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The Women In His Life
by Z.P. Florian

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Kani Flamedancer paced up and down in the gray conference room of the Medical Frigate. She had little time and even less patience. They better send me an able person, she fumed, not some hotheaded soldier, who had been stupid enough to get himself into the medcenter, when there was no battle with the Imps in a month...

The door slid open and she found herself staring at a young man, maybe a little over twenty, dressed in sickbay whites. He was blonde and blue-eyed, hospital-scrubbed clean and way too good-looking for the assignment.

"I'm Luke . . . ahm, I don't think I'm supposed to tell you my full name, " he said.

Kani hooked her sharp-nailed thumbs into her worn leather belt, signaling that she had no desire to shake hands. " Never mind. You won't do, " she said, her annoyance clearly written on her grimy face.

"Aren't you a little hasty in making judgements?" Luke asked.

"Listen, I need a man who can pose as a slave, work as a freight-barge pilot and not stand out as a sore thumb somewhere, where no one had ever seen a clean fingernail. They take one look at you and sell you on any of two dozen planets as a high-priced sex toy, in which capacity you won't be much use to me. " Kani resumed pacing. "Have you ever worked as an agent?"

"No. Well, I impersonated a stormtrooper once."

"For how long?"

"Twenty hectic minutes." Luke smiled. "You're right, I have no experience, but I'm willing to learn. And the problem of the clean fingernails can be solved, I'm sure. I can certainly fly a freight-barge."

"How much do you know of the assignment?" Kani asked.

"I know that there are some two thousand Alderaani on a slave ship, I know that they must be brought to an Alliance base, and you are someone who can get me on that ship. "

Kani faced him . "How important is this to you?"

Luke waited a little with his answer. "Important enough. I know someone from Alderaan. Let's just say, that I understand why each and every Alderaani survivor must be saved. "

Kani mellowed a little. "And if you fail? What if you end up playing the slave for months, what if you get seriously injured, what if you die? Are you ready to take the risk? "

Luke didn't look at her as he answered. "I'm an X-wing pilot. If we only lose half of our men in a fight, we think we'd been lucky. Playing secret agent ought to be a lot safer. Listen, I don't know how to make you like me, but I want this assignment, I'm willing to take whatever comes with it, and if Mon Mothma thinks I'm right for it, maybe you should trust her, even if you don't trust me."

"As if I have a choice, " Kani grimaced. "All right. I'm known as Kani Flamedancer at the place where we are going. I own a warehouse there. Wait. I need something more for your ID chip than just Luke. So?"

"So set it as Luke Landstander. As good as anything else. When do we leave?"

Kani grabbed her bag. "Yesterday. "

"I have to get my things, " Luke started.

"What things? Slaves have no things. Damn, I told you you won't do!"

"Pipe down, Flamedancer, " Luke said cheerfully. "I can go in a hospital gown, if you want me to. "

Kani looked at him sideways, grinning wickedly. "Slaves don't have hospital gowns either, Landstander. Just pack your birthday suit, my dear. I'll get the matching accessories from the techs. "

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She is enjoying this, damn it, Luke swore silently, as he tried to be perfectly casual about being naked. Kani insisted on starting the role-playing as soon as her small ship left the bay of the Medical Frigate. "You've been a slave for the better part of your life, at least according to your fake ID chip, so you can't be shy about it, " she told him. "Besides, we must get a few layers of dirt on you. " She handed him an oily rag. "Go clean the cargo hold. By the time it gets clean, you should be as authentic-looking as you'll ever get. "

She was right, Luke admitted four hours and a lot of scrubbing later, studying his grimy feet . Kani called him into her cabin. "Sit down, " she said. "I'm going to fix your bracelet. It should cover this -" she indicated the smooth band on his right hand. "Where did you lose your hand? "

"We are not supposed to exchange personal information, " Luke retorted.

"Oh, sure. I was kinda hoping for a heroic story, but have it your way. " Kani got hold of his right hand and affixed a wide flexmetal bracelet on it, using a small tool to seal it. "This is permanent. The Alliance mechanics said they'd be able to remove it eventually. Your ID chip is in there. It contains all the information your owners need: your name and your number. "

"That's all?"

"What else? List of allergies? Sexual preference? Favorite food? Hell, Landstander, I suggest you try to remember what a slave is supposed to be: perishable equipment. Droids are expensive, slaves are a lot cheaper. "

"What if someone asks me about my previous owners? my work and so on?"

"Very unlikely. If yes, say anything you want, nobody believes a slave anyways. Say you have been the favorite pilot of the

Emperor. They assume you're bragging, and that you've been hauling nerf droppings in a wheelbarrow from one end of the Rim to another..." Kani gave him a hard look. "I have some three days to teach you. I hope to hell it'll be enough."

Luke answered with an innocent stare. "I suppose if you'd whip me a few times, I'd learn faster."

She gave him a fairly friendly shove. "Very funny, Landstander. Keep your eyes down when you're talking to a Mistress. Sit down on the floor when no one is talking to you. Try to keep out of the way of people: good slaves know how to be invisible, but snap at it if you hear your name. Stay out of sight. Boga, the Slaver Queen is rather interested in pretty Humans, but she has a favorite now, and it's not very likely that she'll go searching for another one. If all goes well, the whole thing would be over in a few days. "

"And if not?"

Kani sighed. "Then everyone is for him-or-herself, friend. I can't afford to blow my cover. You'd have to get out of whatever mess you've made."

"And when are you going to tell me the details? How am I supposed to free the Alderaani? I don't know what Mon Mothma told you about me, but if she had said that I could seize a slaver ship single-handed, she had been exaggerating my abilities a little, " Luke grinned. His annoyance with Kani's attitude gradually vanished. She was, he saw, about his age, another person caught up in the war, living a life the circumstances forced on her. Like himself, like Leia, she, too was a fighter.

"I'll tell you the details in good time, " Kani snapped.

Damn, but it was hard not to get annoyed with her, Luke thought. "A measure of trust between us might actually help...." he told her, still patient.

"Have it your way, " Kani said. She sat down tiredly. "The barge you're going to pilot will be loaded with food crates containing firearms. You'll set her down in the bay of the slaver. You'll immediately go to the ship's main computer and feed the data chip. It's hidden in your ID bracelet. The chip will sabotage the ship's security system: the Alderaani will then be free to arm themselves. They will take over the ship, and you fly it to the nearest Alliance base. You memorized the coordinates, I was told. Simple enough?"

"Very simple, " Luke smiled. "Presuming nothing goes wrong. In my experience, something always goes wrong. "

"Like what?" Kani asked, unveiled disapproval in her voice.

"The food crates will actually contain food..." Luke started.

"I know what's in them. You can double-check them on your way to the slaver."

"The freighter will develop an annoying little malfunction and won't land in the bay of the slaver, " Luke continued, grinning triumphantly.

"I damn well hope you're able to fix little malfunctions, " Kani smiled back at him.

"Assume I can, and the freighter is in the bay, " Luke continued, " Someone walks up, says he's hungry, opens a food crate and sees the weapons."

Her mouth twitched. "I damn well hope you can kill that someone on the spot, preferably without making a lot of noise."

"Rest assured, " Luke said, his annoyance returning anew.

Kani was equally annoyed with him and didn't bother to hide it. "Any more of your imaginative ideas ? Oh, I know: you approach the computer and find out that the keypunchers are armed with ion cannons. Well, that's unlikely. "

"Unlikely is not impossible. " Luke sat down, uncomfortably aware of his nakedness. He'll be a Jawa's nephew if he'd let her see it, he woved. "What am I to do if I run into a bit of opposition, trying to reprogram a computer?"

"Fight?" she asked sweetly.

"Oh, sure. Fight and probably die without accomplishing my task. I'd need a wide-angle stun beamer, just to be sure. "

She shrugged. "I'll get you one as soon as you tell me where on your naked body do you plan to hide it. You know, slaves aren't kept

bare-assed for nothing. What other worries do you have, oh, most wise warrior? or should I say worrier? "

Luke refused to explode. "The data chip won't work."

"I was told the Alliance's best computer technicians programmed it. If they don't know what they're doing, we can kiss the Rebellion goodbye."

"Suppose the Alderaani won't be able to overcome the slavers."

"I assure you, Landstander, that there are about two hundred other things liable to go wrong, and I'm not interested in any of them. I'll do my best to make this work, and you'll do your best, and I haven't the slightest doubt in the Alderaani. Nothing will go wrong. Now stop fretting."

"Fretting!"

"I'm going to sleep." She rose, looking at him expectantly. "And you?"

He frowned. "Where do slaves sleep, Mistress?"

"Wherever they want to. There is plenty of floor space..."

"Provided I'm not blocking the traffic." Luke added.

She gave him a wide grin. "Why, you are a fast learner. "

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Luke waited patiently for Kani in the large warehouse. It was a spacious, old building, with a row of overhead loadlifters and two wide openings for loading. One was closed, the other opened into the cargo bay of a ship. Luke thought it was the barge he was supposed to fly. Crates lined the walls, stacked ten high. The place was drafty and cold.

Luke leaned against the rusty wall and tried not to think of anything. There were too many things he preferred to forget for the moment - Vader's dark whispers through the Force, Han's silent agony in carbon-freeze, Leia's love, so clear and obvious for the Corellian . . .

Kani's angry curses startled him. She was using obscenities Luke had never even heard before.

He grinned at her. "Now, which one of my predictions came true?"

"The load lifters don't work, " she said, her eyes hard with anger. "I need a part. Stay here, this might take a couple of hours. I have to wake up someone and wheedle spare parts out of him. Damn, we might not finish loading in time. "

"Just go get the parts, " Luke said. Kani studied him for a moment, but there was no sign of gloating in the blue eyes. She found she was actually grateful for him not saying "I told you so".

"Try to sleep some, " she advised. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She left and Luke remained alone with the crates and the empty cargo hold of the barge. The crates were too heavy for manual loading - especially packed with weapons and ammo, he thought.

Since his meeting with Vader, Luke was reluctant to use the Force. Hell, he was reluctant to do anything that reminded him of any link he had with Jedi, light or dark. His father! Damn, but he cannot let this rule his life. He had an assignment now: the rest can wait. There wasn't a thing he could do about Han before Lando and Chewie reported back from Tatooine, there wasn't a thing he could do about Vader, father or not, but he could very well do something about the crates. He walked to the center of the warehouse, closed his eyes and invoked the calm concentration he needed, to feel the Force. His whole body as the conductor, he directed the power towards the crates, moving them smoothly, one by one, into the barge. It was easy work, though slow and careful, but he felt glad doing it. There was nothing in the whole universe but the crates and his will. Eventually the last two of the crates were levitating towards the barge.

"Yman Haght! " Kani's voice exploded behind him. " Sun's heat, you're Jedi!"

The crates dropped to the ground as Kani's noisy surprise broke Luke's concentration. He looked at her with unseeing eyes for a moment, fighting for breath.

"Don't ever do this again, " he groaned, "I'm not that good at this . . ." His head was heavy like a stone and his heart felt like a trapped animal trying to break out of his chest. He swayed on his feet, blindly reaching for support. Kani put her arms around his waist, steadying him.

"I had no idea, " she protested, "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough, " he grated, blinking rapidly. He couldn't see anything but bright flashes and his head started to hurt with a vengeance. He felt Kani's cool fingers on his temples. She was gentle, something he hadn't really expected from her.

"How can I help?" she asked.

The discomfort dissipated fast enough, but Luke was reluctant to admit it. He enjoyed her embrace. "You may want to hold me a little longer, " he grinned.

To his surprise, she did not come back with a sharp retort. Her cat-eyes shone in the dim light. Luke was very much aware of the fact that only her thin thermal suit was between them. His arms tightened around her. She kissed him, hard. Her hands slid down his bare back, her touch less than gentle now. His kiss lightened with a smile as he found a new use for the Force - the snaps of her thermal suit released at once. She didn't seem to notice.

Her body was strong, sinewy, demanding. He was eager and responsive, taking all she had offered, giving generously, and for a while, they were both safe, invincible and at peace, regardless of the galactic war that could easily take their young lives the next day.

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"The crates are all in, " Luke reported, striding into Kani's orderly little office at the end of the warehouse. He wasn't shy about his nakedness any more, not in front of Kani.

She was sitting at her desk and motioned for him to come closer, pulled him down, her left arm around his neck: her right hand moved lightning-fast, marking his face with four parallel slashes of her claws. He hissed in pain and surprise.

"What did you do this for?"

"Shh. Boga's coming. " Kani gave him a quick kiss on his unmarked cheek. "I don't want you to look too attractive. I had hoped you'd never meet her. "

Luke glared at Kani. "See, another thing going wrong."

"Shut up and sit in the corner. And look ugly."

"Fat chance!" he grinned, but did as he was told. Kani looked at him and her heart sunk. Even with the bloody scratches on his face, Luke was hopelessly good-looking, his skin tanned gold, his blue eyes, wide mouth, the fine strands of his hair . . . damn, Kani groaned, let's hope it's only my opinion . . .

Gods of Irfogan, why can't I stop lusting after him? She gritted her teeth, cursing both the man's looks and her own temper with the same breath.

Two armed men came in, both reptilians, taking positions at the door. The Slaver Queen entered between them. She was short, her eyes similar to Kani's cat-eyes, her fingers ending in the same kind of hard long nails, but Boga had curved fangs protruding from her dark mouth. She wore simple, warm garments, and a lot of high-tech gadgets. A jewelled shockwhip hung from her belt. Luke thought she was probably old, but age was hard to guess when the race was unfamiliar.

Kani bowed low in front of her.

"Greetings, Majestic Female, " Kani said reverently. "I've acquired a pilot for you. " She indicated Luke, who tried his best to bow as he sat.

Boga studied him. "On your feet, " she said. Her voice was surprisingly pleasant.

Luke scrambled to his feet, doing his best not to be graceful.

"Hmm. Looks healthy. A Standard Human. A purebread Stan?"

Kani shrugged. "Only a medic can tell. He looks it, for sure."

The Slaver Queen's eyes narrowed. "He's not gelded."

Luke stopped breathing, as Kani asked casually: "Should he be?"

"No, not at all. I might want to breed him. Some of the Alderaani females are still in good enough shape to give birth. This one might just earn me the price you're asking for him. Purebreed Stan babies, with this kind of coloring are thirty old-coins on Teema. " Boga's forked tongue flickered between her fangs. "Good. Can you really fly a freighter, boy?"

Luke remembered Kani's advice. He stared at the floor and said: "I've been the best pilot among all the slaves on the Rim. "

"Of course. " Boga unclipped her whip and showed it to him. "You'll get to know this, if it turns out you can't pilot the barge. Go now. "

Kani didn't even look after him. She was busy registering the credits one of the Queen's bodyguards transferred to her. Luke went, wondering what was he expecting - a goodbye kiss from Kani, maybe? Would have been rather unusual, among the circumstances. But he felt saddened, alone, and maybe ... afraid. His cheek throbbed with the claw-marks.

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The slaver ship was huge and shapeless, it's metal sides pockmarked with carbon scoring, scarred with innumerable repairs. Compared to this, Luke thought, the Falcon is a luxury cruiser. Even the barge appeared in better shape than the ship itself.

His comm beeped, a sickly sound, then spit static at him. Finally he heard someone talking to him on a language he did not understand.

"Spaceint please, " he said, remembering to be humble.

"You the new pilot?" the voice cracked. "Come around, this bay is jammed. I have the port side open for ya. "

Luke brought the barge up and around, where the bay was open already. He guided the barge inside and waited for the seal to close. It

took forever, and something made fearsome creaking noises in the background.

"All clear, you have air, " the voice reported from the comm.
" You can come out. "

Luke sighed. The flight was long in the slow barge and his whole body ached with weariness. The constant, nagging cold sapped his strength. He hoped the slaver ship was warmer inside. The hangar bay wasn't, he knew in the instant the hatch opened. His bare feet hurted on the cold metal plates of the floor.

A round, hairy being came out of a small office and looked him over. It extended a long, flexible arm and touched Luke's hair. "Yellow, huh? Never seen yellow fur before. There. " He pointed at a small cabin high up on the bay's wall. "Your place. Go up and stay there. "

Luke had no intention to do so. "I was told I must help unloading the crates, " he said.

"Suit yourself. " The being left him and went back into his office. Luke saw a back door open and some two dozen Alderaani came out. They were filthy and bone-thin. A heavy slave-collar encircled their necks. Most of them had long, red marks on their bodies, the sign of an often-applied shock-whip.

Luke went with them to the barge's cargo door and opened it. He stepped inside. An Alderaani men followed him .

Luke stopped him with a gesture. "Leia Organa sent me, " he said quietly. "I'm Luke Skywalker. The crates contain weapons for you. In a short while the ship's security system will be disabled. You can then arm yourself and take over the ship. I will pilot it to an Alliance base."

The Alderaani looked startled, but only for a moment. "We are ready. "

"I must find the ship's main computer. "

"It is somewhere on the lower levels. " The Alderaani seemed to study him. "I have no idea how you can get there. The corridors are guarded. "

"I will manage. " Luke said firmly.

"Ah. An interesting attitude. " The Alderaani leaned closer. " Skywalker, you said. A strong old family. I've heard of another Jedi Skywalker and he had been a darksider. The Organas have a strange taste in Jedi."

Luke bit his lip, hard. The last thing he needed now was Vader's shadow. Damn if he cared, he thought. "I don't think you are in the position to pick and choose your Jedis, Alderaani, " he said coldly. "Just take what you can get."

He was angry, with a deep, bitter anger, a kind of feeling he had not experienced before. How many times would Vader step between him and the trust people used to give him freely? Do all Alderaani know more about his ancestry than he, himself?

The Alderaani shook his head, as if the angry flash in Luke's eyes had confirmed his suspicions, but didn't pursue the subject. "We will start unloading the crates."

Luke stood there for a moment, hating the animosity between them.

"May the Force be with you, " said the Alderaani.

The anger was slow going away, but Luke managed to swallow a retort -- which side do you mean? -- and left, under the watchful eye of the hairy guard. He climbed up to the cabin that was supposed to be his "place", and looked for a way out of the bay, up on the catwalks. It took a couple of perilous steps, and a long jump that had him blessing Yoda's training, but he was out on a narrow corridor. It was hot, too hot for comfort. He didn't mind: heat he could take, it was the cold that he couldn't bear. This was damp heat, the climate control set for a race that was definitely not Standard Human. Luke guessed it was the Slaver Queen's idea of a fine environment, remembering the warm clothes she had been wearing planetside, in Kani's office.

Kani. Sweet suns, would he ever see Kani again? And why did it matter? Wasn't it Leia he wanted? Damn, I'm standing here like a bull nerf in springtime, he thought, dismayed. Nothing ever was simple. None of the other pilots made a big thing out of a quick embrace before or after a dangerous mission. Now Kani, tomorrow someone else, somewhere else. Just another item on the growing list of things he had no time to think about. He had a computer to find.

Closing his eyes, he let his Force-sense map the ship for him. He felt the Alderaani, in crowded quarters, many of them sick, most of them starving, men, women, children. He sensed the guards, bored, annoyed, cruel and not very bright men, looking for any kind of entertainment. A few levels below him, he detected the presence of Boga, her aura angry, and there was someone with her, someone in horrible pain, nearly dead. Luke tore himself away from the mental picture. Not now.

He found what he was looking for, and started to walk - stars, how he wanted to run, but the kind of unobtrusive Jedi invisibility did not allow for fast movements. Walk, softly, broadcasting the aura of nothingness, walk past the guards, never once allowing himself to think that they might see him. This was part of it: first he had to make himself believe that he became undetectable, then spread the feeling around himself. Walk, confidently through guard posts, his bare arms almost brushing the men on the narrow corridor.

Hard? If it was hard, he had been the last person allowed to admit it. If it was hard, he was doing it the wrong way. Sweat run down his naked back, but then it was hot inside the ship.

He had no idea how long it took, but he reached the computer room. The double doors were closed. He could see the beings inside through duraglass windows. Four of them, none armed with more than the neuro-whip. They weren't doing anything, just sat there, eating fried snakes and some kind of green vegetables. Luke latched on their minds, trying to find the easiest way to get them open the door and - preferably - go somewhere else. Killing four men bare-handed was not the best idea, although Han would probably try that first, Luke thought bitterly. He was missing the Corellian -- another item on his list of forbidden subjects. Damn it to the seven hells, his whole life was on that list already!

He found a vague thought in the mind of one of the men and gently strengthened it, till it became an irresistible urge. The man stood up and said something. Luke did not understand the language, but the thought was clear.

"Why don't we all go and see if the barge brought some ale?"

Only one of them resisted the idea, and Luke had to concentrate on that one harder, to get under his skin: the man was recently punished for neglecting his duties and he was afraid to go with the others. Luke reassured him that this time he won't be caught. Treacherous creature a Jedi can be, he thought, when the four men filed past him, eager to find cold ale. Luke slipped in the door, just before it slid shut behind them.

As he let go of his concentration, he found that he was trembling. His palms were slippery with perspiration. It took forever to pry the chip out of his slave bracelet.

He fed it to the computer and waited, holding his breath.

"Penetration accomplished. " came the first line on the screen in front of him, "Hi, Luke, how are you?" was the second.

He almost laughed. This was typical of the Alliance computer techs, programming a joke into everything. But the smile left his face as the next line came on.

"Approximate time of execution: four hours seven minutes. Press start now. "

He did.

But then he had to hold on to the desk just to stay on his feet.

The computer was back to normal now, showing exactly the same screen it had shown before the Alliance program started. He was told it was an excellent program, that it would work in the background undetected, severing all links to the security systems, opening all doors and deactivating the slave collars. He also knew that the speed of the work depended on the capacity of the ship's computer. Kani told him the Alliance tech's expected anything between four minutes and half an hour.

Four hours or more.

What was he supposed to do with that much time?

Four hours for the slavers to find the weapons. Four hours for the Alderaani to wait, probably lose hope, give up. Four hours for him to be caught.

First of all, he had to get word to the Alderaani. Where on the ship were they taking those crates? Supposedly food. Must go to the mess hall.

Hell, he could walk the corridors once, he could do it again. Yoda never said how much manipulation was a Jedi supposed to do without getting tired. Yoda said he had to do it and see how far he can go. He would go as far as he had to.

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The Alderaani, the one who had misgivings about Skywalker Jedis, was in a large storeroom adjoining the mess hall. Several slaves worked on stacking the crates or at least making a show of it. For how long can they hang around here? If they are herded back to their holding cells, they'd have to fight their way back here barehanded just to arm themselves. Too many casualties - no good.

Luke approached the man silently. "Don't stop, " he whispered. "The guards can't see me. Walk behind the crates. We must talk."

The Alderaani stiffened, but not for long. In a few seconds, he worked his way around the stack of crates where Luke was waiting for him.

"The security system will be down in four hours, " Luke said. He was tense. "I know it's a long time."

"Are you good at moving objects?" the man asked.

Luke almost smiled. It was good to work with someone who knew what to do with a Jedi. He nodded.

"See those yellow containers on the top shelf?"

Luke glanced at them. They were rather large, on a shelf about fifteen feet off the floor.

"Make a few of them fall down."

He didn't ask why. It was easy: all it took was a little nudge. The Alderaani nodded appreciatively when the crates fall. They broke as they hit the floor and thousands of small pellets rolled out of them in every possible direction.

The guard immediately ordered the slaves to pick them up.

"Dry food, " the Alderaani whispered. "Slave chow. It will take a while to collect it."

Luke thought he should find himself a hole to hide in, to wait out the four hours. Kani was right, the Alderaani could take care of themselves.

Unseen, he moved past the guard, into the mess hall.

This was a large room with high ceiling, long tables and low benches. A thick layer of age-old dirt and grease covered everything. A long time ago, Luke imagined, hundreds of proud Rimworld warriors sailed this ship and had great feasts in this hall. Now some twenty well-armed slavers of different species sat at the tables, eating and playing dice. The food smelled strange and looked even stranger. Luke stood in a dimly lit corner. He felt drained, bone-weary. He thought of Kani's hot, demanding body with desperate longing. Two minutes in her arms could revive him, he was sure of it.

"You!"

A scaly finger prodded him.

"What the hell are you doing in here? We're looking all over the place for you. The Majestic Female wants you. Why aren't you in your cabin?" The slaver was more annoyed than angry, relieved that he managed to find the lost slave after all.

Luke cringed, rather convincingly. "I was looking for food..." he mumbled.

"There is a dispenser in your cabin, you stupid hwimat." The slaver sighed. "Someone shouldve shown you the ropes first. Move on. "

Luke went, not wanting to create more problems than he could handle.

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He was led to a brightly lit, very warm and humid area, much cleaner and better equipped than anything else he had seen on the ship. The slaver pushed him through a swinging door.

Luke almost stumbled over a bloodied corpse. He remembered what he had felt, when he sensed the aura of the Slaver Queen.

She stood at the back of the room, smiling at him.

"He had been a very bad boy..." she said, pointing at the body. "See that you'd do better. I like Stans. There is something enticing in your plain bodies: little hair, no tail, no scales, no horns, no fangs, not even claws, just tender skin and soft flesh. So very . . . vulnerable. A little too vulnerable, though. This one couldn't stand the punishment. Well, how would you like to become my new pet? "

A theoretical question, Luke thought. "I'm honored, " he said.

"Yes, you are. " Boga laughed. "Go wash yourself. I want you clean and good-smelling. Use the green soap. "

Against his will, Luke shivered, trying to find an acceptable way to deny her command. "I'm ... afraid I might not be able to please you now, " he rasped. "I've been working over twenty hours without rest and . . . "

Boga run her claws across Luke's chest very gently. "We can help that, sweetling. I have good medicine to ensure your performance. How else, do you think, a weak little Stan would be able to satisfy me?" She laughed, her forked tongue touching Luke's throat. "I know you're afraid of me, and fear is a poor aphrodisiac. Go wash."

Luke glanced at the bloodied body on the carpet. He needed all of his willpower not to clench his fists. Damn, he had to gain time. At what price? Even in the best condition, he couldn't possibly bed the Slaver Queen. A man needs a little inspiration for those things, he thought.

Kani would probably laugh at him for being "squamish".

He stepped into the sani: it was luxurious, equipped even with running water. The green soap had an utterly revolting smell, like Dagobah swampwater. Well, one being's stink is another being's fragrance, Luke thought, lathering himself. Besides, it's better to smell of an alien perfume than stink of fear. Boga had a keen nose. One, two hours left, at the most.

How bad could it be, to couple with the Slaver Queen? but how can he allow himself to be drugged now, when the fight might break out any minute? Sweet suns, how could that damn program take so long to start working?

He can't stay in the shower forever.

Boga didn't exactly look weak-minded.

Would she respond to Jedi manipulation? and can he do more of it? He had been sustaining illusions far longer than he had ever thought possible. Then again, his choices were rather limited. When his strength run out, he'd know how long is too long.

Luke walked out of the sani. The Queen sat on the square bed, an array of jars and syringes already on the low table beside it. She sniffed at Luke's skin.

"See, now, this is a nice scent on you, " she purred, taking Luke's arm in one hand and a syringe in the other.

"The drugs are not needed, " Luke said firmly. "I will perform well. Your beauty has a powerful effect on me."

"The drugs are not needed, " Boga repeated, smiling. "You will do fine. I think you find me very attractive."

Luke was dizzy with relief. He sunk to the floor at her feet and continued talking. "You are incomparable, my Queen. Your presence radiates power and sexuality. My poor race can't be but honored that you find one of us worthy of your attention. Your eyes mesmerize me. I have but one desire, to entertain you. " He saw her pupils narrow to a slit, her mouth opened slightly. "I beseech you to take off your clothes and reveal your beauty to me. "

Boga begun to undress, her cat-eyes never leaving Luke's face. She wore a tight-fitting bodysuit under her garments. She peeled it off slowly.

Luke never stopped talking, his voice soft, resonant. "The sight of your shoulder brings me to the brink of extasy. I'm drunk with the hope that you'll allow me to touch your breasts." He faltered, as the manipulation penetrated his own soul, linking him to Boga's dazed presence. Gradually, he begun to believe his own words. The Force he had invoked to use swirled around them, inside them, licking at him like a living flame. He played with more power than his tired mind could deal

with. The woman in front of him was growing more beautiful and more desirable with his every sentence. His body responded to the images of his mind. He reached out to stroke the skin of her thighs. The contact lit fire in his loins. Time . . . he had time . . . no, something important was supposed to happen . . . but the woman . . . all women are beautiful . . . Leia . . . Kani . . . this is as it should be. . . a man needs . .

"Touch me, " he said, his voice hoarse.

Blaster fire?

His fogged mind cleared suddenly with the stab of a blinding headache. He saw where he was and what he had been doing. The sound of a battle filled the room. He grabbed Boga's whip and ran to join the Alderaani. Fight now, think later, he told himself, relegating Boga as another item on the damn list. His heart was racing and his vision took a while to clear. Damn, I manipulated myself clear out of my own mind, he cursed, thinking that Yoda would never let him live down such a mistake. He turned the corner, running, and threw himself into the fight. A blaster shot grazed his shoulder, bringing him to his senses completely. He would've given his right hand - what right hand? - he could even laugh at this - to have his lightsaber, but the first blaster he grabbed in the melee served him well enough.

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"How do we stand?" Luke asked the Alderaani. He was balancing on one foot, pulling up a pair of pants he acquired from the laundry dispenser. Somehow, it made him feel better to be dressed.

"We are rounding up the last of the slavers. By the way, I am Count Ardion. How is the Princess Organa? Have you seen her? The Imperials told us that she has been killed."

"She is fine, " Luke said. "You will meet her shortly. " It occurred to him that he had no idea how long would it take to fly the slaver ship to the base. "How fast is this tub anyways?"

"Let's find out." Ardion turned to his people, standing around him, half-dressed, dirty, some wounded, silently waiting for his words. "See that everybody gets a good meal, try to wash and clothe

everyone, especially the children. See who needs medical attention. And I need a crew for the bridge. "

Luke admired the quiet, unquestioning efficiency of these men, who spent months among incredibly miserable circumstances and still kept their discipline and dignity. He couldn't help asking: "What group of people you are? Have you been working together before?"

"Not really. We were on Mord when Alderaan was . . . Some of us were diplomats, others merchants, artists or just tourists. We thought it would be safer to leave Imperial territory after the . . . " He apparently couldn't bring himself to say what had happened to his home planet. " Our ship had no armaments and we had no weapons. The slavers had an easy time taking us. " Ardion smiled. "If you are wondering, the Alderaani have an inbred respect for their aristocrats. In any situation, the command structure is automatically there. By rank and title, there is instant leadership."

Leia, of course, the way she always assumed command, Luke thought. An advantage as much as a burden, somewhat like being a Jedi. He didn't mind at all that the count took control of the situation. He was more than tired.

The bridge was theirs to use, though the corpses weren't removed yet and a few of the circuits were blown. Luke sunk into the navigator's seat, then stood up immediately, knowing that he'd fall asleep if he remained in that seat a second longer.

"Check the comm systems, " Ardion told someone. " They might have sent transmissions during the fight. " He studied the command boards and his face turned white. "This ship does not have a hyperdrive. How far is the base?"

Luke stared at him, forcing his fogged brain to work. "About two years, I'd say, without the hyper. I think the Alliance should send a ship for us. " There was something nagging at him and it took a while to register. "Then we don't have to worry about those transmissions. Without hyper, they only had subspace comm."

"WE only have subspace comm!" Ardion said. "The Alliance won't get our transmission earlier than two months, then. By that time, we'd either starve to death or get captured by the Imperials."

"Hang on. " Luke tucked the blaster into the waistband of his pants. "I'm going planetside. Kani should be able to contact the Alliance. "

"Shouldn't you enter the coordinates of the base before you leave? just in case?"

"No." Luke had strict orders not to commit such data in any computer. "I'm sorry. I will be coming back in less than six hours."

Ardion nodded, then added hesitantly. "Are you sure I shouldn't send someone else to Kani? You look ready to drop."

"I'm sure, " Luke said. He wanted to go. He needed to see her.

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The noisy landing of the barge woke Kani up. She surged to her feet, blaster in hand. She had no need to dress - in her line of work she had learned long ago to sleep in her clothes. Her first thought was that Luke had failed. She got to the dock at the same time he climbed out of the barge.

Her smile told him that she was glad to see him in one piece.

"It's all right, " Luke told her. "Except a small little thing. Why didn't you tell us that the slaver ship had no hyperdrive?"

"It slipped my mind." Kani said.

"A funny thing to forget. You held it back because you've thought the Alliance won't help if they knew the slaver can't reach the base?"

"Let's say, I didn't want to risk it. "

"And now what?"

"You tell me, Landstander."

Luke pulled her closer, embracing her. "You're a strange one, Flamedancer. Do you have a safe link to the Alliance?"

"Would I be an agent if I had not? " She kissed him quickly. "I was worried about you. About Boga. I'm glad to see she had no interest in you."

"Sheer luck, " Luke kissed her back. "Not all women think I'm that great, you see."

"Come now, the comm is in the basement."

Kani did have a very sophisticated comm system with a coded line.

"Just how important work are you doing?" Luke asked.

"Well I'm not important enough to be told, I mean officially be told, that you're Jedi." Kani grinned, her hands busy with the keyboard. "You know, I always had a thing for Jedi. When I was young - "

"A very long time ago, " Luke teased.

"Look how arrogant you are getting just because you got a pair of pants on you, " Kani shot back.

"So, what had happened when you were young?" Luke asked, standing behind her, his hands gently massaging her shoulders. It did wonders for his fatigue just to touch her.

"I loved to watch all those Imperial holos about the evil Jedi lurking in the shadows, seducing innocent maidens. Somehow I never liked the heroic Imp officer who appeared in the last moment to vanquish the hooded outlaw. Do you have a black uniform and a hooded black cape? " Kani nudged the comm and got static. She tried again.

"I never even knew Jedi are supposed to have black uniforms and hooded capes." Luke admitted. "I'm just a half-baked Jedi, trying to figure out what to do with himself. " He took a shaky breath and kept silent.

"Anything wrong?"

He wanted to tell her what had happened in Boga's room, how he lost his control over his own powers, but the comm beeped and Kani wasn't looking at him anymore.

"Here is your link, " she said. "What's the message?"

"The slaver is starting off tonight and I will be maintaining the course to the base, but the hyper is out. " The way he put it, Kani knew, covered her little deception. She wanted to hug him for it. " Tell them we need transport and we need it soon. There isn't enough food and medicine on the slaver and we can't survive any kind of Imperial inspection either. That's all."

Kani set to coding the message. Luke waited, trying to figure out how to tell her that he wanted to see her again.

"There, it's done. You can expect an answer in thirty minutes, " Kani smiled. "Can I do something for you now? Do you want food? a hot drink? Can I get you a jacket? you must be freezing in here. I don't have boots your size, do you want some socks?"

"Yes. No. " Luke took her in his arms and kissed her, very long. "I have my priorities. Any of those holos ever told you how the Jedi feeds on the love of those innocent maidens? "

Kani shook her head, her feline eyes sparkling.

"Let me show you." He pulled her on her feet, holding her, and sat down with her in his arms. "Putting on pants might have been a mistake, " he grinned.

"Professionalism is the know-how to correct your mistakes, " Kani quoted.

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"You must go now, " Kani said. "You should be fairly safe in this quadrant, till the transport gets to you. See, lots of things went wrong and we still managed. "

"I want to see you again, " Luke told her.

"That's very unlikely. "

"I'll try."

"Please, don't."

He looked at her for a while. "No. "

"I must tell you. I'm life-bonded. I have a mate on Irfogan."

"Then how?"

"We aren't only-sworn. When we are not together, we are free. Of course I can't pledge anything to you: I always return to him, and he is mine. " She was helping him to put on the thick thermal socks. "This was beautiful between us, but this is a wartime thing. We both needed it. "

"I know." He was saddened, but not bitter. "Maybe we'll run into each other again, sometime. I could love you, you know."

"This is a big galaxy, Landstander. There must be about six million females around whom you could fall in love with. You're bound to find one that's free to keep." Kani kissed him lightly. "Go now and take care of your skin. "

"You too. "

He let her go, reluctantly.

She held him back. "You look beat. I can take you back to the ship a lot faster than the barge. You can even sleep on the way."

For a moment he was tempted to refuse - maybe he WAS bitter after all - but then, somehow, he saw her in a different light. He had been thirsty and Kani gave him a drink of water: should he be miserable because he didn't get the whole well, or just glad and thankful for what he had been given? Strange how many ways there are to look at things, he smiled.

"You're kind, " he said, " and I do need a rest, thanks."

Back in Kani's little scout ship, Luke counted the days he had known her. Five, in all. It was nice, he thought sleepily, stretching his toes in the warm socks. It was nice to meet her, and take what she had to offer. He watched her intent profile as she navigated out of the port. Half-asleep already, his head on her lap, he felt warm and confident about the Alderaani. The Alliance will send a ship: five or six days, maybe, and he can present them to the Princess. Not a bad gift from a green Jedi, two thousand survivors to start a colony with...

And this is only the half of it, he thought, drifting. He fall asleep before he could finish the reasoning, but it was clear that there was a second gift, too - something to do with his attraction to Kani. That he could let Leia go now, let her love the Corellian with all her heart, without forcing her to be concerned about a lovesick Jedi suffering silently but noticeably around her. This was his other gift to her, his new maturity.

He slept, barely feeling Kani's slim fingers stroking his hair. In his dream he was at home, with Beru.

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