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THE WHITE FEATHER

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File 2

Part III

"He lost his career, his girl, everything..."

"Whaddaya mean, you can't put me on the list of general spacers for hire?" Han exploded at the bored-looking clerk behind the registration desk. The first place he had gone after walking off the base was the main hiring hall in downtown Port Cor, only to run up against this unexpected snag.

The clerk wasn't fazed by Han's show of temper. "You can't go on the list without your blue spacer's registration card. Can't have just anyone off the streets applying for these jobs. Might be unfit."

"I'm qualified for my Master's papers, dammit! And you're telling me I can't even swab decks and load cargo?"

"Not without your blue card, you can't," the clerk replied implacably.

Han sighed. "All right, where do I get this blue card?"

"Right here. I need your date and place of birth and your thumbprint."

Han readily complied. "That's all?"

"Yup. That's all. You can pick up your card in two weeks."

Han exploded again. "Two weeks! What takes so long!"

"We're short-handed around here," the clerk grunted. "Really swamped." With an air of dismissal, he returned his attention to the racing form on his desk.

Han swore under his breath and turned to leave.

"Of course," the clerk said hurriedly, "for the right amount I could 'expedite' matters for you. Have the card ready right away."

Han gave the clerk a dirty look. "Oh, I get it nice little scam you have going here! How much?"

The clerk smiled. "Fifty credits."

Han gulped. All he had to his name was the spare change he had found in his pockets. The military court, in levying his fine, had seemed to have an eerily accurate idea of his exact bank balance. They had cleaned him out. "Oh, fine. Great. If I had fifty credits to live on for the next two weeks, then I wouldn't have to use it to bribe you, would I?"

The clerk shrugged. "It's up to you. I wouldn't worry. You'll find the money somewhere nice looking guy like you." He winked nastily.

Han glared. He got the man's message loud and clear. He had seen them himself, even in a relatively prosperous city like Port Cor. The euphemistic term for them was "independent pleasure-givers" as opposed to the regulated trade of the Courtesans Guild but the ugly reality was that they were street whores, forced into their pitiful life of disease and violence by the desperation of poverty. They came in both sexes and all ages some children even. Han always felt sick when he thought about the children. His own childhood hadn't exactly been a bed of roses, but there were worse things, he supposed, than having an uncle who beat you regularly.

Han turned and stalked out of the hall, before he gave in to his temptation to knock the clerk's salacious grin right down his throat. He knew where he could find the money. It wouldn't be pleasant, but it sure as hell beat turning a quick trick with some horny spacer whose "tastes" were too questionable to be catered to by the Guild.

The place was on the seedy outskirts of the yards, in a section where the buildings grew small and dingy. As the door to Bars Freejer's repair hangar shut behind him, Han drew in a deep breath. The distinctive smell of the place brought the old memories flooding back. Han had virtually grown up there, even to the point of losing his virginity in the shop's back room one memorable afternoon when he was fifteen, and much of what he knew about the inner workings of spaceships he owed to Freejer, who was always willing to let an eager youngster hand him his tools, taking the time to explain what he was doing even when sometimes those repairs weren't exactly legal.

As he made his way into the shop's dim back regions, a flock of childhood ghosts seemed to hover about Han's head, their facing haunting the corners of his vision, their laughter and boyish taunts ringing silently in his mind. The old gang. There were Torb and Benni, gone off to space years ago. And little Zek, who of all the boys had come closest to being a true friend to Han. He had been killed in a speeder accident half a year after Han had joined the fleet. And finally, there was another memoried face, that of a friend at first, but changing as the innocent fellowship of childhood gave way to the more complex interplay of adolescence. Try as he might, Han had never been able to decide what had made that boyhood friendship go sour.

Back in the farthest corner, a man was at work patching the hull of a one man cargo hauler. Seeing Han, he shut down his welding tool and stripped off the mask covering his face.

"Well, I'll be damned. If it isn't Han Solo! What brings you back here, kid? Slumming?"

Han shook his head. "Don't start in with me, Tanno. I wouldn't have come without a good reason. Remember that sixty credits I won from you shooting dice right before I joined the fleet?"

"I remember. Thought you'd forgotten about it, though or else you were trying to show off to a poor working slob like me how little the money meant to someone with a high and mighty officer's pay."

"Look, Tanno, I wouldn't ask for it now, except that I've got to get off planet fast."

Tanno laughed. "No shit. I know a lotta guys who'd like to see your hide hung out to dry and wouldn't mind having a crack at it themselves. Now me, I just think it's funny."

"Funny? You don't even know what happened."

"I don't have to. I know you. You were always such an annoying little prig, Solo always thought you were better than the rest of us." Tanno's voice took on a mocking whine. "Gonna join the Starfleet and save the universe, save people, and fight for truth and justice. Shee it! I figure you only settled for the Starfleet 'cause there were no Jedi Knights left for you to join. The amazing thing is that you actually believed all that crap!"

Tanno paused to spit over his left shoulder. "Hell, kid, I've heard the rumors same as everybody else. I can just see you charging in there like a little tin Jedi, figuring that just 'cause something's the 'moral' thing to do, people are gonna fall all over themselves thanking you for it." Tanno shook his head and snorted. "Solo, you ass, you were conned!"

Han felt his face beginning to burn, more from shame than anger. "All right, Tanno, you've had your chance to gloat. Now, do you have the money or not?"

"It so happens you're in luck," Tanno replied, "'cause Uncle Bars paid me today. It's for the last time, 'cause even this little pissant operation is being taken over. As of next month, I'll be working for the Empire. All the work Uncle Bars and me did, and that's all we got to show for it. The difference between you and me, kid, is that I expect life to be shit, so I ain't disappointed when that's what I get. You better start thinking like that, too."

He dug into an overall pocket for the money and threw it down. Six ten credit bills flew in every direction, fluttering under pieces of equipment and landing in puddles of grease. For a moment, Han rebelled. It wasn't worth the humiliation. But Tanno was right; he would have to forget about his pride and honor if he was going to survive from now on. Humbly, he went about picking up the scattered money.

Han stuffed the bills into his pocket. "Tell your uncle I'm sorry about his losing the shop. He deserves better." He said, and turned to leave.

He had gone a few paces when Tanno called after him. "Han, do you ever see her?" he asked softly.

Solo turned. "Yeah. Sometimes."

Tanno's face went cold again. "So long, Solo." He said.

* * *

That evening found Han on the west side of the river, heading up the front walkway of one of Port Cor's "better" homes. The winds of the early morning had died down to an intermittent breeze, but the air was chilly and held the damp earth smell of incipient rain. Han's blue registration card was stowed securely in his pocket; he had arrived back at the hiring hall too late in the day to begin doing any serious looking for employment. That was all right with him; he had some unresolved business he had to take care of before he left anyway.

Han stepped up onto the wide front porch and touched his hand to the discreet brass bellplate. Immediately, the door was answered by the family's droidbutler, its silver photo-receptors registering polite dismay. "Why, ah...Mister Solo..."

Han sighed, wondering, not for the first time, why the droid manufacturers saw fit to program a distinctly lavender cast into the personalities of these protocol models. Ignoring the silver figure's discomfiture, he went straight to the point. "I'm here to speak to Darla."

The droid fluttered its hands. "I'm afraid Miss Darla is not at home."

Han glanced up and saw a flash of gold at an upper window, as if a blonde head had just been hastily withdrawn.

"Bantha crap. Now, will you tell her I'm here, before I--"

"Never mind, C3PF," a suave voice broke in, "I'll handle this."

The silver droid retired with evident relief, and Han found himself face to face with a grey-haired man wearing an expensive looking chryssilk smoking jacket covered with rich Vinderaani embroidery. He was flanked by three younger but equally patrician versions of the same.

Undaunted by the massed expanse of familial flesh, Han pressed on. "Look, you don't have to worry about your daughter. I'm not gonna kidnap her. I only wanted to see her and say good-bye before I ship out."

"She doesn't want to see you." Han began to protest again, but the father held out an envelope. "She left you this. It's more than you deserve. If I had my way, traitors like you would be stood up against a wall and shot. None of this bleeding-heart humane injection nonsense."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Han said sardonically, reaching for the proffered envelope and tearing it open. A small white feather that looked as if it had been plucked from Darla's down pillow fell out and fluttered slowly to the ground at Han's feet. It was an old symbol, the

significance of which had been lost in the mists of antiquity, but the message remained the same: the recipient of the white feather was a coward.

Knowing what he would find, Han opened the folded paper. Immediately, the phrase "couldn't have expected anything better of a lowlife piece of trash" leapt to his eyes. With the same morbid curiosity that prompts a man to pry open the edges of a deep wound and look to the very bottom, Han read the whole letter from start to finish, letting each scathing phrase burn itself into his memory. He had to give Darla credit for having a way with words. Never had he been so well and truly excoriated.

There is a fine line between love and hatred, and it was a testament to the basic lack of viciousness in Han's character that he didn't cross it then and there. A small pragmatic voice deep inside told him that if this was all the benefit of the doubt she was willing to give him, then he was well out of the relationship. She had not loved him, merely the prospect of success and power that he had represented. Neither, he realized, had he truly known her; he had seen only the woman he wanted to see, an impossibly idealized image that he himself had created.

Just the same, Darla's rejection hurt. He had opened himself to her with the total lack of reserve given only to a first love, and as he read, an inevitable, almost unconscious sealing-off process began within him. He would never again leave himself so vulnerable; love was pain. In time, Han's emotional armor was to grow thicker than even he realized.

Finishing the letter, Han slowly straightened up, a fine line of sweat beading his upper lip and forehead despite the chill in the air. Looking her father dead in the eye, he tore the paper into as many small pieces as he could and tossed the handful of fragments into the ornamental shrubbery that bordered the porch. They fluttered down like so much confetti, spoiling the pristine manicure of the flowerbed. Han had deliberately aimed at a bush with thorns, and he sincerely hoped that the promised rain would come that night, turning the paper into a sodden mass and making the cleanup as unpleasant as possible.

"Sorry about the mess," he said airily as the father began to splutter his outrage. "But what else can you expect from us lowlife slum kids we ain't got no manners at all!"

Before he turned away, he looked up once more at the upper window and saw a delicate hand drop the curtain into place. He shook his head.

"Women! They're all the same." He thought bitterly. "They've all got a price; it's just that some of 'em are more honest about it than others."

After leaving Darla's house, Han paid little attention to where he was going. Lost in a cloud of depression, he let his feet carry him in the general direction of downtown Port Cor, but beyond that, he had no fixed goal in mind. He had gotten his wish. With the coming of full darkness, the wind had died down and a chill drizzle had begun to fall, blurring the shadows of the street lamps and soaking him as he trudged through the gloomy night. Han paid the cold and wet no attention; they suited his mood.

It seemed to Han that he moved through a universe in which honor, friendship, and love all the values upon which he had built his life were nothing more than a cruel hoax. And the sad truth was that he had really believed: morality was a simple matter of black and white, and virtue would be rewarded in the end. With Tanno's laughter and Darla's scornful repudiation still echoing through his head, Han's cheeks burned at the memory of his own stupid naivete.

All his life, Han had struggled to rise above his beginnings, to prove to everybody the father who had deserted him, the uncle who had said he was no good, the other youngsters who had mocked him, and above all, himself that he could make something decent and admirable out of his life. He was going to show them all!

"Oh yeah, I showed 'em all right," Han whispered bitterly into the rainy darkness. In the end, he had been no better than any of them; his own miserable life was what had counted.

"I give up they were right," Han told himself miserably. "I am no good, and I'm damn tired of trying to prove otherwise. You can't make a silk purse out of a bantha's ear. But if I'm no good, I'm gonna be the best damned no good there is! From now on, I'm doing nothing that isn't directly in my own self-interest. It's look out for number one!"

The faint sound of music and the nearer crash of a breaking bottle brought Han out of his reverie and made him aware that his wanderings had brought him to the portside area of the city, where the cantinas, bawdy houses, and cheap hotels could be found. It was late, and although the rain had finally let up, it was becoming colder.

Han concentrated his mind on his present situation. He planned to try to find work again tomorrow, but first he had to get through the night. He could not decide whether to get a room for the night or to throw caution to the winds and get roaring drunk. Then he realized that with the paltry few credits he had left in his pocket, he hadn't the means to do either properly. Well, he decided, he could just spend the night on a

park bench or huddled in some doorway. His life had changed. No doubt there would be many such nights ahead of him.

Han turned down a dark side street. Three men were approaching from the opposite direction. Han could see them silhouetted against the light from the street at the other end, but, his mind filled with the immediate need of finding shelter, he paid them little attention. The three men were slightly unsteady on their feet; evidently they had just left a tavern. Still preoccupied, Han stepped aside to let them pass, but one of them stumbled and jostled against him.

"Hey whyntcha watch where y'r ? What the hell lookit who we have here." The boozy note in the man's voice had turned to something nastier.

In a flash, the man's two companions circled round and Han found himself backed against a wall.

"Well, if it ain't Han Solo," another voice said. "Your miserable face has been all over the holo-casts for the past few weeks, flyboy."

"I think would should show this guy what Corell thinks of lousy cowards." The first one said. He actually sounded pleased, Han thought, as if this new sport was just an extra bonus on the evening's fun.

He could make out their faces now; tough, scarred, and gleaming with an almost animal eagerness. The drink had made them mean, very mean indeed. From force of habit, Han's hand moved to his side, but his service-issued sidearm had long since been taken away from him. He hadn't so much on him as a pocket knife, and as the first blow crashed into his midsection, he realized what a mistake it was to have gone unarmed into the night side of the city.

Han was no babe in the woods. He had grown up in the toughest parts of Port Cor and he knew how to defend himself with just his fists if the need arose. But three on one is not good odds, and Han's assailants had been schooled in the same mean streets as he had. For a while, Han gave as good as he got, but inevitably his luck failed and he caught a succession of bad blows. He went down. He felt a heavy boot smash into his head, and knew with an awful certainty that these guys meant business. His last emotion before the darkness took him was not fear or even anger, but a calm, sad resignation.

* * *

Chewbacca threw back his massive head and sniffed the night air with a sense of pleasure. The city stank, as all the cities of the humans did,

but his keen sense of smell was able to pick out the good freshness of the recent rain. He had spent the evening in a nearby cantina, alone as always, but enjoying the feeling of having other beings around him, and the brew he had consumed had cheered him. To date, he had not been able to find work to replace his berth on the *Mimban Lady*. As if warned by some unofficial spacers' grapevine, the smaller, independent ships seemed to be steering clear of Corell, making spacers' jobs more scarce than usual, and in addition, Chewbacca had to deal with the problem of prejudice not all shipowners would hire a Wookiee.

As Chewbacca made his way back to his rented room, his ears picked up the sound of heavy breathing, scuffling, and a series of strangely muffled thuds coming from a nearby alleyway. He stopped and took a look. Halfway down the alley was a tableau most people would have seen as three shadow men kicking at a limp bundle on the ground. The Wookiee, and his well developed night vision, identified the "bundle" as a man wearing the red-striped uniform trousers of the Corellian Starfleet.

Chewbacca did not stop to ponder the possible moral complexities of the situation; he just didn't like it. He uttered a fearsome howl and charged down the alley.

Few human beings could have stood up to the sight of an enraged Wookiee looming out of the darkness, and the three drunks were no exception.

They fled in the opposite direction as fast as their rum-sodden limbs could carry them. Chewbacca gave a "whuff" of dismissal and made a hand-brushing gesture after the retreating men. They would not be back.

That done, he turned and knelt. The man on the ground was unconscious, knees drawn up in the foetal position in a vain attempt to ward off the incoming kicks. Carefully, Chewbacca rolled the man over, straightening the body out to examine for any obvious injuries. The stranger moaned once or twice but did not come to. As he looked at the face, Chewbacca gave a snort of surprise; this was the pilot from the military court, Solo.

There were no grossly apparent injuries that Chewbacca could detect. There was some blood on the face, but it was difficult to tell where it was coming from. In any case, the street was not the place to administer first aid. He must take the young man back to his room and attend to him there.

A dufflebag was lying a few feet away. Chewbacca clipped it onto his bandolier strap; to him, its weight was inconsequential. Transporting the young pilot presented more of a problem. How best to do it, Chewbacca

wondered? These little creatures had their pride and Chewbacca had learned that they hated being carried like cubs, it being somehow "unmanly". Simply tossing the young man over his shoulder like a sack of grain would be easier for Chewbacca, too, but he could not take the risk of causing the end of a broken rib to poke into a lung or some other vital organ. Gently, he scooped the young pilot up and, cradling him in his arms, he started for home.

Back at his room, Chewbacca laid his burden down on the bed and began to take stock of the young man's injuries. How puny these humans were, with their weak, hairless bodies, he mused as he removed the torn and muddied shirt, although by human standards this one was on the large side. As he had guessed before, several of the ribs were broken, and he taped them with adhesive tape from his own first aid supplies. Already nasty looking bruises were beginning to purple the young pilot's body he would be very sore tomorrow and for some weeks to come, Chewbacca predicted.

Wetting a cloth at the room's tiny sink, Chewbacca turned his attention to the face. As he began to wipe the blood away, the young man groaned again and slowly opened his eyes. He looked around, his gaze coming to rest disbelievingly on the Wookiee; then, with a sigh, he passed out again.

"Good," Chewbacca thought; the pupils had been the same size and focussing properly. He hoped that young Solo had no really serious injuries. Chewbacca certainly hadn't the money for treatment at a med-center, and he doubted that the young man did either. Furthermore, considering the present state of Solo's popularity on Corell, Chewbacca doubted that he would be given very good care by the authorities anyway. No, young Solo would be safest with him.

The source of the facial bleeding proved to be a two-inch gash in the left side of the chin just below the mouth Chewbacca surmised that Solo had caught the tip of a steel toed workboot there, splitting the skin cleanly. Chewbacca frowned. The cut would best be treated with a patch of synth-flesh, but he had none of the expensive stuff in his kit scars were of little importance to someone with a pelt like Chewbacca's. In fact, there was even a common saying: "You need that like a Wookiee needs synth-flesh", in other words, not much.

He did the best with what he had, carefully positioning the edges of the wound together and holding them tightly with little tabs of adhesive tape, as he would have done for himself. There would be a scar, not getting around it, but Chewbacca didn't think it would be bad enough to spoil the young man's looks. He thought he knew enough about human aesthetics to determine that Solo might be considered handsome in a callow sort of way.

Chewbacca had done all he could for the time being. Solo's breathing had evened out and chest was rising and falling with the slow, relaxed cadence of sleep. The Wookiee covered him and left him sleeping in the room's only bed. It was no matter. In all his years with humankind, Chewbacca had never gotten used to beds and could not abide sleeping in one. A heavy mesh hammock with two suspensor units to affix it to the ceiling was all he needed to be comfortable anyway. He crawled into it now and went to sleep.

* * *

Han awoke the next morning surprised to be alive at all. He remembered falling under the three toughs' flailing boots and thinking that was it, and he had a vague confused memory of a huge hairy creature bending over him after that. He did not know whether the latter was a fragment of a dream or not.

He felt truly awful. If he had had his old wry sense of humor about him, he might have likened his condition to having had the entire Imperial Accession Day parade march over him, Household Guard, ceremonial banthas and all. But Han's sense of humor was gone. The previous night's beating had been the last straw, and some vital spark seemed to have gone out of him.

Bustling noises told him that he was not alone in the room. Han opened his eyes and found himself staring into a huge, simian face. So, it hadn't been a dream, after all. The Wookiee Han was too immersed in his despondency to wonder if it was the same one from the court-martial growled something softly, went away for a moment, and returned with a bowl of steaming broth. It dipped a spoon into the liquid and held it out expectantly.

Han didn't want to eat. He just wanted the creature to go away and leave him alone, but he was too tired to speak. Mutely, he turned his face to the wall and closed his eyes.

Chewbacca muttered a growl of concern. This was an unfortunate development. Many years ago, as a young cub, Chewbacca had, against the advice of his father, old Atchitchkuk, attempted to keep as a pet a lame Kr'alla that had lost a foreleg to a jungle predator and could no longer fend for itself. The Kr'alla's wounds had healed under Chewbacca's skilful care, but it had lost the will to live. Chewbacca could still recall his feeling of helplessness as the poor beast turned its face away from the food in his outstretched hand with a gesture uncannily like that of the young pilot now. Ultimately, the animal had pined away and died.

Chewbacca did not know what Solo had been through in the past weeks, but he could guess well enough; Solo had lost a future, and Chewbacca knew that the death of dreams is the hardest to take. He felt much empathy with this young human, for he was no stranger to disappointment and loss himself.

It had happened many years ago, when he was a young stripling of a mere thirty summers. Her name was Chessillawen and, even now, after the passage of so much time, Chewbacca felt a pang of desire when he remembered how beautiful she had looked when the pale moonlight of Kashyyyk tipped her soft fur with silver. She was the daughter of a cousin of the male who was mate to Chewbacca's mother's younger sister no blood relation, but according to the way that the Clans reckoned it, they were close mother-kin and forbidden to each other. All too soon, the Old Ones had noticed the looks of longing passing between the two and, lest shame be brought upon the Clans, Ch'essa had been swiftly married off to another young male.

But Chewbacca had not submitted meekly to the decision of the Elders. Slow to come to passion, he was equally slow to forget. He could not stand by and suffer daily the galling sight of the female he loved mated to another. So he had done a thing unprecedented in all the history of his people; he had turned his back upon his family, his Clan, and his planet, to seek his life among the humans.

For many years, Chewbacca wandered among the stars and in time the hurt grew less. He had not broken completely with Kashyyyk - no Wookiee could and he wrote home regularly and returned for the Life Day celebration whenever his work would permit. Now when he saw Ch'essa a plump, dignified matron with grandcubs these many years he felt only a fleeting sadness for what might have been.

Several years ago, he had given in to the nagging of his aged father, who was afraid that he might die with his only son unmated, and married a young widow under similar pressure from her own family. For a marriage of convenience, it was surprisingly happy. Mallatobuck was a sensible female and he was fond of her in his own way, as she was of him. Chewbacca had settled back down in the village of his birth, intending to live there all his days.

But he soon discovered that a strange thing had happened to him during the years of wandering. His close association with the humans had changed him until he no longer fit in with his people. He now saw the Clans as backward and parochial, and he began to chafe at their insular ways and planetbound existence. Malla, with her keen female instincts in these matters, had sensed his restlessness and confronted him one day, giving

him her blessing to go. When he was home, she said, she would welcome him; when he was not, well she enjoyed the freedom and autonomy she had as head of his household in his absence.

And so, Chewbacca had begun his wanderings once more, but he could call no place his home and no man his friend. Neither human nor truly Wook, Chewbacca the Wookiee walked alone.

As he looked down at the bruised and battered youngster on the bed, Chewbacca heaved a deep sigh. It was all so much ion flux through the grid. Life had sent him disappointments, but he had adjusted to them and gone on, as this young man would, given time. And Solo would have that time; Chewbacca was going to stand for no more nonsense about refusing food.

Han, his face still turned stubbornly to the wall, was startled out of his morass of self pity by the sensation of a huge hand cupping his chin. Very gently but firmly, he felt his face being turned to the front. He opened his eyes. The Wookiee was brandishing the spoon and growling like he meant business. Han decided to be sensible and opened his mouth.

"Hey that wasn't bad at all," Han thought as the Wookiee popped the first spoonful of broth in. Later, Han would trace his rekindled interest in life back to that moment and Chewbacca's good cooking. Suddenly realizing that he was very hungry - he had not eaten since the previous morning Han reached out impetuously for the spoon, wincing and cursing as a sharp pain from his taped ribs reminded him of the pounding he had just taken. Meekly, he settled back against the pillows and allowed the Wookiee to spoon feed him as if he were a baby. Han wouldn't have liked to admit it, but it felt sort of good to relax and be taken care of.

When at last Han indicated tat he had had enough, Chewbacca took the bowl away, rinsing it at the sink. Then he began to clear away the remains of the food preparation. Nearby, the broth simmered on a tiny portable hotplate.

For a while, Han watched the huge creature's back as he worked. At last he broke the silence.

"I guess I oughtta thank you," he began somewhat sheepishly. "I figure those guys weren't planning to quit as long as there were any shreds of me left big enough to stomp."

Chewbacca turned and nodded, indicating agreement with Han's assessment of the situation.

"But why?" Han continued. "Why save my neck and then bring me back here and patch me up and feed me? What am I to you?"

The Wookiee barked a single word. At the same time, he unclipped a small slate from his bandolier and hastily scribbled something on it. He turned the face of the slate toward Han and pointed to what he had written, saying the word in his own language: "Life-debt."

"Life-debt?" Han shook his head and shrugged, signalling that he still did not understand.

The Wookiee quickly wiped that slate with the flat of his huge hand and wrote again. He held out the slate, this time rumbling an entire sentence: "You saved my life. That day on Mimban Lady."

Han sighed. So this was the Wookiee from the court martial. It figured: there couldn't be two lone Wooks in the galaxy. He remembered the fragment of testimony, so hastily cut off by Commander Danzer. "Yeah. I see. So that was the old tub's name." His tone dropped to brooding. "You know something? Of all of 'em, you were the only one who came back to tell the truth. Hell, I suppose I shouldn't be bitter. They were well away from it, so why should they risk their necks again? You won't catch me doing any differently from now on myself. I guess that means that's twice you've saved me, uh " Having heard only the poor, tinny translation in the courtroom, Han did not know the creature's name. "Chewbacca." The Wookiee informed him.

Han tried to repeat the name using its correct Kashzzykii pronunciation and got only as far as the first syllable before collapsing into a fit of coughing, clutching his aching ribs.

The Wookiee motioned him to silence and hurried to the sink for a glass of dark liquid from a small bottle he took out of the first aid kit. Probably some sort of sedative, Han decided as he swallowed the bitter tasting water, for almost immediately the various pains that had been wracking his body began to dull.

The Wookiee used his slate to write out his name using the sounds in Basic which most nearly approximated it: "Chew-bac-ca."

"Chewbacca," Han repeated.

This time the slate wasn't necessary. Chewbacca held up his circled thumb and forefinger in the traditional spacers' gesture which meant, "A-OK".

"Y'know, Chewbacca, they have a strange custom on Khirgit, or so I've heard," Han said dryly. "If you save someone's life, then you owe that guy a debt from then on, 'cause otherwise the poor slob would've been dead and past his troubles."

Chewbacca rumbled out what served as a Wookiee laugh. He held up his slate. "Yes, life-debt means that too."

Han smiled weakly. He was becoming drowsy. "Then I guess we're even. But do me a favour, okay, Chewbacca? If you ever see me doing something like that again, risking my ass playing hero, please sit on me until the madness passes."

Chewbacca snorted. Experience told him that the young man was speaking out of the first blush of his disillusionment. No doubt he was sincere about it right now, but in time perhaps. But he had no chance to comment, for a quick glance told him that the sedative had taken effect and Han Solo was asleep.

* * *

It was several days before Han was well enough to leave his bed and much longer a matter of weeks before his injuries had mended enough for him to look for work. In such a buyers' market as Corell's space industry has lately become, with many applicants for every potential spacer's job, no one was about to consider hiring a man with one eye swollen shut and several cracked ribs. During that time, Chewbacca stayed with Han, tending to his needs while he was confined to bed and going out to buy the food he prepared at the hot plate once Han was up and about.

No two individuals could have been less alike at the beginning than Han and Chewbacca, on the grounds of age, race, and the fact that they had no language in common. At first, they communicated sketchily by a combination of Chewbacca's slate and a judicious use of the spacers' sign language which served as the lingua franca of the spaceways, Chewbacca all the while accompanying his notes and hand gestures with his own rumbling language. As time passed, Chewbacca found himself writing out his messages less and less frequently, as Han proved to be a quick study, picking up an understanding of Kashzyykii with a flair Chewbacca had never seen in a human before. By the end of Han's convalescence, they had gone beyond the basic communication of simple physical needs to the point where they could actually discuss abstract concepts and, for the first time in a long while, Chewbacca found himself having a real conversation with another sentient being. Cooped up in their tiny room, there was little else to do but talk.

Privately, the Wookiee was somewhat taken about the first time Han off-handedly call him "Chewie", but he knew the boy meant it well. In all his years in space, no human had grown friendly enough with him to give him a nickname. He decided that he liked it.

Chewbacca awoke one morning to discover that Han was already up and peering into the tiny mirror above the sink, turning his face this way and that to examine the faint yellowish remains of the bruises that had covered his face. With a small grunt of displeasure, he ran a finger over the cut on his chin, now closed over and healing nicely, although it was still bright red. Noticing Chewbacca staring at him, Han turned, looking slightly abashed to have been caught with his vanity showing.

"Today's the day, pal. I'm going to the hiring halls to look for work."

"Do you think you are well enough?" Chewbacca asked concernedly.

"The bruises are mostly faded. No one's gonna say anything about it."

Chewbacca growled and pointed out several nasty-looking bluish-black marks on Han's chest. "And I can tell your ribs are still paining you. You wince every time you move quickly."

"What doesn't show doesn't count. And don't worry about my ribs I can cover that up, too." Han shook his head. "I know you mean well, Chewie, but I can't lie around here forever. I'm getting dressed."

He bent to pick up his dufflebag, manfully refusing to betray any of the discomfort that the motion caused him. He'd show Chewbacca! He emptied the contents of the bag out onto the bed and took stock of his meagre wardrobe. There were a variety of white shirts and underwear. The trousers blue dress uniform with a red stripe down the legs and brown fatigues with yellow, two pairs of each presented a problem. He would stick out like a sore thumb in them. He realized that he had no civilian attire, the last civilian clothes he had worn at age sixteen would not have fit him, even if they had not been discarded long ago.

Delving deeper into the pile, he found his flight jacket. Someone had "thoughtfully" removed the division patches and insignia before packing it. He sat down on the bed, holding the jacket in his hands and staring pensively at the fresh dark areas where the patches had been. He needn't have been cold that first night if only he'd known about it, he thought with a bitter laugh at the irony of it.

The jacket and trousers were made of the finest grade of domestically manufactured twill, the Corellian starfleet had stinted on nothing when it

come to its men. The uniforms wore like iron, or so the older veteran corpsmen said; they would last for years. It seemed a waste to throw them out.

Han stared sadly at the jacket he held and at the trousers on the bed, running a hand softly over the red-striped material. He had worn them with such pride; now they mocked him as an outcast and a failure.

Chewbacca noted Han's silence with a soft growl of concern. He had seen it often during the past weeks; one moment Han would be outwardly cheerful and optimistic, the next, lost in dark brooding. Sometimes Chewbacca seriously doubted for the boy's sanity.

"The hell with it!" Han said suddenly, making Chewbacca jump. Something new and defiant hardened his mouth and burned behind his eyes. "I'm through pretending. Let 'em see exactly what I am!"

He drew the red striped trousers over his long legs, pulling the pants up and fastening the waistband almost savagely. He completed the outfit with a shirt and his flight jacket, leaving both collars casually unbuttoned. The effect was strikingly, almost nose thumbingly unmilitary. "I'm ready whenever you are." He told Chewbacca.

In his decision, Han was not alone. Although he was an isolated incident in its severity, Han was not the only man of conscience to run afoul of the newly Imperialized Starfleet. Many had proceeded him and many would follow. In years to come, the uniform of the ex-Corellian fleet became a not unfamiliar sight in the back alleys of Mos Eisley and the teeming ports of the galactic core.

The clerk at the hiring hall turned out to be the same one Han had dealt with weeks earlier.

"You two together?" the man asked as Han and Chewbacca showed their cards.

"Yeah, why not?" Han replied, not noticing the look the clerk flashed on Chewbacca.

"Suit yourself," the clerk said, passing the cards back. "Line up over there."

What followed was a discouraging experience, as a seemingly endless parade of shipowners and agents eyed Han and Chewie as if they were less than prime cuts of meat and passed on by. Toward the end of the day, the crowd thinned out, but it was all too apparent that the hopeful applicants

far outnumbered the available jobs. Han was beginning to feel as useless as a hooker at a eunuch's convention, when a tall, hard-looking man stopped in front of him and gave him an appraising glance.

"What are your qualifications, kid?"

From the neat cut and shiny braid of the man's uniform, it appeared that the ship he represented was a large and prosperous one; the pay would be good. Three blank spaces on the clipboard held in the man's hand showed that there were at least three jobs to be filled.

Eager to make a good impression, Han said, "I did a stint in the Starfleet. I can pilot, navigate whatever you want. And the Wookiee can do most anything."

The man dismissed Chewbacca with a glance of barely concealed contempt. "I can give you a bridge-crew swing shift job. Pays seventy-five credits a standard week." He told Han. "What do you say?"

"Hey, what about him?" Han asked, indicating Chewbacca with a jerk of his head. "You've got more than one position to fill!"

The man's eyes narrowed. "I'm not interested in him. I don't hire his kind. The job's yours if you want it. Take it or leave it."

Han bit his lip, looking briefly at his large Wookiee companion, then back at the waiting ship's agent.

Here it comes, Chewbacca thought philosophically, the inevitable parting of the ways. He had been expecting no less ever since he had rescued Solo from his attackers three weeks before. He had discharged his life debt obligations and more so in the time since, and he was content in the knowledge of a job well done. He had no wish to be a millstone around the young man's neck.

And yet, Chewbacca found himself feeling a curious sense of regret that the parting had come so soon. It would have been handy to have a human being around who could understand and interpret for him without having to resort to the bothersome slate. And it had been good to have a friend, however briefly.

To the Wookiee's surprise, Han shook his head. "Uh-uh. Chewie and me are a team. You hire him, too, or it's no deal."

"Look around you, kid. Jobs are scarce. This may be your last chance."

"Then we'll just come back tomorrow, or the next day." Han said firmly.

"It's your funeral." The man turned and walked away.

Han noticed Chewbacca staring at him strangely and dropped his eyes. He knew what the Wookiee was thinking, but he was dead wrong! Han had only been looking out for his own interests in refusing the job. It was a cut-throat, knife-in-the-back milieu he would be living in from now on and having a big, mean-looking guy like Chewbacca around could prove to be a definite advantage. That was the reason he'd done it, Han told himself; there had been nothing noble about it. That he hadn't wanted to desert the Wookiee made no difference.

He felt a tap on the shoulder and turned to recognize a short, thin older man with a definite squint in his left eye. Everything about the fellow was faded, from his thinning reddish-grey hair, to the watery blue of his good eye, to his well-worn clothing. He had spoken to them a few minutes earlier but had moved on after explaining that he needed only one new crew member.

"Listen, son," he said. I overheard what just went on. I can hire you and the Wookiee."

"Ten minutes ago you told us you had only one job," Han said.

The older man shrugged. "I know. But sooner or later someone is bound to jump ship. They get shackled up with some woman or on a hot streak at Sabacc, or else they get drunk and miss lift-off. This'll save me the trouble of having to look for someone else later on. I figure it's worth carrying an extra hand for a while. You two seem to be a good bet. A man who'll stick by a friend will stick by his ship, too. I can't pay you very much to start with, and it's only general able spacer's work, but at least it's a job."

"I'll oil bolts and mop out the head I'm not proud." Han said. "Anything to get off this gods forsaken rock." He looked at Chewbacca, who nodded his agreement.

Han put out his hand. "Thank you, Captain "

"Thoms Jeril Thoms," the old man replied, returning the handshake and proceeding to enter their names and specifics on his crew roster. "My ship is the Golden Matrix she's not as pretty as her name, but she'll serve. Report to docking bay AA 708 at 0100 hours tomorrow morning. Any questions? Good see you later."

As Captain Thoms strode off through the crowd, Han let out a great whoop of relief. "Hot damn, Chewie, we did it! We're home free! I feel like celebrating. Let's go back to the room, get packed and then go somewhere for a drink."

Two hours later, Han and Chewbacca entered a tavern several blocks from their room. As the double doors whooshed shut behind them, Han was aware of a hostile hush that fell over the assembled drinkers. He stared them down and gradually the buzz of conversation returned to the room. Han sauntered in with an air of easy confidence. He was still unarmed he planned to remedy that lack as soon as he got his first paycheck but the huge Wookiee at his side was worth ten blasters on his hip.

"Brandy," Han said as he stepped up to the bar "and what're you having, Chewie? and a brew."

If the bartender was inclined to make trouble, one look at Chewbacca changed his mind. The other patrons ignored them studiously.

Han had finished his first drink and was about to order another round when he felt someone grab him from behind. He whirled, adrenalin pumping, only to have a young woman throw herself into his arms.

"Oh, Han," she said, "thank the gods I found you!"

"What th-?" Well, I'll be Randa!" Solo smiled and winced in quick succession. "Oof, sweetheart! Take it easy on the ribs!"

Randa stepped back to look him over, reaching up a gentle fingertip to trace the outline of a barely visible bruise on his face and noting the fresh scar on his chin. "Sweet gods, Han, what happened? You look like somebody's been jumping up and down on you!"

"That's about the size of it," Han laughed ruefully. I've been through some hard times, but I'm okay now thanks to " Han looked up to see Chewbacca grinning at him expectantly. "Chewie, I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine. This here is Randa who once gave a skinny fifteen-year-old the best birthday present a boy ever had."

Randa laughed and blushed slightly at the mention of what was obviously a private memory. She was an attractive woman, Chewbacca thought, as well as he could judge these matters, in her early twenties, with dark curling red hair that cascaded down over one shoulder from a gold hair ornament clipped high atop her head. Her generous figure was set off to perfection by clothing designed to be moderately revealing yet at the same time

tastefully elegant. Pinned to the collar of her light grey fur cloak was what Chewbacca recognised as the membership insignia of the Corellian Courtesans Guild.

"We've both changed a lot since those days, Han." Randa said.

"Yeah haven't we!" Han signed, almost as if regretting lost innocence. He flicked his eyes nervously around the room. "Say, Randa, we better not stand up here talking like this. I'm not the person you want to be seen with."

Randa shot a glance over her shoulder and indicated her contempt for public opinion with a pithy and extremely vulgar hand gesture that belied her air of cultured refinement and hinted at an under-class upbringing. Nevertheless, she let Han lead them to a corner alcove which afforded more privacy.

"I've been looking for you ever since I heard the news," Randa said as she slid into the alcove's cushioned seat. "I was so afraid you'd ship out before I got a chance to say good-bye."

"I mean to. The Impies made damn sure I can't show my face around here any more." Han said bitterly.

"I was off-planet when it all happened, Han. Otherwise I would have come down to the court maybe testified for you as a character witness. I know you couldn't have done what they said."

Han shook his head. "Wouldn't have made any difference. No use your getting dragged down with me."

"Are you all right now? Is there anything I can do for you? A place to sleep maybe a few credits to tide you over?"

"Thanks, sweetheart, but no. Chewie and I have a berth on a ship that's leaving tonight, and you know I couldn't take "

"Listen, hotshot," she interrupted. "As you always used to put it so gallantly, what's a little money between friends? And you know that if you had back all the money you've spent on me over the years, you'd be a rich man."

"No, I wouldn't," Han said flatly. "The Empire would have it. Better you than them. Honestly, Randa, I'll be fine." Han dropped his eyes, embarrassed by what he had to say next. "Randa, of all my so-called friends, you're the only one who's had a kind word to say for me, and I "

Noting his discomfiture, she reached her hand quickly across the table and laid it on his. "Han you don't have to say it."

"Yeah. Yeah, I do," he said firmly. "I know I sort of stopped coming to see you this past year and I feel rotten about it."

Randa shrugged. "Don't, Han. So, you met someone. I understand. How did it work out with her?" she asked gently.

Han made a grim face. "It didn't. I was an idiot, and you deserved better from me."

"Well, don't worry about it. As it happens, I've been pretty busy myself this past year new man in my life." Her tone brightened. "He's a businessman, an importer of raw materials and small machine parts. That's where I was last month, with him. He took me along on a little buying jaunt to the Corporate Sector."

"Sounds serious."

"Yeah. Would you believe it, Han? He wants me to retire from the Guild and make our arrangement more exclusive."

"Really? Personal contract or marriage?"

Randa shrugged and smiled coyly. "Who knows? Stranger things have happened."

"He'd be getting a good deal either way," Han said sincerely. "Thinking of taking him up on it?"

Randa's face darkened. "Things have changed since I started out, Han. Last year the Empire put a surtax on the Guild membership fee, and this year they doubled it. And that doesn't count all the little 'gifts' to various Imperial bureaucrats."

Han snorted. "Bribes, you mean. So, just don't pay them."

"What? And have the central computer erase my license? It's getting harder to break even. And there's even talk to the effect that the Empire is going to take over the Guild entirely next year. That would mean that we'd lose the right to our choice of customers! Yes, I'm thinking about taking him up on it. It's either that or go independent."

Han suppressed a shudder at the thought of Randa out on a street corner. "No, sweetheart, don't do that. I think you should go with him."

"What's this?" Randa laughed. "I seem to remember you saying once that I was too good to be wasted on just one man."

"Times are changing, Randa," Han said. "getting harder, meaner. We're all gonna have to learn to survive the best we can. You deserve a good life. Do you love him?"

"He's a good man. I like him, he respects me, and we understand each other." Her face softened. "Yes I guess I do."

"Then that's all the more reason for you to get on home before someone sees you with me and you queer it for yourself," Han said flatly. "And Chewie and I have a freighter to catch."

"I'll walk you to the door." She said.

Outside, the cold night air hit them like a slap after the smoky warmth of the tavern. Chewbacca turned away as Han and Randa faced each other for one last time.

"I guess this is it," Randa said. "Good bye, Han. Take good care of yourself."

"If I can't, then Chewbacca will." Suddenly, Han found himself at a loss for words. He reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Randa's cheek. "I'm gonna miss you." He said, pulling her close for a quick, hard kiss. For a moment, they pressed together, warmth against the cold; then Han broke away and strode off down the street with Chewbacca in tow.

"Gonna miss you, too." Randa whispered, watching until the two forms, one tall and rangy, the other huge and shaggy, were swallowed up by the darkness.

EPILOGUE

"Just a minute, son. Your work can wait."

Jeril Thoms laid a restraining hand on Han's arm as the rest of the Golden Matrix's crew filed out to go about their duties.

Thoms looked up at him with a kindly expression on his wrinkled, squint-eyed face. "I remember what it's like to be the new hand, leaving

your birth planet behind. We have fifteen minutes before we go hyper, if you'd like to have a while to yourself for a last look."

Han glanced over at the rear port, which showed a slowly shrinking view of Corell. It was the planet which had given him life; the atoms of its rocks had formed the substance of his bones, its dust made up his flesh. Yet he had known nothing there but grief and disillusionment. He shook his head.

"The place means nothing to me now. There's nothing for me back there, no one who gives a damn about me. I'm never going back. They could blow it up for all I care."

He pictured it in his mind's eye, seeing the bluish orb of the planet hanging suspended against the star-sprinkled void and feeling a certain dark satisfaction as he imagined it bursting apart in a shower of white-hot shards. Then, his pain-inspired venom purged by the dreadful enormity of the vision, he closed his eyes and shook his head. He was glad that such a thing was not possible.

"No one," he had said. And yet, there was one among all of Corell's billions whom he would remember fondly. For the sake of that one, Han Solo spared one final glance at his former home before he turned away and followed his captain aft.

END

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