the least. Han had never set eyes on him before, and he had no idea why the huge being would want to be heard at his trial.

The Wookiee squeezed himself down into the witness chair and sat waiting patiently.

"Do you require a translator assist?" Danzer asked.

The Wookiee nodded and uttered a growl that changed into a " yes," as the computer's translator pickup was activated.

"Please state your name and your reason for wishing to speak," the Commander said.

"My name is Chewbacca," the Wookiee began, the computer simulated voice trailing several beats behind his howling speech. "Until two standard weeks ago, I served as Engineer's Mate on the freighter, Mimban La "

In a flash, Commander Danzer's hand shot out and hit the translator switch, cutting it off. "Court is adjourned until tomorrow at 0900 hours."

With no further explanation, he rose and left the court, leaving puzzlement and speculation in his wake.

* * *

The holo display on Commander Danzer's desk shimmered and coalesced into the face of Telzer Kreth.

"It's about time you called," Danzer said. "What the hell are we supposed to do now? That Wookiee changes everything!"

Kreth scowled. "I've been too busy to call. I've just been in contact with the Governor. This trial can't go any further."

"Dammit, Telzer, I've spent the past weeks working toward Solo's conviction on your orders. We can't change our tack now."

"We'll have to. Solo mustn't be allowed to tell his story. His unsupported word was no threat to us, but with the Wookiee to back him up, people will start to believe. And once they believe, they'll start to ask questions. What could be so important that it would warrant destroying a civilian ship? And that will lead to something we can't risk exposing."

Danzer made no answer and Kreth continued. "The governor is insistent upon this, Reg. As you said, this is Corell, not Imperial Center. Memories of the Republic die hard and we have to move slowly. Maybe in a few years not now. If there's a scandal, the Empire won't be above making scapegoats of us!"

"Can't we just get rid of the Wookiee?" Danzer said wearily.

"It's too late for that. We'll have to see that Solo changes his story."

"It isn't likely he'll co-operate in his own execution." Danzer said dryly.

"No, but there is a way to make him damn himself and disprove the Wookiee's story too. And for both our sakes, Danzer, you had better convince him to go along with it. Here's what we'll do..."

* * *

Han was staring glumly at the wall of his cell when the door hissed open and Commander Danzer entered. Danzer waved his hand in dismissal at his two guards and he and Solo were left alone.

Han didn't bother to rise. "What brings you here, Commander? Come to gloat? Hell, I thought you'd be too busy showing Captain Texor around the officer's club to spare me any time. He's the new fair-haired boy around here, isn't he?"

Danzer remained impassive. "The Empire is always willing to reward a soldier for a job well done."

Han shook his head. "You sure did a proper job on me," he said bitterly.

"Come now, Lieutenant, you didn't expect us to pin a medal on you. You've caused us a lot of trouble."

"Damn right! I joined the Starfleet to protect civilians, not murder them!"

"We pay our pilots to follow orders, not to make moral judgements," Danzer said.

"There are some things you can't order a man to do. I did what was right."

"Are you so sure of that? You had no idea what was at stake here. You still don't."

"I don't care. Nothing can be worth killing women and kids for."

"Sometimes innocent lives get in the way of expediency. When you joined the service, you swore an oath to serve Corell's interests. Now Corell is suffering because of your actions."

Han glared. "Typical Imperial reasoning. And to think I was on the way to becoming a loyal Impie myself."

"Listen, Solo, I didn't come here to debate morality with you. I came to make you an offer. If you'll agree to plead guilty to a lesser charge, we'll drop the capital charges of mutiny and treason. You'll be cashiered and fined, but you won't be facing the death penalty. What do you say?"

Solo's eyes narrowed. "All through the trial you guys are out for blood and now you're changing your tune. Why? It's that Wookiee, isn't it? He can back up my story!"

The Commander smiled evenly. "No one's going to believe a Wookiee."

Han sneered. "I'm not that stupid, Danzer. Something really smells here. You're covering something up and it must be something big. Well, I won't! I'll blow the lid right off this secret and you and whoever else is in this with you will get exactly what you deserve!"

"That may well be, Solo," Danzer said quietly. "But you won't have the satisfaction of seeing it. You'll be dead."

"You can't. I didn't do anything!"

"Since when has that made any difference? You're a fool, Solo, if you think you ever had a chance of acquittal. We meant from the beginning to convict you, and if you don't take our offer, we will see you dead. That's a promise."

Danzer looked deadly serious. For the first time, Han paused and forced himself to take an unflinching look at the reality of his own death.

For the few weeks of life that were left to him, this tiny cell and its joyless routine would be the sum total of his existence. There were so many of life's pleasures that he had taken for granted and would never know again. For some reason, Han did not think of the obvious ones like sunsets, and spring flowers, and the sweet, keen joy of making love to a woman, although he felt regret that he had seen his last of them. It was the small, unexpected things that he felt the most: the sound of the free wind as it rustled past his ears, the smell of the snub fuelling up on the runway on a bright morning, the sensation of walking barefoot on hot

summer pavement and the quick, sharp pain of stepping on a pebble. So many little things that meant life. And then it hit him with the force of a shock wave from a thermal detonator; he would never, never again be alone with his ship in the peaceful blackness of space. Han began to feel a horrible claustrophobia, as if the dirt they would bury him in was already surrounding him, filling his lungs.

At the appointed time he would be taken from his cell and escorted to the room where the sentence would be carried out. There would be nothing barbaric or painful no, Corell did things in a civilized manner nowadays. Han would be seated in a simple chair, his arms and legs secured by restraints. And he would be given an injection that would stop his heart within seconds. Simple, painless, some even said pleasant but it would be death nonetheless.

Han was no coward at least he had never thought he was. He had grown resigned to the idea of dying in the course of his duties, as any soldier must. But such a death would be in the heat of battle, quick, clean, and with a fighting chance. And, with luck, it would come without warning, not awake and aware, every nerve screaming, holding on desperately to every last second of consciousness. "Oh, gods, no." he thought. "Not that way, not trussed up and helpless." He closed his eyes and shook his head.

Danzer had seen the play of emotions cross Solo's face. He smiled the smile of the victor. "What will it be, Han some foolish grand gesture, or your life?"

"All right, you win," Han whispered miserably. "I'll cop the plea."

"There I knew you could be reasonable." Danzer rose to leave. At the door, he turned back over his shoulder. "You see, Solo? You're not so very noble, after all."

* * *

The following morning, the courtroom buzzed with amazement at the news that Han Solo had changed his plea to guilty.

A further humiliation remained, as Han was called to take the stand. "Lieutenant Solo," the prosecutor-general began. "How long have you belonged to the Starfleet?"

"A little over three years, sir. Two years of my cadet training and one of active duty."

"Two years of training. The best training this galaxy has to offer."

"Yes, sir. The best." Han replied, wondering where this line of questioning was leading.

"Tell me, Lieutenant, what about your original allegation that the ship you allowed to escape was not a military vessel?"

Han paused. All eyes in the courtroom were on him and he knew his next words were being broadcast to all of Corell as well. He saw what the prosecutor was trying to do; it was fiendishly clever. His answer would make him seem like a fool, a liar, and worse, destroying his credibility and squashing any talk about his original story that might have leaked out. And the beauty of it was that he didn't even have to perjure himself, not really.

He cleared his throat. "I might have been mistaken."

"Louder, please, Lieutenant. We can't hear you."

"I said, I might have been mistaken."

The prosecutor's tone was sarcastic. "The security of the planet and the Empire have been severely damaged, and you 'might have been mistaken'. That will be all, Lieutenant Solo." He said with the contemptuous air of someone flicking a piece of filth off his sleeve.

As Han stepped down, he saw a large brown figure quietly rise and leave the courtroom.

The panel of judges wasted no time in deliberation.

"Lieutenant Solo, this tribunal finds you guilty of cowardice and incompetence. Have you anything to say before we pass sentence?"

Han felt a brief flash of anger. Cowardice and incompetence? It seemed to him that it had to be one or the other, not both. But then, the urge to protest passed as quickly as it had come. What the hell did it matter any more? He shook his head mutely.

"We hereby sentence you to be publicly stripped of all rank and insignia and expelled from the service. We furthermore sentence you to be fined, the exact amount of which to be determined at the court's pleasure. Prisoner dismissed."

Nope, Han thought as they led him back to his cell. Nothing mattered any more. Nothing.

* * *

"I don't know, Telzer. I can't shake the feeling that we've made a terrible mistake in letting Solo go."

It was the eve of Han's cashiering ceremony and the two men, Kreth and Danzer, were sharing a drink in the privacy of the Commander's quarters.

"We did what we had to do. Once we made the decision to destroy the Mimban Lady, we were committed right to the end. The Governor's secret had to be protected."

"Secret!" Danzer snorted. He was beginning to feel the effects of the liquor. "I'd like to know what was so damned important that it was worth all this!"

"It's a special project of Governor Tarkin's a new weapons system. More than that, you don't need to know."

"I don't want to!" Danzer said, a trifle petulantly.

"Oh, but you will in time." Kreth told him. "The Governor is pleased enough with the way you talked Solo into pleading guilty that he has promised you a position aboard it once it's built and operational."

Danzer remained silent and Kreth continued. "At least it beats commanding a garrison on Kessel! We've both kept our jobs and, after the way this whole affair was botched, I can assure that we were damned lucky to have done even that much!"

"Still, I feel nervous about having Solo roaming around free."

"He's been humiliated totally on Corell. He'll be leaving here for good as soon as possible with his tail between his legs."

"You don't know him the way I do, Telzer. Solo was one of the most promising officers I've seen in my career. He's angry now and bitter. A man like that can be dangerous wherever he is and not just to us."

"I wouldn't worry too much about Solo if I were you, Danzer." Kreth smiled a chilly parody of a smile. "Feelings are running very high against him, we've seen to that. You know how rough the seamier sections

of Port Cor can be. To tell you the truth, I'll be extremely surprised if he makes it off-planet alive."

* * *

The Empire couldn't have asked for a better day for a drumming-out if they had ordered it specially, Han Solo thought as he was marched out by his escort of military police his dishonor guard, as he had come to think of them. The autumn sky was leaden and overcast, and a cold wind was blowing, snapping the regimental flags and pennants that lined the parade ground. The ranks were already assembled and waiting, as Han was led to a prominent spot where Reg Danzer stood in readiness to bestow the symbolic coup de grace on Han's military career.

The ceremony itself passed in a slow motion nightmare of ripping cloth and struggling to stand erect as Commander Danzer tore the insignia and buttons from his tunic one by one. Han stared straight ahead, his back teeth clamped down hard, terrified that he would lose control of himself and faint or throw up or cry, or give in to his helpless rage and knock Danzer flat with one glorious punch.

Instead, he concentrated on the ranks of assembled pilots, trying to find just one friendly face in the sea of watching eyes. These were his friends. His buddies. Men he had lived, trained, and fought along side of for the past three years. Men he had gotten blind drunk with, brawled and roistered with, and gone wenching with, following that peculiar covenant of male bonding as old as humanity itself.

There was even one man there that day whose life Han had saved. Dik Bledo, three rows back, second from the end. He and Bledo had been flying routine patrol one morning a little over a year back, when the air filtration in the other man's cockpit had gone bad. The first Han had known of the problem was when Dik had begun to sing and slur his words, mumbling something about how he was going to head out into deep space and fly forever without touching a planet again. And so he might have done, had not Han recognised the symptoms of anoxia and thought fast.

"Hey, asshole, betcha can't beat me back to the base." Han had yelled, pulling his fighter into a steep dive planetward. Fortunately, Dik had taken the bait and given chase, laughing and whooping as the two snubs dropped like playful swallows through the atmosphere. Han had flown the race of his life, egging Dik on with taunts that he was too lame to pilot a dewback down a boulevard and others far less printable, never losing him until they had reached the ground. The frantic ground crew that had cracked Dik's canopy had found him slumped unconscious over his controls but alive. Han had not expected or asked for any special gratitude from

Bledo at the time it was just the sort of thing one guy did for another but he would have liked to have seen something, anything, other than the cold vacuum he was seeing in the man's eyes now.

The assembled faces all told the same story. Coward, they said. Outcast. You're not our kind any more.

"So much for friendship," Han thought bitterly. The thing that hurt the worst, though, was that they were right. He was a coward, they just didn't know in what way.

Solo became aware that the sound of ripping cloth had ceased and Commander Danzer had stepped back. The ceremony was over.

The rest was almost anticlimactic. A voice yelled out, "Dismissed!" and the field emptied quickly. Even the news team that had been broadcasting the ceremony live for the edification of all Corell packed up their holo-cam and left. Han and Commander Danzer were left alone on the field, face to face.

"Well, Commander," Han said. "You must be proud of this day's work."

Danzer shook his head. "No, it doesn't give me any pleasure. Believe it or not, Solo, I would much rather have just been pinning a medal on you in recognition of a job well done."

Han could not trust his voice to reply. The thing that frightened him was that just a hairsbreadth of difference if he had decided not to go walking that fateful morning, if he hadn't stopped to look at the old piebald freighter, if he had maybe had a little more or a little less time to think about the consequences of what he was doing he might be wearing that medal now and basking in the approval of his peers. Would he have preferred it that way? Han wanted to believe that he would not, but he was afraid to look too closely at the question.

Without another word, Reg Danzer turned on his heel and left. A short, fat non-com in a supply clerk's uniform bustled up with a packed duffle bag which he unceremoniously dumped at Han's feet before walking away.

"Thoughtful of them to do my packing for me," Han said sarcastically. He was alone on the parade ground; out, like so much garbage.

Quickly, he stripped off the ripped dress tunic and dropped it on the ground at his feet. A small voice inside himself told him that he was going to be cold without it, but he did it anyway. The gesture satisfied his soul.

Without another pause, Han Solo shouldered his bag and turned his back on his old life.

end file 1

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