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## **In it For the Money**

by [Carolyn Golledge](#)

The cantina was crowded , noisy and dimly lit, but even so the tension radiating from the young, lean Corellian spacer was felt by all the patrons. He was beginning to draw unwanted attention. Several times he jumped to his feet, scowling angrily, hazel eyes blazing as he shook his head in apparent disgust then returned to the bar for another drink. At the table in the corner his Wookiee partner was conversing with a Rodian merchant. Whatever was going on Solo obviously didn't like it. Chewbacca, the Wookiee, seemed to dislike the terms offered by the merchant, while Solo was eager to do business.

Even among the greatly varied assortment of sentient beings in the cantina, a Wookiee was still capable of creating an aura of menace by his sheer size and power. Nobody here wanted to be around should Solo's temper drive the Wookiee to violence. And Solo was rapidly becoming more and more agitated. The Wookiee's blue eyes were glowing embers in the shadows of the corner as he watched his young human partner.

The merchant looked increasingly nervous though Rodians looked nervous at any time with their twitching snouts, mobile ears and bulbous, glassy eyes.

Everyone in the cantina watched as Solo grabbed a bottle of brandy from the barkeeper and swaggered back to the table. Several of the patrons exited the building rather hurriedly. Maybe they were empath's. The remaining crowd looked set to follow their example. Solo thumped the bottle down on the wooden table top and the Rodian jumped, his beady eyes glittering and his mouth twisting in a grimace. He looked ready to bolt.

"So, have you found any more ways to screw this deal, \*Partner\*? Solo's voice rumbled threat.

Chewbacca snarled and Solo said "Oh yeah!? Well we'll just see about that!" Solo turned to the merchant who was unhappily fidgeting with his drink "I am happy to deal with you, Gaaref. And although it has obviously slipped my partner's mind I AM the captain of the Millennium Falcon. I am the one who makes the final decisions." Solo flashed a burning, challenging glare at Chewbacca. "And \*I\* own the ship."

Chewbacca's eyes squeezed shut and one lip curled up to expose his fangs.

The Rodian shifted in his seat and half got to his feet then sat down again as Solo waved a finger at him. "Stay right where you are; we're just about to conclude this deal."

Chewbacca slowly stood and towered over them all. He growled something loudly enough to make the glasses on the table rattle. Solo flinched. His face drained of color and for a moment he looked ready to back down. Then his jaw set tightly and the fire returned to his eyes.

Solo waved an arm at the other beings in the cantina and said, "Look around . There are plenty of other co-pilots here."

The Rodian finally spoke up in his chattering native tongue which added to impression of nerves.

"Yeah that's what he said." Solo aided the translation of Wookian. "He doesn't want to fly this mission with me." The Rodian stared and asked a frightened - sounding question. "A crew and a ship, yeah that is what I need. A ship is particularly useful." Solo threw that barbed comment at the Wookiee and held the mammoth being's angry gaze as he continued, "One in good condition is best. One not in danger of impoundment by the Port Authorities is even better. Am I right, Partner?" The final word was made an insult by Solo's sneering tone.

Chewbacca at last broke the eerily intense stare and nodded gruff agreement.

Solo looked back to the Rodian. "Thankyou for your offer of a charter. We are happy to accept. We agree to your terms -- full payment on the successful transfer of your goods to your customers on Dasellia."

Chewbacca barked a sharp-sounding protest.

Solo ignored him, eyes flat and cold as he maintained eye contact with the Rodian. "Make that, I have agreed to your terms, and what I say goes on my ship!" Solo extended his hand, palm upward. "Give me the data card and I'll seal it with my retinal scan."

Chewbacca growled a soft, rumbling plea.

"Shut up." Solo said from the corner of his mouth. "I ain't your cub."

Eagerly, the Rodian produced the data card and activated the security scanner. Everyone in the cantina watched breathlessly, knowing there could be no going back once Solo's ID was sealed. The annoying little Rodian weapons-dealer had been trying to do business here for days. All turned him down, most laughed at the very idea -- they knew what happened to smugglers who went to Dasellia. None had ever returned -- or at least they did not return capable of functioning anywhere outside of a mental health unit.

Solo eyeballed the card and waited for the scanner light to pass over his face. Then he straightened up and turned to smile with grim triumph at his Wookiee partner.

Chewbacca's blue eyes had lost all their anger and were twin blue shadows of intense sorrow.

A hush settled over the cantina. Even the discordant musicians lowered the volume and settled for a slower paced arrangement. The tension between Human and Wookiee was palpable, a pack of explosives set to detonate. Chairs scraped and bottles clinked as everyone prepared to duck for cover or run for the nearest exit

Solo was first to back off, his gaze shifting to the tabletop, his face drawn and his hazel eyes dark, sickened. He struggled a moment to reclaim his brash smile but simply couldn't manage it. He lifted his eyes in one last pleading stare to lock with his partner's serene, sad, blue gaze. "You know I have to do this. The Falcon needs this. Can't you see that?"

The Wookiee shrugged and turned away, silently, smoothly to look back at the now much happier Rodian who had taken the data card and clutched it tight to his green-scaled hide.

Finally, Solo said, "Docking Bay 462. Have your cargo there by dawn tomorrow. I'll need to hustle if you want me to deliver that cargo to your buyers by the deadline."

The Rodian flicked a nervous glance to the unmoving Wookiee who had turned about to stand studying Solo's back

"Don't worry about him," Solo said. "You bring the cargo, I'll find a crew."

At that the Rodian nodded again and scuttled away, obviously relieved. Solo sat down again and poured himself a long swig of brandy. "Ahh, quit worryin'," he spoke still without looking up at the Wookiee. "It's done now. Finally . I just

guaranteed we won't lose The Falcon. Loosen up. You should be celebrating. Have a drink."

Chewbacca said nothing and remained standing

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Solo scowled, his voice ripe with frustration as at last he turned and eyed his partner. "You almost blew our only chance. Without this deal to save us we'd soon join the dirt eaters grubbing for a living here. And Tatooine is my least favorite place to spend a lifetime."

Still Chewbacca said nothing.

"And now you don't want to fly with me?" Solo's tone was shaken, his eyes disbelieving, hurt. He looked very young, very alone. Not much older than the farm boys who sometimes came to town hoping for some action.

Chewbacca simply said "No. I do not."

Solo stared and gulped a long swallow of brandy. "Fine. I thought you were only saying that to get him to up the payment. But go, leave if you don't have the guts for this run."

Chewbacca rumbled something very softly his blue eyes immensely compassionate now.

Solo looked up at him, one lip curled in a mocking sneer. "Oh you didn't say that? Funny, I thought my understanding of Wookian was perfect. You said I'm the only human who learned it so fast."

Chewbacca spoke again.

"Yeah , so I heard it as a child too," Solo scowled. "Big deal. So now you're saying I'm not such a fast learner? And I ain't doing well with the charter business stuff either -- according to you." Solo made to pour himself another drink and Chewbacca snatched the bottle away from him. "I have plenty of time to get over a hangover before I fly!" Solo said indignantly "Give that back!"

Chewbacca upended the bottle and poured its contents on the floor.

Solo jumped to his feet and his hand went to his blaster. Patrons ducked under tables.

"What 's it to you anyway?" Solo roared. "You ain't coming with me! I'll find someone else." Solo swung about to glare at the other occupants of the cantina and suddenly seemed to revise his estimate on how easy a task that might be --

the place had near emptied out and the remainder were either hiding or trying to pretend he didn't exist.

Chewbacca turned away again, heading for the stairs up to the street exit, then he looked back briefly to make one final comment.

Solo went white with rage and his hand closed about the blaster butt. "Oh so now I'm a murderer? And you're not? I haven't been keeping score but you have a hundred years lead on me -- I'd say you're winning!"

Chewbacca turned and left, apparently sure he was in no danger of being shot in the back by a man he had just named "murderer". Solo sat down and looked completely drained of life.

The band started up again and the other patrons drew breath to resume conversations .

Solo mumbled to himself. "Ahh, hell. Wookiees! Some life debt promise. He picks a great time to walk out on me." He glanced up as a robo-waiter approached the table. "At least now I can drink what I want -- bring me another bottle of brandy. Good riddance anyhow. I don't need a walking conscience who sheds fur all over my ship."

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Solo was more than a little the worse for wear when the noise of droids and Rodian arriving to load cargo woke him with such a start that he near fell from his bunk aboard the Falcon. He had no clear memory of how he had made it back to his ship. Only that he had done so alone. More alone than he had been in the four years since Chewbacca had rescued him from a hell named Kessel-- and despite naming himself Solo, he hadn't grown to like it any better.

He dressed and watched as the cargo was loaded, ignoring a throbbing headache to make sure he tallied it correctly. It was all there, as arranged. Gaaref asked him only once about the replacement co-pilot. Solo gave him a glare driven by the pain of his hang-over and said he'd be picking up a new partner from one of the tankers in orbit above Tatooine.

Finally all was in order, the ship's manifest checked out and the shoddy port officials paid off. Still Han didn't feel as eager to leave as he'd expected. The Falcon's ramp stood open waiting for him -- waiting to return him to a life of desolation and heart-aching loneliness he thought he'd left forever when Chewbacca had sworn Life Debt to him. Chewbacca who had also flown as Co for Solo's father. The only connection Han was every likely to find to those he had so loved -- all dead now. Murdered.

"And so now he thinks I'm a murderer too -- just because I'm running guns to people he doesn't like?" Solo grabbed at anger to ward off the encroaching pain. "Fine. I managed without him before-- I can do it again!" He only wished he believed that. He strode up the ramp, sealed the hatch and turned for the cockpit only to get the feeling there was someone else in there. He drew his blaster and inched forward along the short connecting corridor until he could see into the cockpit. There was only one person who could board the ship without the alarms going off, but --

Chewie! Han only just managed to clamp his mouth shut and close in both elation and surprise. He decided it best not to ask the Wookiee why he changed his mind.

Han holstered the blaster, swaggered in and took his customary position in the pilot's chair. "All set?" Silently he dammed the husky tone that betrayed just how relieved he was to have his partner back. Then again maybe Chewbacca had only come to say good-bye? His heart thudded in renewed panic. But no, the Wookiee nodded an affirmative, and began flicking toggles for engine warm up and settled the head set to contact Port Traffic Control.

Only when they were safely in hyperspace and on their way to Dasellia did Solo dare ask "So you changed your mind?"

"No," Chewbacca said after an interminable pause.

Han's head snapped about and he stared at his co-pilot in fearful confusion.

"I didn't change my mind," Chewbacca explained, blue eyes twinkling in familiar mischief, " -- I lost it."

"Very funny," Han said. He looked back to the flight board and tried hard to scowl.

"I am coming along to watch as you learn the hard way that this won't work."

"Hey," Solo said, "Sure it will -- let's keep a little optimism here. We'll make a fortune and all we have to do is deliver this cargo to the Ochrans on Dasellia. I have the rendezvous co-ordinates right here. Simple."

"I did not mean the charter," Chewbacca explained softly. "I was talking about you trying to pretend you don't care about hurting people."

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"Keep a close ear out for that signal, Chewie, and watch the scanners. This is going to be tricky."

Solo's hands were gentle and deft as he eased the Falcon through the cumulous cloud band and cut speed to almost hover above a ghostly, jagged landscape. With no running lights to give away her presence, the Falcon was just another flitting moon shadow in near total darkness. The time for the rendezvous had been well chosen. The last of Dasellia's twin moons was setting, a fingernail crescent against the dark peaks of the mountainous horizon.

"I know, I know," Solo snapped irritably. "But this is the right place. I swear the co-ordinates are accurate."

Still, Chewbacca was correct. The scanners showed no indication of life consistent with sapients, no organized settlement. "I'm taking us in," Solo said determinedly. "There's the boulder set just as Gaaref described it. And there's the hollow just like a natural docking bay."

Solo depressed switches and the Falcon slowed to a complete halt, thrusters firing in sudden bursts of illumination, then they were down, settling gently on the landing struts. Solo shut down the engines, shut down every system on the ship so that no enemy energy tracers could find them. This was a war zone, after all, and Gaaref had repeatedly warned Solo that the Ochran's vicious enemies, the Spatas, would not hesitate to blast him and his ship to radioactive dust rather than allow him to supply weapons.

Corellian and Wookiee sat as still and silent as their ship, peering into the shadows beyond the cockpit. Minutes passed - there was no sound, no movement. The infra-red scanners showed occasional blips of small animal life, nothing else. Solo fidgeted then stood and said, "I'm going out to look around. They've gotta be hiding out there some place. Gaaref told them I was coming."

"It is too dangerous," Chewbacca protested.

"No," Solo turned and hefted a forefinger at the Wookiee. "Sitting here waiting to be blasted is dangerous. I'm going out. If no one makes contact, we leave."

The Wookiee sighed, nodded reluctant agreement. He watched as Solo pulled on a heavy jacket and checked his blaster, power-pak and hand scanner. "Don't forget the night vision goggles," Chewbacca added.

"Oh yeah, thanks." Solo rummaged in an overhead bin and found the infra-red heat seeking goggles, with those he'd see any life form approaching before ever they saw him. One final check and Solo let out a nervous breath and said, "All set. I'll see you later."

"I'll be here," Chewbacca said, meeting the young human's unsteady gaze. "I wish we had that belly cannon. I could cover you."

"Yeah well, that's what this is all about, remember?" Solo said, "making the money to upgrade the Falcon's weaponry and scanners, not to mention keep her from impoundment."

Chewbacca sighed. "Go, be careful. Remember, it could be the other side waiting to ambush you and steal our shipment."

"I know that!" Solo snapped. "We already went over that. You will put the emergency plan into action if need be, right?"

Chewbacca looked away. "Chewie," Solo said threateningly, "that shipment is our only bargaining power. You get it outa here first and worry about me second."

"But --"

"But nothing! Your life debt is supposed to protect me. You can't do that if you get yourself blasted!"

The Wookiee howled and threw up his furry arms.

"Good. I'm glad that's settled." Solo bent to the flight control panel and flipped the toggle, just to be sure. It was the engine warm-up. The soft hum of engines reverberated through the ship, then dropped to a barely audible thrum. Chewbacca followed Solo to the exit ramp. The hatch popped and the ramp extended, pushing back soft, dark soil, littered with a needle-leaf carpet. Chill foggy air swirled into the Falcon.

"Okay then," Solo lifted his chin defiantly and put one hand on the blaster holster, the other holding the scanner. "If I don't find them in half an hour, I'm back."

Chewbacca placed a huge hairy hand atop Solo's head and stroked once.

"Don't got all mushy on me," Solo warned. He stepped onto the metallic ramp and his boot heels echoed a sharp rapping in the still night. He was glad to leave it and set foot on the deep, cushioning carpet of pine needles. He studied the scanner and headed out in a direct line toward the largest clump of boulders lining the hollow. He circled about and looked for a cavern. Surely there must be a hidden settlement shielded by rock where the scanners could not penetrate.

He began circling about, peering into the shifting moon shadows as clouds passed over its face. The scanner blipped occasionally as small Rodent-like animals hunted in the underbrush .

Giving up on the boulders when he found no pathways or other sign of organized settlement, Solo turned in a circle about the Falcon, entering the pine forest that fringed the hollow to the rear. There was not the least whisper of a breeze, just a



clinging ground fog and complete, utter silence. No, wait, there was something. A barely heard sighing. Solo's flesh prickled. Something or someone was breathing in a low sighing hiss very close by. Still the scanner showed nothing. Solo's pulse thumped in his ears, and his mouth went dry. What was that sound? The scanners insisted there were no animal life forms nearby. Solo concentrated, craning to listen, the soft sighing sound rose and fell faintly, haunting him with its sorrowful call.

The trees, damn it! Solo snorted a foggy breath in wry amusement. The sighing sound was coming from the passage of air through the pine branches. Get a grip, Solo, he told himself. You're lettin' your imagination get the better of you.

He continued his stealthy circling and time seemed to slow to a crawl. The place was as empty as a wasteland, or a graveyard. Deep dark shadows of ravines and canyons interlaced the boulder rim of the hollow, running off to join the distant mountains. An army could hide there forever. The Spatan army, supposedly equipped with long range cannons, lived in the towns at the foot of the mountains. If they locked onto the Falcon -- Other gunrunners had tried coming here and never returned. Maybe the promised payment for this run wasn't high enough, Solo decided, and then said aloud, "A rust bucket of a ship is better than no ship at all. Enough of this."

He turned to head back to the Falcon, and suddenly realized he'd wandered further than he intended. He pocketed the scanner and began hurriedly moving back toward the familiar welcome bulk of his ship, shimmering faintly in the moonlight. Then suddenly the earth erupted, and the insectoid Sentients, his customers, the Ochrans, were everywhere.

Solo drew his blaster and the leader hastily called the password. "Damn it," Solo snarled. "I almost blasted you. Why all this sneakin' around?"

"The enemy is ever vigilant," the Ochran hissed, his translator echoing a clicking, sinister-sounding language. "My name is Achra. You have brought our guns?"

"Yeah," Solo lowered his blaster arm, but did not reholster the weapon. "I have a sample here in a crate by the ramp, the rest are aboard my ship. We unload only when I have been paid in full."

"And you will be paid after we have checked and tallied the shipment." Achra said. "We have been cheated before."

"I don't cheat my customers," Solo snarled.

"We shall see," Achra said, his octagonal, multi-faceted eyes caught the moonlight. "We have a simple means of ascertaining the truth, a method of linking my mind to yours."

"What?!" Solo gaped. He took a pace backward, his fist tightening about the blaster. "No truth tests. We have a deal. You check the shipment as it's offloaded. Where's my money?"

Solo's heart raced as he realized the Ochrans had him trapped inside their circle. They were much heavier-bodied than he, and looked to be wearing armor as well. Each of their forearms ended in twin clamp-like claws with serrated edges. The limbs were triple jointed and long. It would be impossible to avoid so many grabbing, powerful arms. Then there were the legs, they had four each of those, short, muscular and swift.

"Stick to the terms of the deal," he said. "I get my money first. Then you get the weapons. I'll stay out here while you check them, but the money is loaded into the ship meantime. Fair enough?"

Achra's eyes showed no emotion whatever. He turned off his translator and spoke to his subordinates in his native tongue. They began arguing and gesturing with their multi-jointed arms. Realizing he was outgunned, Solo folded his own arms across his chest and tried glaring instead. A sound came from his communicator, the Ochrans didn't hear it over their arguing. Solo sighed and lifted the comlink to his lips. "Yeah, they're here, Chewie. We're settling the arrangement for payment and offloading. No, I didn't see them before. They came up out of some kind of tunnels. Looks like it should be - hang on, the boss insect is talking to me again."

Achra had taken advantage of Solo's distracted communication to move closer, his two subordinates flanking him. Solo did not turn and look, but was aware the circle at his back had also moved in, closing on him. Not good.

"So," he said, as nonchalantly as possible. "Do we have a deal or not?"

"Yes," the Ochran hissed. "The deal is as arranged."

"Good," Solo sighed in relief. "Come on, then. I'll signal my partner to open number one hold. It has one quarter of the shipment only, so don't try ...."

Solo moved forward, expecting them to follow him, and one of Achra's bodyguards' uppermost arms snapped out to full extension, then clamped about Solo's chest. Han yelped and kicked, but found his own arms pinned to his sides.

"Let go!" Solo shouted. "What is this? You want those guns or not?"

All four of the bodyguard's arms closed like a vice and Solo's speech was reduced to a breathless gasp as his chest contracted, his ribs creaking. "Look," he panted. "My partner is...." His breath was cut off in a spasm of panic and pain as Achra touched one long antenna to Han's forehead.

"This will only take a moment," the lead Ochrans assured, trying to sound soothing via the translator, but not succeeding. "I must link with your mind."

"No way!" Solo struggled harder. He'd been mind-probed by non-human guards on Kessel and still bore the mental scars. It was rape of the worst kind, the forcible removal of all his most intimate memories. He didn't need more nightmares. He kicked out at the nearest guard's knee joint and the creature's hold loosened, but the second guard grabbed even harder and Solo felt a rib give way with a sickening crack. Still he fought, kicking at the remaining guard frantically and trying to keep his head out of range of the probing antennae. His arms were almost numbed by the tight grip, but he managed to grab at his blaster butt, pull it and the holster and level it at the nearest guard. He fired and the creature crumpled as the stun nimbus caught him.

"Wait!" Achra called. "We only want to ask one question, then you will be ..."

"No questions!" Solo shouted. "Call off your thugs!"

But Achra waved an arm and the entire group, rather than retreating, charged forward. Solo fired again, grinning in savage pleasure as Achra went down, stunned. The onrushing attackers faltered only momentarily, then their alien voices lifted in a chorus of outraged bellows. "Go!" Solo called into the comlink. "Chewie, get outta here! Ahhh! ..." the last word ended in a gasp of pain as several Ochrans barreled into him from behind.

Solo went down face first, the needle pines soft and cushioning his fall, but their sharp tips cutting his face. He struggled and kicked, and powerful claws clamped at his limbs, more grabbing at his torso. Several antennae slid in obscene, wet touches about his face, sliding over his eyes, nose, mouth, seeking contact. Alien images filled Solo's mind. He screamed in pure panic, kicked harder and made contact with some unguarded part of a captor's body. He felt a crunch and a squish as his boot sank home. The antenna left his face, but the claws closed harder about Han's upper arm. He pushed himself to his knees, and tugged hard, trying to wrench his arm free. The bone gave way with a resounding crack. Searing pain blazed up in his head. Another clawed arm swung for his head and glanced across his temple. He felt a rush of warm blood trickle into his eyes. Even as he began to lose consciousness another Ochrans landed a blow to Solo's chest and he fell again, sinking into darkness. His last image was a flare of light and heat and a deafening roar as the Falcon lifted off. "Go, Chewie, go!" he thought, smiling victoriously even as he was captured. "Fly free!"

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Dim light filtered through Solo's eyelids. There was pain, odd rustling noises, musty smells overlaid with something sharper, acrid, nauseating and over it all the terrifying realization that he could not move. How badly was he hurt? Slowly

regaining full consciousness, he shivered as he recalled the Ochrans surrounding him, his desperate struggles and now he was at their mercy. A prisoner. Well, he'd been in worse places. If he could escape Kessel he could survive this too.

Chewbacca got you out of Kessel, the snide thought mocked him, and you were nine-tenths dead. Han's pulse raced as the terror of that memory joined the present. His heart thumped loudly in his ears and his mouth went dry. The fingers of his right hand twitched, preparing to close about the reassuring blaster always at his side, his father's blaster. His hand jerked and tugged hard, but something bound his wrist. His back was cold, his thin shirt not protecting him from the chill, hard surface on which he lay. He no longer was wearing his jacket. He was sure his left arm was similarly tied or restrained, but he was not about to try moving it. Searing agony of the least movement of that limb told him it was broken.

Why are they doing this? What went wrong? We had a deal, damnit! He tugged again at the right wrist restraint. There was not the least give, but there was another response -- the rustling, clicking noises grew louder and there was a sense of movement as someone or something came closer. Solo lay still and tried to steady his breathing and feign unconsciousness long enough - perhaps he'd bore his captor into leaving, or last least falling asleep. And, Solo thought, if my feet are free I can get to my boot knife.

The sudden flare of hope was just as suddenly snuffed out, sheer panic flooded his veins as twin slick cold tentacles traced his jaw and trailed upward. He tossed his head, opened his eyes, wide with horror, and he had to bite back a scream. The creature standing over him was straight out of his nightmares, angular face, bug eyes, long flicking waving, antennae with wide suction pad tips. The torso was segmented, striped with pale yellow bands. The four arms were bare, the armor removed, and Solo could see that there were spiked protrusions at the joints. The clawed hands were just as ugly as he remembered, and just as dangerous.

Unable to shake off the sickening touch of Ochran's sensor padded antennae, Solo tried a new defense. Wrenching his head hard to one side and tucking his chin toward his chest, he opened his mouth and did his best to bite through the long, flickering sensor. It was wiry, slimy and very tough, like a raw sinew. Solo's stomach lurched with nausea but still he bit down.

A high pitched keening sound filled his head, sharp enough to cause pain -- the Ochran was screaming. Good, Solo thought. But his victory was short lived. The creature swatted at him with one clawed hand, slicing through the flesh of Solo's cheekbone and cracking his head hard to the other side. Han thought his teeth were still clamped to the antennae, but he wasn't certain. Stunned, he saw a flare of bright light that faded into the deep dark of unconsciousness.

He could only have been out for moments, but when next he came round, things were different. His head hurt almost as badly as his arm, there was sticky warm blood pooled at the back of his neck. His cheeks throbbed from the blow and more warm, salty wetness trickled down the side of his nose and over his mouth. His throat was so parched he licked at the blood. He couldn't move his head, some kind of clamps held it painfully immobile. The light was brighter too and he squinted against its intensity as he cautiously opened his eyes.

At first everything was blurred, but there were three insectoid shaped figures now, not one. He hoped that was just the effect of concussion. No such luck. His vision swam, wavered, steadied. It was difficult, if not impossible, to judge emotion on those nightmarish alien faces, but their stances screamed hostility. That, in turn, made Solo's anger reach the level of fury. HE was the one being abused here, not to mention betrayed. He wished he could say both were unfamiliar sensations. At least the bright light, painful as it was when he could not turn away from it, had erased the terror image of the nightmare from his first awakening. Now the setting was clear. He was in some kind of clinical room, either a medical examination cubicle or - best not think of the alternative. There were no windows. The musty smell was stale, recycled air -- an underground room? The sharper acrid smell came from the Ochrans themselves.

On second thought, maybe being able to see all the details is not an improvement. Solo thought. He was restrained at wrist, waist and damn it, yes, ankles too, on what felt like a metal slab. An operating table? Benches and cabinets lined the small room and were filled with vials, needles, jars and canisters and other metal instruments. Solo stifled a groan and wondered how he got into these things. The Ochrans, realizing he was awake, moved closer. One of them was carrying something, a hypo-infuser? in one claw.

Solo shivered, then swallowed hard and said, "Nice of you to take me to the medical center. Thanks, but I'm fine now, really, and I have to see your bosses about a gun shipment."

A second Ochran, the one with the yellow banded chest, came up to stand at the left lower table corner close by Solo's booted ankle. One antenna hung limply. The creature's eyes were empty of emotion, a multi-faceted mirror, black, but resentment oozed from his expression. He wore a translator box at his upper thorax.

"You are not here for medical attention, human," he grated out.

"No, really?" Solo said sarcastically. "And here I thought you didn't understand human anatomy. You want me to bleed to death? Or freeze? Which?"

The first Ochran, larger and blue striped, sounded puzzled. "It is not cold in here."

"Could have fooled me," Solo muttered, fighting the urge to shiver harder -- the spasms hurt his arm. "Why am I tied down like this?" He struggled and pain flared again. "Let me go, damnit, or you'll never see those guns!"

The second Ochrans made an old, whistling sound and Solo's trouser leg moved slightly as air brushed over it. The creature was sighing, probably in exasperation. They breathed through spiracles then, not mouths. Chewie constantly maintained that Solo would drive any species to exasperated sighing. "Come on, Chewie, pal," Solo thought. "Where are you? Do a deal with these bug eyes and get me the hell out of here."

"We apologize sincerely," Blue Stripe said. "Somehow you misunderstood our normal means of communication with Off-worlders."

Solo rolled his eyes to regard the creature, who continued "You are restrained only because we fear you might react badly if you misunderstand a second time. We do indeed need that weapon shipment urgently. We have no desire other than to honor our original deal with you so that you might bring further shipments for us."

"Funny way you people have of showing honor," Solo snarled, "or even good plain manners for that matter."

"I tried to explain," Yellow said, "You bit me, very nearly crippled me. Is that your race's method of good manners?"

"You keep those slimy tentacles to yourself!" Solo roared "and you won't get bitten. I sure as hell didn't want to taste it. It stinks!"

Blue Stripe sighed. "Gentle beings, please, if I may summarize. Solo, you want our money and freedom. We want our guns and a permanent trade agreement with you. You panicked at our approach."

"I do not panic!" Solo interrupted indignantly, but Blue overrode him, waving a clawed arm.

"I admit the military section handled the contact poorly." Yellow huffed and turned away at that. "I'm sorry, Kren," Blue said and touched a tentacle to the other's shoulder. "But the results speak for themselves."

Kren shook him off and said, "We have tried every means we know. It is the universal prejudice against our kind that causes trouble."

Solo decided that he had over-reacted just a bit to the insectoid features coming at him out of the moonshadows. Oh! it dawned on him. I remember now. I must've been only about five years old on Corellia for the Harvest Festival. He

shuddered at the memory. The thing that crept into my tent crawled right over my chest. It looked just like these guys - well it was a lot smaller, but just as creepy. Distracted by the memory, it was a moment before Solo realized that Blue Stripe was again speaking to him, giving up his argument with Yellow, Kren.

"So you see, our normal means of communication is via our antennae, as you call them. We transmit feelings as well as words, and some of us have the talent to read direct thoughts from other species. Kren and I both have that ability. We merely wish to ensure by linking with you that you are not selling guns to the other side too."

"What?!" Solo gaped indignantly. "Just how long do you think I'd stay in business if I got a rap for double dealing. I ain't no cheat!" Well, he amended silently, not in trade deals, anyway.

"Good, then," Blue said. "You'll have no objections to the link. As soon as we verify that fact you will be ..."

"Listen up, Bug-Eyes!" Solo snarled. "Ain't no way, no how, anyone messes with my mind. You got that?! And second, it is considered a deadly insult not to accept Corelli blood oath on a deal, which I have already given."

"We are unaware of Corelli custom," Blue said. "I apologize for unintended offense."

"Lucky for you," Solo snapped. "Now let me out of here and I'll call my partner."

"Soon," Blue said in a sinister tone, which was apparently his version of soothing. "I do apologize, but you are a smuggler, a space farer. It is well known that smugglers do not adhere to the honor codes of their planet of origin. The mind link will continue."

What?!" Speechless with rage and more than a little afraid, Solo could only stare as Blue came closer.

The creature said, "It will not take long and provided you do not attempt to erect any mental shielding, there will be no pain. You say you are not double-dealing us, therefore there is no need for thought shielding. You will not be hurt."

Solo glared, the sinews in his neck standing out as he fought the restraints about his head. He stared down at his broken arm and then met his captor's gaze accusingly.

"You will not be further hurt," Blue corrected. "To ensure this you will be sedated. Currently, your mood is too hostile."

"Hostile?!" Solo repeated, feeling a fresh surge of blood as the wound on his cheek stretched with his struggles. "Trust me, tentacle face! You ain't seen me hostile yet! But try drugs, any drugs on me and I swear you will regret it."

"Perhaps," Blue said calmly. Kren stood back to watch and Solo sensed almost sadistic eagerness in the military Ochrans' mood. "But I doubt it. The sedative will also cloud your recent memory."

"I'm warning you!" Solo hoped he sounded threatening and not merely scared to death. "Stay away from me!"

Blue ignored him and pressed the hypo-infuser to Solo's throat. Han tensed, but at first nothing happened. He felt no different. He was just as enraged and just as afraid. Blue waited, then shifted with impatience, and Solo hoped, also puzzlement.

"What is your name," Blue asked tentatively.

"Screw you!" Solo spat.

Blue and Kren exchanged glances. "Maybe it's slower working on humans," Kren said. "We've never had a human trader here before."

Blue's upper arms lifted in a gesture of either resignation or helplessness. Solo smiled.

"Give him another dose," Kren said.

Solo's smile vanished. "Now wait a sec," he said, trying desperately to squirm away again. "If this stuff has never been tried on humans, how do you know it won't kill me?"

"We don't," Blue said truthfully. He moved back, lowered the hypo-infuser and Solo relaxed a little. "But we certainly do know that linking with an unreceptive, non-Ochrans host has caused deaths."

If Solo had thought he was cold before, now he was chilled to the marrow. "Are you saying you killed all the other traders who came here?"

"Not all of them, no. Some survived, others were fine until we learned they intended selling us defective weapons. Solo, it is your choice, the drug or the link. If you have nothing to hide, I assure you the link will not harm you."

"Take your link and shove it up your rear end!" Solo said.



Blue's upper eyelid flickered in some show of emotion. "Why would I do that?" he asked.

Solo suddenly felt an hysterical urge to laugh. Obviously the human anatomically insulting reference was lost here. "Let me rephrase that," he said with soft deceptive charm. "Take your antennae and hack 'em off with a blunt knife."

That did the trick. Blue's eyes changed color, burning angrily, fiery red tinged with green. Uh oh, Solo gulped, I think you just scored. Now your interrogator is really pissed at you. Good job.

"I think a triple dose would be more appropriate." Blue said to Kren and even the translator couldn't hide the menacing tone. "Obviously the first dose had no effect whatever."

"Indeed," Kren said nastily, "triple or more if necessary."

Blue moved swiftly to refill the hypo-infuser from vials in the cabinet.

"Now let's not be hasty, maybe we can ..." Solo protested, but the cold nozzle again met his bared flesh as it injected its load. This time he did feel the effect immediately. His head swam dizzily. He felt as if he were floating above his body and the pain was gone from his arm. Then his heart lurched and his pulse raced frantically, every beat pounding against his skull. Pain flooded back, drawing him down again, down into his trapped body. His chest hurt. He fought for breath, his vision steadied, but everything was too sharply outlined, too bright, almost pulsing with energy.

Blue spoke and the words echoed, roared, reverberated in Solo's head. He flinched, squeezed his eyes shut against the pain and heard himself say, "Han Solo." No! He had answered against his will. He fought, struggled, deliberately wrenched his broken arm and welcomed the pain. Blue was asking him the color of his, Solo's shirt. Han was greatly relieved and pleased to hear himself say sarcastically, "Pick a color, any color. What's your favorite? Take it and screw it."

Blue blinked, obviously surprised. He stepped back and nodded at Kren. The military Ochrans oozed out of the oddly distorted shadows, tentacles waving. Solo bared his teeth threateningly, his eyes watching every move. That was a mistake. Blue came around behind him swiftly and slapped some adhesive tape over Solo's mouth. Han was already having trouble breathing, now he felt near suffocated. Unable to get enough air, he panicked, the fear of the link mixing now with the terror of asphyxiation. His heart beat harder, so hard he would swear his ribs creaked beneath the pounding.

When the tentacles, the wet sticky pads contacted his face, Solo's chest heaved as he sought air to scream. He choked, strangled by his own fear, eyes wide in

undiluted terror. Alien thoughts slid cold and ugly into his mind. He resisted, and at every effort of shielding, white hot bolts of fire punished him, searing through every nerve ending, making his staring eyes swim with tears of agony.

Still he fought, refusing to allow that alien mind further entrance. His mind, his memories were all he had of his murdered family, of himself, of his lost honor. It would not be taken from him, nor sullied by this filthy alien. Better the pain should kill him. The agony blazed higher, and his vision narrowed, closing down to one narrow small circle, and finally winking out. He could see nothing at all. The blindness panicked him further. Nerves blazed and seared, sending muscles twitching, then his thoughts seemed to explode in a multicolored, fragmented rainbow. The colors dazzled him, falling back in a silvery rain. He began convulsing. His head thumped hard against the metal table despite the clamps. His broken arm jolted, his teeth clamped on his tongue, his legs spasmed, then there was only silence and darkness and welcome release as unconsciousness claimed him.

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"Is he dead?" Kren asked, leaning over the bloodied human unmoving on the table.

"No," Blue answered, "you can see he's still breathing."

"He's not moving," Kren pointed out. "What was all that thrashing before?"

"How would I know?" Blue said, "we've never tried this on one of his kind before. Did you get any images from him at all?"

Sighing and whistling, Kren lifted his lower arms and stroked his antennae, patting them back into place across his shoulders. "Nothing that made sense. Nothing we needed. He resists like no other. He will die as they did."

Busy working on reviving Solo, Blue looked up sharply. "And what good will that do? We need those weapons. This whole link questioning idea is pointless."

"Pointless!" Kren bristled in anger. "I think you would change your mind about that if the enemy comes at us with similar weaponry."

"I say buy the guns and attack first. Simple."

"Simple!" Kren said. "We would win a battle, but not the war. The enemy would just retreat further into the hills and ....."

There was a thump at the door and it swung open. Another yellow marked military Ochran partially clad in armor waved one claw in salute and said, "I'm

sorry to intrude, Honored, but the enemy attacks in force. We may not be able to hold here."

"What!" Kren barked. "How did they breach our lines? Find our tunnels?"

"We are uncertain," the junior officer replied, "but they may have had help from the Offworlder's friend and his ship."

"Never!" Blue said.

At the same time Kren answered, "Of course. Solo betrayed us. Kill him!"

The guard drew a claw and stepped forward but Blue blocked his path. "The human wants his money. The Spatas cannot pay him. He must deal with us. We can still trade Solo for the weapons. Deal with his partner."

"Perhaps." Kren waved the officer back. The room shook and dust rained down as there was an explosion nearby.

"Honored," the officer said, "we need you organize a strike team."

Kren nodded and moved to follow the guard out the door, but he stopped and looked back at Blue. "Will the human live?"

Blue lifted his clawed hands in a sign of uncertainty. As Kren left Blue muttered, "He might now you're gone." He began attaching sensor leads and got erratic readings from the human's heart, dangerous signs of high blood pressure, but he dared not try more drugs. The human's face was a different color now, very white, not red and flushed as it had been as he struggled. Solo felt cold to the touch, not warm as he was before. What to do?

More explosions sounded and there were cries of alarm which were coming closer with every blow. The next round of explosions startled Blue even further as they sounded from behind in the opposite direction, and there were shouted voices in the outer corridor that led toward the eating and sleeping alcoves. Blue went to the door and opened it to investigate just as another blast hit.

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Deafening noise, choking dust and violent shaking of the surface on which he lay brought Solo to partial consciousness. Pain near swamped him, but there were voices, shouts, screams. He could recall nothing of what had happened to him, and realized only that he was restrained in a dark, terrifying place. There was no more than faint blurry light, and trying to make out more detail caused searing bolts of pain in his temples. He closed his eyes, groaned and tugged hard at the restraints.

Then something, someone was touching him, returning memory of the slick antennae probing for his thoughts. He struggled harder, cursing. There was the hiss of a hypo-infuser, the pain eased and he felt drowsy and relaxed, but struggled for awareness. Then he was being moved, lifted away from the table, his head at last freed of the clamps. His broken arm jolted, falling to his side, and he cried out, driven back into unconsciousness.

He remembered little of the remainder of that night, drifting in and out of consciousness, but at one awakening he saw a night sky strewn with stars and there was fresh air cool against his sweaty face. He struggled, trying to get to his knees, desperate to escape, only to be injected with yet another drug.

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"It is all right." An emotionless, translated voice urged. "It is safe to wake now."

Says who? Solo thought. He tested his right arm, surprised to find it free. He wriggled his bare feet. Someone had taken his boots and he now had neither his knife nor his blaster, but at least there were no restraints. He must have given his captors a bad scare, nearly dying under questioning. Good. He was stiff and sore, but the agony was gone. As soon as the Ochrans realized he was recovering, they'd either resume the questioning and restrain him again, or try to ransom him to Chewbacca for the guns.

No deal, either way. You're getting out of here, Solo. This time you escape under your own power. Chewie's 'I told you so's are going to be bad enough as it is.

Whoever, whatever had spoken moved closer and the voice sounded next almost at Solo's ear. The Ochrans, he supposed, was bending down closer, closer. Solo swung a fist and connected a glancing blow, hurting his hand as much as anything else. The speaker let out a pained gasp and collapsed forward. Solo threw off the body, momentarily surprised at how light and small it seemed. He half-rolled, half fell from the table hoping to find a weapon. Then suddenly he realized he could see nothing, total darkness surrounded him, thick, impenetrable. Why had they turned out all the damned lights. The cursed creatures probably felt via their antennae rather than saw with their eyes. Solo reached out, fumbled, still determined to find a door and escape. Maybe the hallways outside would be better lit.

There was a rush of air as an entrance opened into the room and there was the sound of more beings moving about. Hands grabbed at him. "No!" he cried desperately, struggling and kicking and swinging wild punches with his one good arm. The familiar hiss of a hypo spray drove him again into blackness.

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The next Solo knew, a very different voice was speaking. "Do you always do this to people who rescue you?" It was a wry, and very human, male voice. "Take it easy, will you?"

"Rescue," Solo said, sneering. He blinked and squinted, coming around for what seemed like the hundredth time. "Look, your mind games ain't gonna work. You think a human voice simulator and total darkness will be enough to convince me I'm free? Ha!" He tried futilely to sit up, but every muscle was so relaxed his limbs refused to obey him. Indeed, he was finding it difficult to maintain his anger.

There was a moment's silence, then the human voice said, "It's not dark in here. Can't you see anything at all?"

Panic niggled at the drug-induced sedation. "Oh, nice try," Solo snorted. "Convince me I'm blind and helpless now, is it? Look, I ain't buying -- but I am selling. What is your people's problem? Do you want the damned guns or don't you?"

"Wait!" the voice interrupted, sounding astounded. "You still think you're with the Ochrans?" The translated voice he had heard on his first awakening added eagerly, "Guns?"

Han frowned, feeling dizzy and disoriented. "You let me go now, yeah, you get the guns. Keep up with this crap, and the deal is definitely off."

"You are no longer with the Ochrans, Captain," the human said. "What is your name, anyway?"

Han's lip curled into a sneer. "So we're back to that question, are we? I don't know how long you've been holding me prisoner, but my partner has firm orders to leave this world without me if he doesn't get the all clear from me in a certain time. So what's it to be?"

There was a very human sounding, very exasperated sigh. A warm hand closed over Solo's hand. Firm flesh, long strong fingers. "Captain," the man said, "Does this feel like an Ochran claw to you?"

And as Han lay shocked by the reality of the human touch, the hand lifted his own and placed Solo's fingers against a firm jaw and a soft mouth, "And does this feel like an Ochran face?" the man asked.

Han's fingers trembled as he traced first the face and then lower, falling in weak shock to reach the shoulder, the chest. The man was clothed in some kind of woolen tunic. His arms were bare below the elbow. Han swallowed hard, "So they got one human working for them. Big deal. You ain't fooling me. Now turn on the damn lights!"

There was another silence, and the man said gently, "The lights are on. In fact, it's broad daylight. Your eyesight must have been affected by the drugs the Ochrans used on you, but I'm fairly certain it's only temporary blindness. I've already administered antidotes. Can you see this?"

There was a rattle of movement, some instrument on a tray, and the man leaned closer. Solo flinched as a small bright circle of light appeared and lanced down at him. He flinched as again pain tore through his eyes, desperately he turned his head away. "Good," the man said. "I take it you did see that, and it hurt? The optic nerve should recover completely in a day or two."

"Sure," Solo said. "I'm still not buying this."

"Fine," the man said. "Think what you want." He was starting to sound annoyed now. "You'll soon be able to see for yourself that you are no longer a prisoner. You were rescued by the Spatas."

Solo frowned and considered maybe the man was telling the truth. After all, if the Ochrans had a human mediator, why hadn't they produced him before? And that smell, that stringent odor of Ochran bodies was absent, as were the whistle-click sounds of their breathing. And the room -- Han couldn't see it, but he was sure it was a different place. He sensed an openness, windows, fresh air, and he was on a bed, not that cold metal table. Could it be true? Was he free?

"You must be thirsty," the man continued. "Here," an arm slid beneath Solo's shoulders, propping him up and a water bottle pressed against his sore lips. He drank greedily. "Steady," the man laughed. And there was no denying the wondrous humanity of the sound. "I've ordered some hot soup for you, too."

Solo lay back, enjoying the feel of pillows behind his sore head. "Is this for real?" he asked. "I have been rescued? Where am I?"

"Yes. You are in a Spatan hospital on the other side of the mountain range from where you were captured. My name is Doctor Eiled Greega." He took Solo's hand and shook it.

"I am not a prisoner?" Solo said warily.

"Of course not," Greega replied indignantly.

"Good. Then you'll have no objections to me leaving." Solo sat up, fighting dizziness, but he succeeded in swinging his legs free of the coverings and his bare feet met with the cold floor. "If this is legit, you can give me my boots and my blaster now, thank you."

"Talit," Greega said wearily. "Get his boots and his weapon."

"But, sir ..." the tinny voice objected.

"Just do it! If he wants to wander around blind, tripping over things, breaking more bones, I'm not going to argue. I have many patients much more badly hurt and much more in need of my care -- and I am tired!"

This last statement was snapped angrily. Solo blinked, a little surprised. A small furry hand touched his wrist and then he felt the rim of his boots placed against his fingertips. He grabbed at them, one handed, and began awkwardly trying to pull them on. He noted his left arm no longer hurt and it seemed to be encased in some kind of cast. Doctor Greega had moved a short distance away and there were sounds of metallic instruments shifting on a tray and moans from another patient.

How could a doctor function in total darkness? Solo refused to believe that he was blind. It all had to be some kind of deception. Of course! The man would be wearing infra-red night goggles. He'd only taken them off when he'd allowed Han to touch his face. Solo stood, swayed and clutched at the bed. He was pleased to feel his blaster and holster lying there. He picked them up, buckled the blaster belt about his hips, tied down the thigh strap. "Look, I don't believe this blind routine. So you might as well turn on the lights before I smash something on the way out."

The doctor's footsteps sounded, tramping over what must be wooden floor boards, coming closer. "Captain," he sighed, "I know it's a shock and it's hard for you to accept, but for the moment at least, you are blind. I swear on my honor I'm not lying. Nor am I working with the Ochrans." He paused and added irritably. "Why are you so suspicious? Why can't you trust me?"

Solo was beginning to be afraid. He swallowed hard and said, "I remember, after I was questioned, there were explosions, someone carried me outside." He lifted his chin defiantly and added, "and I saw the stars, trees, other figures."

"Oh?" the doctor sounded interested. "I see. I mean I see why you are confused, then. Hmmm. Yes, you may be able to see better in darkness or dim light. Direct light obviously causes pain. Wait a moment, let me try something."

"Forget it," Han said. "I'm free, I'm leaving."

"You're afraid," Greega corrected. "That's another kind of prison, you know. Lock yourself in if you choose."

"I ain't afraid!" Solo snapped. "I just want out."

"Go, then!" Greega said.

Solo took a hesitant step forward, waving his good arm before him. The small, furry hand grabbed at his wrist. At first he resisted, and then he realized that the creature, Talit -- was it a Spata? -- was guiding, not hindering him. They made a few steps before Solo bumped into another bed, and someone moaned. "Sorry," Solo muttered, then he asked his guide, "How far is it to the door?"

"Not far," the translated voice said. "Ten human steps."

"Good," Solo said. "Lead on."

From behind somewhere, harried and busy, the doctor called "It's midday out there, Captain. Direct sunlight could turn temporary blindness to permanent blindness."

Solo stiffened, and his pulse leapt, but he said calmly, "Good story, clever. Good bye."

"Good riddance!" Greega snarled at his back. "Talit, don't bring that fool back in here, if he does injure himself. I have too many patients already. And he was selling guns to the enemy, guns that would harm your friends far worse than the weapons the Ochrans currently possess."

There was a hissed breath from the creature at Han's side and the furry hand guiding him dropped away. "Hey," Han protested.

"Is this true?" the Spatan asked. "You would aid the Ochrans in destroying my people?"

Han blinked and frowned, utterly confused. "Look, this is all a trick. I'm still with the Ochrans. They have that link thing, they brainwash you. They make me have hallucinations."

"I was one of those that rescued you," the creature said. "I saw what they had done to you. I had pity for you, but if all you wanted is their money, you never cared for us. Why should I care for you? Go, leave us."

"Fine," Solo finally said. He had figured he was in a corridor lined with beds and it was ten paces straight ahead to the door. He could manage that, and with his boots again in his possession, he also had his locator transponder and could call Chewbacca to come and get him. The sooner he was out of this darkened room he would be able to see to send the correct co-ordinates.

He fumbled, stumbled, but made it to the door, relieved when it whooshed open at his first hesitant touch. Flower-fragrant air filled his nostrils and he heard bird calls and other voices, alien voices, but these were different, soft. He stepped out onto what seemed to be a porch. His heart thudded with more than exhaustion



and weakness. It was still dark. Fine. They had lied, it must be midnight, not midday. Just get out from under this roof and he could see the stars. His head had begun to hurt again, pain lancing behind his eyes and his arm aching dully. He refused to recall the doctor's warning, if he was a doctor. He took more steps forward, tripped and fell over some kind of knee-high railing. He landed with a breathless thud only an armlength down, finding himself amid some kind of shrubbery, the flowers he had smelled. Winded, he lay there on his back. Very warm, very real sunshine burned his face. The pain in his eyes became agony. He bit down hard, screwed his eyes shut -- his useless eyes.

He was blind.

He rolled over, face down, and the pain eased a little. He flung both arms over his head for further protection against the searing light, and promptly hurt himself as the heavy cast plunked against his skull. Blind! It was the only word he could think of. There was room for no other thought. The man hadn't been sure before, the doctor. And now, now the sun had blazed onto Solo's face, maybe he would never see again. Tears flooded Han's eyes and he fought to control himself. Call Chewie, get a real doctor to check you over.

"Captain," Greega's voice was more gently concerned than annoyed. "Are you ready to ... will you --?" There was a heavy sigh as Greega came closer, and then the floorboards creaked. Solo deduced the doctor was sitting on the porch steps somewhere close by. "You know," Greega said, "if you really like those flowers so much that you had to come out here and hug them, I could have one of the staff pick a bouquet for you."

Solo sniffed, swallowed back his tears, glad the man couldn't see his face, and infinitely grateful for the joke. A faint smile tugged at his lips. "Do you have some kind of filter glasses, goggles, bandaging?" Solo asked. "I can use that to protect my eyes."

"Come inside and you'll be fine," Greega said. "Keep your eyes shut while I get you back in there."

"No!" Solo lifted an arm to ward the man off. "I'm calling my partner. He'll bring my ship and I'm leaving."

"What!" The annoyance returned to Greega's voice. "You are moving only on painkillers. You're going to pass out as soon as they wear off. Ahh! I'm going back inside. Come in when you're ready. Oh, and for your information, there's no way any ship can get in here."

Solo gaped, and then said, "Well, my ship ain't your ordinary hunk of junk."

"I'm sure it's not," Greega called back from somewhere up on the porch. "She's no doubt as stubborn as her captain, and look where he is right now!"

Bootsteps thumped over the porch as the doctor stormed away and the door hissed open and closed at his back. There was a murmur of conversation that sounded suspiciously amused and Solo realized there were spectators, Spatas apparently, watching him.

Screwing his eyes tightly shut, Han pushed himself to his feet, then clapped his good hand over his eyes. He could only imagine how ridiculous he must look. Bits of shrubbery and dirt clung to his clothing, he had one hand over his eyes and the other arm in a cast. Only you, Solo, he thought. Only you. Gathering as much dignity as possible, he said, "Would one of you good, uh, people, please help me inside?" A small furry hand touched his arm. "Talit," he asked, "is that you?"

"Yes," the familiar voice answered. "You may be a low-life gunrunner, but you are also obviously a fool. One makes some allowances for fools and clowns."

"I'm so glad to be of entertainment," Solo said sarcastically. But privately he was greatly relieved to have someone to guide him to the steps and back inside. He was beginning to hurt again. He was utterly exhausted and dizzy, and was quite sure that if it had been more than twenty paces to his bed he'd never have made it. Out of breath, totally drained, he lay back on the bed. "Thanks, buddy," he panted to his guide. "I owe you one."

"Indeed you do," Talit observed primly. "And by the way, I am female."

"Oh, sorry." Solo lay with his good arm across his eyes. The reality of his blindness was beginning to hit home. If he had listened to Chewbacca, none of this would have happened. What if his eyesight never returned? Was it fair to burden the Wookiee with a crippled partner?

There was the sound of cloth swishing nearby and metallic rings clinking. Solo started up then cursed as pain flared in his head.

"Jumpy one, aren't you?" Greega observed. "After what you've been through I suppose I can give you that much."

"Thanks ever so much," Han said, and the doctor chuckled.

Greega explained, "I just pulled the privacy screen about this bed to block out as much light as possible I want to try some medication on your eyes. A local specialty, they make it from the plants here. I've seen it do wonders for other wounds. Then I'm going to bandage your eyes, all right?"

Solo was surprised the man was bothering to ask permission. These people had rescued him, though it had not of course been a rescue mission for him. They had had no way of knowing he was there, held by the Ochrans. Some other big brass of theirs must have been a prisoner too, lucky for Solo. Still, they could have chosen to leave him behind. He could only guess at what they had risked to carry someone so much bigger than themselves who knew how far and under what danger.

"All right," Greega said. "Open your eyes, I'm going to put some drops in them. Try not to blink them out again."

"Okay." Solo said, sounding chastened and quiet even to his own ears. "Thanks." He added as an afterthought. Then as the drops spilled into his eyes he cursed and said, "Damn."

"I know it stings." The doctor's hand clamped on Solo's brow, holding him steady. "Try not to move."

"You could have warned me," Solo said.

"True," Greega admitted. More drops went in the other eye. "And I should have been here as soon as you woke, also. My apologies. But there are only three doctors here for almost one hundred patients."

"Oh," Solo said, concentrating on not blinking away the stinging fluid.

"I knew you'd wake disoriented," Greega continued, "but I didn't think you'd create quite as much fuss."

"Yeah, well," Solo groused. "I thought I was still with the bugs."

"The bugs! Ha!" The doctor sounded amused. "That's what I call them too."

"Are you the only human here?" Solo asked.

"Yes, well no. I mean, I'm the only human here at the hospital. There are other human military advisers in the headquarters some distance from here." Greega's arm again slid behind Solo's shoulders. "Sit up, let me wash that stuff from your face."

The doctor cleaned more than the remaining medication away from Solo's cheeks. He was quite sure his face was also smeared with mud from his fall into the garden. Greega turned aside momentarily, then placed a hand to Solo's temple and began unraveling a roll of bandaging about the Corellian's eyes.

"So," Solo said hoarsely. "Do you think I'll see again?"

"I won't lie to you," Greega said steadily. "I really don't know. I'd give it a 50/50 chance."

"Okay," Solo said, trying to sound calm. "Those are good odds. I'd bet on that."

"I'm sure you would," Greega sounded amused.

"What are humans doing here?" Solo asked.

"We're with the Rebel Alliance." Greega answered.

"The what?!"

Greega snorted. "Yes, we only formed as a unit against the Empire officially about a year ago. I'm not surprised you haven't heard of us."

"The Empire?" Solo said, "Oh, Palpatine's new order."

"Order is one word for it," Greega said sourly. "Tyranny another."

Solo shrugged. "There are no good and bad sides in a war. I learned that years ago."

"Years ago?" Greega sounded dryly amused. "What, you mean when you were a babe in arms?"

"I ain't that young!" Solo protested.

"At a guess," Greega said. "I'd say you're no more than twenty human standard."

"So," Solo said, amazed at the man's accurate guess. "I've been a smuggler since I was fifteen."

"And that's where you learned there is no good or bad?" Greega asked softly.

"Damned straight!" Solo said. "My father and I worked with another bunch calling themselves freedom fighters." There was a long pause, and he fought the tightness in his throat before saying, "They set him up, gave him a mock trial, then executed him as I watched. Don't tell me about fancy causes! All they wanted was money. That's all anyone wants." Solo was ashamed to hear his voice break. He pulled away, but the doctor rebuked, "Let me finish the bandaging."

Solo obeyed, glad that the bandages hid the tears welling in his eyes. It was okay as long as no one knew he was crying. There was an even longer silence, then Greega said, "You must be exhausted and hungry. I'll have that soup and some

sandwiches brought for you. Get some sleep. I give you my word we'll find some way of contacting your partner and getting you back to your ship as soon as possible."

"Thanks," Solo said, surprised.

"You're welcome," Greega said earnestly. Solo felt the doctor squeeze his shoulder, "I understand why you find it hard to trust. Forgive me." Then he was gone.

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After a hot meal and a long, interesting talk with Talit, Solo slept soundly and dreamlessly, and woke to comfortable, dark silence in a warm, soft bed. Midnight cycle. Drowsily content with no pain, fears or nightmarish memories to torment him, he rolled over, adjusted his cast encased arm to a more comfortable position, and opted for a return to sleep.

A loud, rattling, clinking sound startled him until he realized it was someone entering the ward, pushing a trolley cart over the wooden floor. He smelled the delicious aroma of hot kalin tea and fresh baked bread. Breakfast. They sure were waking everyone early. No, wait. It wasn't dark, was it -- not really. Hesitantly, Han touched his good hand to his face. Sure enough, the bandages were still in place, covering his eyes. His blindness was not some hideous imagining, no residual nightmare. It was true, darkness was his reality.

Anger settled to leaden despair in his chest and stomach and he no longer felt hungry.

The tea cart rattled closer and Talit called, "Oh, you're awake. Want some breakfast?"

"What -- you seriously think anyone could sleep through all that noise you're making?" Solo scowled.

Talit sighed, her sandalled feet pattering on the floor as she moved around the trolley. "Do you always wake in such a cheerful mood?"

"No!" Solo snapped and turned away. "Only when I'm blind!" He made a grab for the covers and was further annoyed when pain stabbed in his broken arm and his fingers failed to close on the blanket.

"Oh." A cup and saucer clinked "You want kalin or not?"

Solo let out his anger in a defeated sigh. "Sure."

Talit successfully handed the cup to Solo who could not deny how good the strong, hot tea tasted. He munched on a fresh pastry and his stomach settled. He listened as Talit completed her rounds, talking to the other patients in her native tongue.

He was surprised when she returned to him, then he figured she must want to collect the empty cup. He had put it on the nightstand. He fumbled and was ridiculously pleased to hand it over without dropping it. She put it on the trolley, then Solo felt her small, furry hand pat his arm.

"Don't worry about your eyes," she said kindly, "the trillium extract will cure them."

"Trillium?"

"The flowers grow wild here. Taller than my head, white and gold and very beautiful. The Creator's gift to cure all ills. You will be well. Be patient. Rest."

She trundled away again, somehow managing to make even more noise on the way out. Around him Han heard the ward coming to life for the new day. Spatans conversed in their musical-sounding language, and there were moans, coughs and shuffling footsteps as the ambulatory patients moved to and from the fresher. That realization made Han suddenly aware he too needed to relieve himself.

He had no idea where the freshers were or how they operated for a non-human race. Sighing, he threw back the covers and determined he'd find his way somehow. He was only half way down the corridor heading away from the exit door, when Greega said from startlingly close by, "Trying to escape again, Captain?"

"The name's Solo --- Han Solo." Steadying himself, Han extended his right hand and added casually, "Nahh, no more escapes. Just looking for the fresher."

Greega chuckled. "It would be easier if you called Talit. She showed you where the call button is, didn't she?"

"Yeah. But I can look out for myself, and she's busy serving breakfast. Don't you people get any sleep?"

"A little." Greega yawned nonetheless. "We do have others on night shift. You slept right through it. That's good." He turned away from whatever he'd been doing and said, "Come on. I could use the fresher myself. There's a special facility for humans."

"Okay." Solo suspected the doctor was only finding a diplomatic way to offer guidance. It was a longer walk than he expected but he wasn't as tired as he had

been yesterday. As they returned to the ward, Greega commented on Solos' fitness.

"You're moving well. How do you feel?" he asked.

"Fine. Not sick enough to stay in bed all day that's for sure. I thought I'd go on down to that Military HQ you mentioned and ask if they can help me find out what's happened to my ship."

"Good idea," Greega said, surprising Solo with the ready agreement. "Yes, I think you're up to some light exercise --- but take it slowly, find someone to give you a ride. And I must continue treatments on your eyes. So return here when you're finished talking down there. I'll give you a dose now and you should have more every four hours or so."

"Look," Han bit back rising annoyance and managed to sound polite, "Thanks. But it'll just be the one treatment. I won't be returning here. I'll have Chewbacca - - my co-pilot -- take me off-world to another medcenter. You have enough to do here."

Greega snorted, wryly amused. "So, I'm not good enough for you?" Han felt the doctor's hand close gently about his arm. "We're here. Your bed."

Solo sighed and felt behind him then sat down wearily on the edge of the bunk. "I didn't say you're not good enough. I just meant you already have more patients than you can handle."

"That's the truth," Greega agreed heavily. Then he added cheerily, "Hey, I like having another human to talk to. You could at least keep me company till your friend arrives."

Solo sat straighter, his eyes wide with hope beneath the bandages. "They've contacted him?"

"I'm not sure. There was a rumor going around about another ship coming in yesterday up in the mountain passes. I'll have someone check on it while I tend your eyes. I'll be right back with the medication."

"The trillium extract?"

"Yes. Talit told you about it?"

Solo nodded. "She says it's a cure-all."

"She's not far wrong." Greega sounded awed. "Amazing stuff. Works almost as well as bacta -- better in some instances. Bacta doesn't work on infected areas

very well -- as you know. But the trillium extract seems to target inflammation. Which is as well for us -- we can't afford bacta even if we had access to it."

Greega wandered off, leaving Solo to consider what he'd meant by "as you know." Then Han realized the doctor would have seen the old whip scars on his back. Yes, it had been too late for bacta to aid that damage.

Greega was gone only moments. He pulled the privacy screen in place and asked, "Ready?"

Han's mouth went dry and his heart raced. For some reason --- denial? -- he hadn't thought about the fact that the bandages would have to be removed again and he'd see only that frightening darkness, feel the helplessness ever more keenly. "Sure."

Greega squeezed his shoulder. "The extract really is near to a miracle drug -- but you need to give it time. Don't expect too much too soon."

Han nodded, hope filling him nonetheless. Slowly the bandaging was unraveled. "All right. Open your eyes," Greega said. "Let's get some more of this stuff into them."

"Stings like hell," Solo complained, wanting to say something to prove he wasn't near scared to death. He opened his eyes, squinted, blinked, then grinned joyfully. "I can see!" he exclaimed. "Well, I mean, I can see some light ...and.. and you -- sort of." He bit back further words, embarrassed that the momentary elation was becoming dangerously close to tearful relief.

"That's great!" Greega clapped him on the shoulder. "Much faster than I expected! No pain?"

Solo shook his head, still too choked for speech. He squinted some more, aware he could make out faint colors. The doctor was wearing a green tunic and must be about Solo's height and build. Han caught blurred movement as the man turned away to collect the trillium extract from a trolley at the foot of the bed.

"Tilt your head back," Greega instructed, then asked as Solo continued to try to stare at anything within range, "You're sure there's still no pain? The truth now."

"Well," Han admitted grudgingly, "a dull ache when I look toward the brighter areas."

Greega's free hand squeezed Solo's arm. "That's still close to a miracle in my estimation. Okay, steady now. Don't blink."



The drops stung less this time and Solo reported that to Greega who said, "Hmm, maybe because there's less inflammation. Your pupil response is definitely improved."

Solo was disappointed when the bandages were replaced and total darkness returned. Just as Greega was packing away the trolley, someone hurried closer, pushed aside the screen and said, "Doctor, we've made contact with the requested vessel last night and.."

It was a human voice, and the man was wearing military issue boots, judging by the heavy tramp Solo had heard as he approached.

"The Falcon?!" Han lurched to his feet and peered eagerly toward the voice.

"Yes." The newcomer sounded nervous. "The co-pilot is here and he's insisting..."

A wonderfully familiar roar from the porch door announced Chewbacca's arrival. "Han!?" the Wookiee bellowed, deep voice resonant with anxiety. There was a minor uproar as various patients cried out in fright. "Where are you?"

"Chewie!" Solo called. He waved an arm and managed to push back more of the screen. "Over here!"

"Hell," Greega sounded shaken. "You didn't say he was a Wookiee!"

"Big, isn't he?" Solo's lips twitched as he imagined the doctor pale and staring.

"Ahh. Yeah." Greega blinked, then winced as Chewbacca roared his relief at spotting Solo. "And loud. Very loud. Try to keep your reunion quiet. My patients are scared to death. I'll be back."

"But--wait!" Solo urged. He'd hoped the doctor would run interference for him. A mothering Wookiee in lecture mode was worse than an angry Wookiee. Well, almost. Then Chewbacca was at his side and Solo was pulled off his feet and given that miraculously gentle hug that only Chewie could manage.

"Calm down, will ya!?" Solo tried to scowl over the lump in his throat. "I'm fine. You're scaring everyone."

Chewbacca held him a little longer then suddenly moved back a few paces and dumped him abruptly on the bed. Solo bounced on the mattress and winced as various sore spots reported in. "Hey!" he said indignantly.

"I am scaring everyone!?" Chewbacca snarled sarcastically "You have bandages over your eyes, your arm in a cast, and you tell me you are fine! AND -- You

force me to leave you alone under attack -- I have a rash from fear-sickness about you!"

Oops, Solo thought , Poor choice of words there, Dumb-ass. Now you've given him the perfect opening for full lecture mode. Not to mention the I told you sos.

"Ahh --- Chewie? Chewie?!" Solo whistled to get the ranting Wookiee's attention.

"Yes?" Chewbacca said after a moment's sullen silence

"I didn't say that -- the doctor did. Doc said you were scaring everyone -- not me. Hey, I'm sure they like the noise."

"Where is he?" Chewbacca asked.

"Who?" Solo said -- so relieved to have successfully changed the subject he couldn't think who the Wookiee meant.

"The doctor!" Chewbacca sounded back to the normal mood now -- exasperation.

"Oh. He's gone to settle his patients and assure them they're not under attack...or something. He asked us to please keep this quiet." There , that should do the trick , Solo thought hopefully. More silence. Solo pictured the mammoth Wookiee struggling to control a temper no doubt fueled to explosive level by the days of intense anxiety.

"Umm," Solo said nervously, "So, where's the Falcon? Do we still have the shipment?"

"Safe,." Chewbacca said shortly. Han felt one huge but gentle forefinger touch the bandages about his face, "Your eyes? How bad?"

Han swallowed hard, then said as steadily as possible, "Just some kind of reaction to a drug the Ochrans used on me. I can already see better than yesterday and the doc says the treatment will probably cure it completely."

"Probably!?"

"Look, sit down and I'll fill you in on what happened. Okay? Take a breath and try to calm down. "

"Calm down," he heard Chewie mutter, "right. " then , irritably, "Is it so difficult to provide just one large chair!?"

The familiar complaint brought a faint smile to Solo's lips. The Wookiee was getting back on track. But now Solo swore he could feel those piercing, wise blue eyes settle on him and bore ever deeper, demanding truth. He squirmed on the bed and fidgeted with the covers.

"It was a long walk down here from the mountains," Chewbacca began softly, "Long and lonely. Cold and wet. Very wet."

"Oh." Han could think of nothing else to say. He knew all too well how much Chewbacca hated getting wet. It never helped his mood. "How did you know where to find me?" Han asked after a long, uncomfortable silence. "The transponder's not working. I guess the Ochrans found it and smashed it."

"I know," Chewbacca said flatly. "When it fell silent, I thought you had been killed. I contacted the Rebel Alliance cell here. They told me a group of Spatans at this base had found an injured human prisoner among their own freed prisoners after a raid on the Ochran tunnels where you disappeared."

"Oh, good." Solo drew a breath, then said in a rush, "Well, I guess we can leave now. Get on with business. We got bills to pay."

"What!?" The Wookiee roar was loud enough to hurt Solo's ears and rattle the medical stores in the cabinets around the walls. More patients cried out in fright. Han clapped his good hand to his head.

"Will you please quit that!?"

"I asked you to be quiet," Greega interjected, sounding more than just a little annoyed.

"Tell him that," Solo said, nodding toward the Wookiee. "It's not my fault."

"I don't speak Wookian."

Solo sighed. "No human can speak it. But he understands Standard. Chewbacca, meet Doctor Eiled Greega."

"Greetings and my thanks. I am indebted," Chewbacca rumbled. Solo translated, picturing the unfailingly comical reaction from a human presented with a gigantic Wookiee handshake.

"Nice to meet you, Chewbacca," Greega replied.

"The honor is mine," the Wookiee said. "And perhaps you can help me keep this human cub under control and prevent him doing himself further injury?"

"Hey! I ain't translating that!" Solo said indignantly.

"What did he say?" Greega wanted to know, amusement bubbling in his voice.

"Ahh, he said that --" Han quickly changed his planned lie to the truth as Chewbacca rumbled a threatening growl. Han sighed. "He said he hopes you can keep me under control and prevent me doing myself further injury."

"Ha!" Greega snorted, then he began to chuckle and Chewbacca's gleeful whuffs combined with the sound of the doctor's laughter.

"Now look , " Han tried to sound stern, "I don't need a keeper. I was doing fine till those idiot Ochrans insisted on mind-probing me."

"A traumatic experience for them, no doubt," Chewbacca paused to say dryly.

"Very funny." Solo made to fold his arms over his chest but only banged the cast into the other arm and hurt his sore ribs.

"What?" Greega asked, then said, "never mind, I think I know what Chewbacca said. And I agree. The Ochrans probably blunted their antennae on that solid durasteel head of yours, Solo."

Han sighed heavily. He'd had enough of being made fun of. He rolled over and swung his legs from the opposite side of the bed, away from where the Wookiee and doctor were standing. He intended to stand up and walk away, but felt dizzy and decided to sit on the edge of the bed a moment. "If I want insults I can get plenty on the walk outa here. Chewie says it's a long hike back to the Falcon." Solo waved a hand low along the side of the bed, searching for his boots. "Don't you people have any ground transport?"

There was a long silence. Solo imagined Wookiee and doctor trading exasperated expressions. Well, fine. Let them. No way he was staying here another moment. He had to get back to the Falcon, get that money from the Ochrans, and go to a Galactic doctor who could fix his eyes faster and maybe give him bacta for his arm.

"I wouldn't recommend any long hikes for you for a day or two yet, Captain, " Greega said. "And yes, we have ground vehicles." He paused meaningfully and Solo cocked his head at him. "Feel free to use them if you don't mind being fried alive by Ochrans heat-seeking missiles."

"Oh." Han swallowed --- there are some of those on the Falcon, waiting for the Ochrans to pay -- "They have those already?" he said plaintively. "They told us they wanted all we could supply."

"You still intend selling to them?!"

Han couldn't decide if Greega sounded more incensed or astounded. "That's my job," he said, "Gun-runner and mercenary, remember?" The temperature in the ward seemed to drop sharply and there followed a profound silence. "I need the money. I can't keep my ship flying without it."

"Fine." Greega said flatly. "Then go make some money." His voice dropped to a savage, cutting snarl. "And while you're spending that money, remember every credit comes covered in Spatan blood and grief."

The doctor strode away angrily, his footsteps echoing an unforgiving march across the solid floor.

"What is his problem?" Han muttered, irritated as he resumed his futile search for his boots. "He knows I'm a mercenary. We sell to the highest bidder and we don't take sides."

A Wookiee finger stroked the bandages on Solo's face and Chewbacca said very softly and sadly, "You are blind in more ways than you know, Cub. Wait here. I am going to speak with the doctor about the treatment for your eyes."

"I'll come with you." Han stood in sock feet, "You'll need a translator."

"The little one here, the nurse, will translate for me," Chewie said. "You stay here." A hairy hand gently but firmly pushed against Solo's shoulder until he was again sitting on the bed.

"My name is Talit," Solo heard his nurse say to Chewbacca via the com-unit.

Han groaned. "How long have you been listening?" he asked.

"Long enough to hear you want to make money helping the Ochrans murder my friends."

Spatan and Wookiee left him to consider that and Han listened as Chewbacca's heavy foot falls sounded all the way to the other side of the ward where Greega must now be working. "Dammit!" Han muttered, "what do they expect?! I ain't getting involved in every cursed war we come across!" He flung himself back on the bed and lay full length, one hand behind his head. Minutes passed in silence. Han was not known for his patience. He sat up again, finally found his boots and pulled them on. Then he wondered what to do. He could hear Chewbacca's rumbling voice coming from the end of the ward. It would be just like the big furry walking conscience to humiliate him further by picking him up and carrying him back to bed should he try to leave.

On the other hand... Chewbacca seemed very involved with the doctor and Talit - and there was another exit door out by the freshers. Of course if you crash into everyone and everything between here and there, you won't get far unnoticed. He considered that problem only a moment before remembering he could now see at least a little. Maybe his eyes were even better now since they'd had another treatment. It was worth a try, and whatever, minus the bandages he should be able to see enough to prevent him getting lost. Once outside he could perhaps find someone to help him reach the Military HQ. And that success should convince Chewbacca that he was indeed fit enough to travel.

Plan formulated, he reached one-handed for the bandaging about his eyes, trying to find the clip that held it in place. Finally he gave up and tugged at the material until it came down and hung about his neck. He kept his eyes closed just long enough to whisper a prayer to all the deities every known. Then he squinted, peered nervously through his eyelashes. Dull pain flared, but not as bad as before. He blinked, squinted some more, opened his eyes fully and was elated to see colors and shapes much more clearly defined than previously. He could see his hand clearly, every finger, every callous, every scrape and bruise. Yes! He felt like cheering. Of course, anything beyond an arm's length from him was still blurry. But he would make do.

It was enough to get out of here. He stood and began walking away from Chewbacca's voice, toward the fresher exit door. Every bed he passed by contained a wounded Spatan. And there were a lot of beds. All of them crammed in very close, only enough room for the doctor to get in to tend the patient. How many wounded had been brought here in all? How many had died before every reaching the hospital? Han drove the thoughts from his mind. Business -- this was his trade, and that was all there was to it.

He was almost to the exit door when he tripped on something on the floor -- a bed pan? He fell sprawled across the nearest bed and the occupant howled in agony. Han scrambled to back off and succeeded in putting more pressure on the patient who screamed even more loudly. Up this close, Han could see the Spatan's face. One raw, oozing scar. The eyes were glazed, slugged over in charred sockets. All the fur gone from the face, the large ears much smaller, just burned stubbs. The thin arms ended in stumps of bandages.

Han gulped back a surge of nausea. "Sorry. I fell. Can't see too good. What happened to you?"

The Spatan could not understand and was in too much pain to answer even if he -- she? -- had vocal chords intact enough to properly articulate words.

"One of those incendiary missiles you intend to sell to the enemy," Greega said, startling Solo as he suddenly spoke at his back. "It turned Hilab here into a

fireball and killed or crippled everyone in his village. Including his wife and children."

Solo straightened, swung about and hefted a forefinger at the blurred figure of the doctor. Behind the man Chewbacca towered, a brown, furry shadow. "Look!" Han snarled, "None of this is my fault! We sell the weapons We don't give instructions in ethics!"

"Not your fault this time, no," Greega said mildly, bending to tend to his patient who was still moaning in pain. Solo heard the hiss as a hypoinfuser discharged a load of painkillers. "But all future attacks will indeed be your doing -- you will make them possible."

"Dammit!" Solo shouted in pure frustration. "You think I like the Ochrans after what they did to me?! I'd rather deliver the missiles to them from orbit, live and ticking! Fry them all in their filthy tunnels! but -- but -- I can't!"

"Why not?" Chewbacca asked softly.

"You know why not! You wanna be stuck on a dirt ball like this for the rest of your life? Without the money for this shipment we won't have the Falcon much longer!"

"Han, Cub," Chewbacca said, reaching out a steadying hand as Solo swayed dizzily. "I tell you true. We no longer have a contract with the Ochrans."

"What!?" Han's head hurt and his eyes burned with growing pain. He rubbed at them. "What went wrong? Dammit, Chewie, what did you tell them?"

"Nothing. But they tried to shoot me down several times. They are now certain we are double-dealing. They want to destroy our shipment before the Spatans get it."

Solo's jaw dropped and he lowered his hand from his eyes to stare incredulously. That wasn't a good idea -- the pain intensified suddenly and his vision swam then blacked out completely. His heart thudded in panic as his world was once again reduced to darkness.

"Han? Chewbacca said worriedly. Greega added, "He's having a relapse. Get him back to bed."

"I can walk!" Han tried uselessly to fend off the Wookiee's strong grip about his good arm. "And I ain't going back to bed. Leave me be!"

"Solo," Greega said patiently, "Do you want to remain blind? Or do you want to see? The tillum is obviously helping. For starsake, give it a chance! If you go outside now there is no hope! None!"

"All right, all right," Han surrendered. He needed to get to a bed or a chair fast -- his legs were giving out now too. "Don't nag. I'll do it your way." He panted and sweat streamed from every pore. "Give me a hand here, would ya. pal? Someone keeps moving the floor."

"I'm sure," Chewbacca snorted wryly. He put an arm about Solo's waist and all but carried him back through the ward and lay him gently on the bed.

Greega examined Solo's eyes and asked Talit to bring more of the plant medicine extract. Han endured another stinging eye-wash, then fresh bandages were prepared.

"Wait, " Han said eagerly as the soft cloth brushed his face, "Wait." he blinked. "I can see again -- a little -- I can see the bandages and your outline."

"Good." Greega squeezed Solo's shoulder by way of congratulations. "It's working. Another day or two and you'll be fine." He began winding the bandages about Solo's face and the darkness returned. "Now do me a favor -- please?"

"Sure," Han shrugged. "If I can."

"Reconsider selling those incendiary missiles at least. I don't enjoy watching these people dying in agony from burns, or worse giving up and dying from a broken heart because they no longer have a home or a family to return to. Please -- I know you need the money -- but ..." He sighed. "I will beg if I must. I am begging. Don't do it." He packed away his medical kit, turned and left as Solo said nothing.

Han waited till the doctor's footsteps faded along the corridor. "He doesn't know," he said to Chewbacca. " He doesn't understand what you said about the contract being void."

"No." Chewbacca answered. "He does not know my language as do you. " There was a pause, and the Wookiee added plaintively, "Is there some place I can get some food around here?"

"I'll call Talit. But I don't know how we're gonna pay for all this ."

"I am here," the little Spatan spoke up. "What does your friend need?"

Solo smiled wryly. "You'd still help us? After what I said about arming your enemy?"



"You are a mercenary. I am a nurse. Your friend needs food. I will bring some."

"Wait -- you understood what Chewie said? Then you must know about --"

"Yes. I heard. I know you no longer have a contract with the Ochrans. I did not want to admit this pleases me. We could use those weapons, Captain."

Han drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Hey, I'd gladly give them to you -- if I could. But they're not mine to give away. They belong to a Rodian merchant on Tatooine . If I steal them from him to give them to you he'll have a death mark issued against me. Even if I survive that I'd never again get work as a trader."

There was silence from Talit, before finally she said, "I see. I did not understand fully your situation. I will give it more thought. But first -- your freind is exhausted and hungry. I will have food and bedding brought for him. We could make room for him here on the floor bedside your bed."

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By the following day Solo and Chewbacca both felt much stronger. More applications of the trillium extract meant Solo no longer needed the bandages. Being able to see again -- albeit only in dull light -- was a miracle he wanted to celebrate. But there was a down side. Now he could clearly see the suffering about him in the over-crowded ward. More wounded arrived by the hour. And this was only one ward of many, and one hospital of several strung across the mountainous continent. Greega looked utterly exhausted and haggard, his youthful face old before its time, deeply etched with concern for his patients. The doctor's blue eyes were dull with growing despair.

Solo regained strength by walking the hospital corridors, then on the second day, Greega gave him permission to go outside wearing sun filters at maximum block-out. Han and Chewbacca ate their lunch in a small park surrounding the hospital complex. It was a peaceful, beautiful setting, but that mood was destroyed by a sudden anguished wailing. A crowd of Spatans quickly gathered about the main entrance .

"What?": Solo asked Talit who came running to find them.

"There was another bombardment last night," she said breathlessly, liquid eyes wide with sorrow. "A direct hit on the main hospital in the capital city. No survivors.'

Solo's jaw clenched so hard it hurt. He tried to say something but could not find his voice. Chewbacca expressed their sympathy.

Distressed, Solo watched as Talit disappeared at a run back to the hospital. "There's gotta be some way we can help these people," he said as Chewbacca looked back to him.

The Wookiee's sorrowful blue eyes slowly brightened with a gleam of self-satisfaction. "I was wondering when you would say that."

Solo let out an annoyed breath and walked away a few paces. Back turned, hands on hips, he said, "Look, I'm no champion of the defenceless and I sure as hell ain't about to give into any charitable impulses here." Turning away from Chewbacca's wise eyes had only put Solo in line of sight as more rag-tag vehicles arrived and offloaded bloodied and moaning victims. "Dammit!" he exploded. "Sure I WANT to help them -- but what good will I be to them or anyone else if I lose The Falcon? No way am I risking her for them." The silence lengthened at his back. Steeling himself for rebuke, Han turned around, his jaw set, eyes hard. but Chewbacca was only gazing off, lost in thought, studying the mountainous horizon.

"You are right." The Wookiee said softly.

Solo's jaw dropped. His mouth opened and closed but he could find no words, so completely thrown from his expected self-defense.

Chewbacca lowered his head, eyes twinkling merriment as he regarded his young human partner. "You CAN be right on occasion, Cub," he said teasingly. "Certainly we must save The Falcon."

"But -- "

"I know. We are indebted to the Spatans. But we have already aided them."

"We have?"

Chewbacca nodded decisively. "We could have armed the Ochrans against them. We did not."

Han grunted. "Only because I screwed up." He sighed, took off his filter glasses and rubbed his eyes. He stood considering the problem, then exclaimed suddenly, "That's it! My eyes!"

Alarmed, Chewbacca hurried closer. He grabbed gently at Solo's chin, tilting the man's head upward to better study his eyes. "Again? Come. I will guide you back to the doctor."

"No, no." Han explained impatiently. He batted at the Wookiee's immense hand until Chewie let him go. "I can see fine."

The Wookiee pulled at his chest fur and said in exasperation, "Then why did you scare me like that?"

"I got an idea," Solo said, his lips quirking into a faint smile. "We can still do some business here and keep us and them happy. Come on." He put the filters back in place about his eyes, turned away and began striding downslope toward the township and the outlying blocky two-story building that was Military HQ.

"Where are you going?" Chewbacca demanded, falling into step beside him.

"To talk to the Rebel Military Advisors down there. I want to find out if they have the necessary equipment to launch the missiles we were going to sell to the Ochrans."

Surprised, Chewbacca missed his stride. "They have no money to pay us - and we must have money to avoid the impoundment penalty."

"No money -- but they can trade," Solo said succinctly.

Chewbacca blinked, then said in elated agreement, "The trillium extract!"

"Right. It should be worth something as an emergency bacta substitute."

Chewbacca considered that as they made their way closer to the complex of duracrete blocks housing the military personnel stationed further down in the valley. "Han," he said as at last they climbed the steps to the entry door, "before we go in here you must know the value of the.."

"Yeah," Solo interrupted, "I've been figuring it. No way can we get anywhere close to the price the Ochrans were offering us. And we'd still have to find a market for the Trillium -- and that puts us closer to the impoundment deadline. AND we will be letting the missiles go at a loss and we have to make that up to Gaaraf. I know all that." He ran a hand through his hair, his brow furrowed in frustration. "But, dammit. Those weapons can make all the difference here. Maybe save this village from invasion at least. And we'd be almost certain to make enough to pay the outstanding bills and avoid impoundment. We'll make the money in time -- somehow -- trust me."

Chewbacca snorted, then reached out and stroked Solo's shoulder. "I do. I always have."

Solo turned about and took off the filter glasses just long enough to meet the Wookiee eye to eye. "Thanks, pal.."

The discussion with the Rebel military advisors took several hours -- after all the cheering subsided. There was much careful planning of just how to off load from

the Falcon without attracting Ochrans' attention. And also the arrangement for Solo's payment in Trillum flowers to be taken with them on the trek up into the mountains. Chewbacca had done well hiding the Falcon in a cavern where no scanner could locate her. Han figured that would be the tricky bit -- making sure they could lead the rebels to the Falcon and not have the shipment stolen by them. Additional plans were made to allow Chewbacca to go on ahead -- thus ensuring he could again lift off if there were any further treachery. But Han doubted these people would give them any trouble -- they needed the weapons too badly and they were getting them almost for a gift. Han sighed at that thought -- so much for all his dreams of wealth.

"Are you all right, Cub?" Chewbacca asked,

"Sure," Han said absently. "All this stuff -- all the details -- it's boring me to tears."

Chewie whuffed a laugh. "You are not yet fully recovered - you are exhausted.. Tell them we will check the contract again in the morning. You need to get some sleep or you will be in no shape for a hike into the mountains.'

"Ain't that the truth," Han agreed over a yawn. He repeated the Wookiee's suggestion and was immediately given an apology by the Rebel officer in charge. "Of course , Captain" he said. "We have held you too long. Go back to the hospital. Rest. We'll iron out the details on this tonight and be set to leave at first light."

Oh," Han grimaced. "Great."

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Solo trudged wearily back uphill to the hospital -- he'd forgotten it would be all upslope on the return. He had not saved near enough energy, but he doggedly refused to reveal just how close to collapse he really was, despite Chewbacca's continual anxious looks and offers of help. In the end it took all Han had simply to make it up the few steps onto the hospital porch. His knees shook and he was glad when Chewie reached out and circled an arm about his waist, propping him up. The porch was teeming with Spatan medics and orderlies and there were wounded lying all over the floorboards. Han had trouble negotiating a path inside the ward room.

If the porch had been crowded, the interior was utter chaos. There were only two or three doctors on duty and they were simply unable to keep pace with the cries for help. The sight of so many maimed civilians -- children among them -- turned Solo's stomach. He found Doctor Greega and asked, "Anything I can do to help?"

Greega spared him a hurried glance, then frowned and reached for Solo's good arm, steadying him as he swayed on his feet. "Yes," the doctor said wryly, "Try not to pass out where you stand -- you'll block the only remaining passageway."

"Gee, thanks." Solo said. He tried to muster a scowl but it turned into a lopsided smile. "Look -- there must be something -- we could ship some of these people out to other hospitals. We're going on to The Falcon tomorrow."

Greega's eyes narrowed and he studied Solo as if seeing him for the first time. "You're offering your services for free?"

Solo shrugged and looked down at his muddied boots. "Yeah, I guess. It's only a short hop."

"Thank you, Han" Greega said. "I appreciate that -- you too Chewbacca." He looked up at the towering Wookiee who was all that was keeping Solo on his feet. "But there are no other hospitals -- the others have all been taken out by enemy fire."

"All of them?!" Han was horrified.

Chewbacca honked mournfully then put in some suggestion the doctor didn't understand. Han translated. "Yeah -- good thinking, pal. He says we can take some of these people to Spatan enclaves off-world. There are others in this star system, right?"

Greega rubbed at his chin, then nodded, and his eyes were much brighter as he looked back to them. "Yes, that would work. I never thought of that -- we had no transport. Thank you!"

Solo was embarrassed by the genuine depth of gratitude. "Yeah, well, I gotta get some sleep first. I came back to sack out a while. " He looked about the crowded ward. "But I can't see my bed anywhere."

"Umm, " Greega sounded discomfited. "Someone else has it now. Sorry."

"Oh," Han sagged in weariness, but said, "no problem. I should have realized you'd need it for the incoming. I'll grab a blanket and sleep outside."

"Sorry. It looks like that's all I can offer you right now. But let me check your arm first. " He picked up a scanner and read from its tiny screen. "Hmm, good news -- we can take off that cast -- the bone has finished knitting."

"Great." Han was too tired to cheer. "Can I sit down while you do that?" His knees had gone completely now, only Chewie was keeping him on his feet.

"Yes," Greega blinked and looked up from the screen. "Of course. " He turned and surveyed the room. "If I can find a chair."

"Ahh, how about the floor?" Han folded, and Chewbacca hauled him off to one side.

Greega ran some more scans, checking Solo's vital signs. "What have you been doing? I ordered you to rest -- this is showing dangerous levels of exhaustion."

"Oh, really?" Han scowled.

Talit came bustling up and chatted away to the doctor. Greega turned back to Solo and began cutting away the cast. "According to Talit you have already helped us more than we can ever adequately repay. You hiked all the way down to Military HQ and back -- now wonder you're a wreck. Thank you, Captain. The weapons you are supplying us should end this war quickly and cleanly ." He pressed a hypoinfuser to Solo's arm.

"What was --?" Han began then blinked. He suddenly felt much better. "Never mind," he sighed, "whatever it was I needed it. Thanks."

"It was either that or have you pass out on me," Greega explained. "A mild stim. It will keep you going long enough for us to find someplace for you to bed down. You're in no state to camp out." Solo opened his mouth to protest but the cast suddenly fell free from his arm and he whooped delightedly -- if weakly. "Let me see you wriggle your fingers," Greega said.

Han waved at him. "Word sure spreads fast round here." He glanced at Talit. "How did you know about the weapons?"

"I knew you would not fail us," she said shyly. Then she leaned forward and since he was for once on a level with her, still sitting on the floor as he was, she kissed his brow. Chewbacca whuffed amusement as Solo reddened.

"Hey!" Han scowled, "I'm a mercenary and I needed a buyer. No more to it than that. We lost the Ochran deal -- Okay, I lost that deal," he amended, "So it was up to me to find another buyer. No sentiment in it. As soon as I thought of the trillium, I had the answer -- we can trade for it."

Talit simply smiled and looked at him in a way that reminded Han of Chewbacca.

"But ..." Greega frowned and looked from one to the other, "There's not much Trillium available and even if we had tons of the stuff I doubt it would equal the value of the missiles you are carrying. Won't you be operating at a loss?"

"Naah," Han denied quickly. He grabbed at a nearby bed and hauled himself to his feet, ignoring Chewbacca's offers of assistance. "Hey, those meds work good Doc, the room isn't spinning around me any more. I figure I can camp out okay now. " Han frowned as he caught the doctor exchanging some mysterious questioning and amused look with Chewbacca. Time to break this up. He grabbed a blanket, turned away and said, "Be seeing ya!"

"Now wait just one moment!" Greega said. "The stim was emergency treatment only. In fact I probably shouldn't have given it to you -- it will give you a false sense of strength. When it wears off -- which will be in the next hour -- your exhaustion will hit you twice as hard. You're certainly not doing any camping out. We'll find someplace else --'

"We can bunk down at Military HQ," Han said, still moving toward the door.

"That' s too long a walk," Greega protested."Especially on stims!"

Talit hurried forward and stood in the corridor -- it was so crowded that Han could not get round her. "Please," she said quietly, her blue eyes large and soft as she stared up at him, "It would be to honor me if you would pass the night in my home. It is not far."

"Well--" Han hesitated.

Talit rushed on, "And my people from the village can arrange extra Trillium for you, They can harvest more tonight and carry it to your ship with the others tomorrow."

Chewbacca regarded his partner sternly. "Umm, yeah, thanks, "Han said, "that sounds good."

"Much more sensible," Greega said at his back. "Thank you, Talit."

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Talit's home was small and shabby, not much more than an empty shell really. It consisted of two rooms and overlooked the rear of the fortified, guarded wall about the eastern village close by the hospital compound. Han was very glad he had not needed to walk far -- the stims made him feel just fine oh yes, but he was light-headed in the way he normally felt when he was drunk.. And he knew the downside of that all too well.

Chewbacca took one look at the small, low slate-roofed hut and opted to sleep outside beneath the overhanging town wall -- he would simply not fit inside. He would be able to take part in the conversation however, via a small round window in Talit's outer bedroom wall. He watched anxiously as she guided Solo inside

and unrolled a mattress on the floor for him. She produced a single patched throw rug -- Solo had left the blanket in the hospital as soon as it dawned on him that they needed all they could get.

"You're sure this isn't an inconvenience?" Solo asked over a yawn as he lowered himself stiffly down to the mattress.

Talit laughed, "Someone might as well sleep here. I rarely come home anymore ... there's no one to come home to." All the merriment vanished abruptly from her small face, her blue eyes wide and sad. "My husband and son were killed when the Ochrans overran our village in the hills last year."

Han stared up at her. He wanted to say something, anything that would express the deep ache he felt for her sorrow, but all he could manage was, "I'm sorry." It sounded so wooden, so trite. Not nearly enough. He reached out and squeezed her thin arm and somehow the touch conveyed much more sympathy than the words. She smiled faintly, again standing level with him now and he noticed the deep beauty of her eyes.

"Doctor's orders, Captain," she said with mock severity. "No excuses. You must sleep."

Han grinned wryly. "No arguments this time." He began pulling off his boots and found his injured arm was still weak. Talit bent to help him. Solo studied his surroundings in more detail. The interior was a little neater than the exterior but not by much. Talit hurried about opening seals on the circular -shaped windows , letting in fresh air -- it was a warm afternoon though the night would be chill. There was a tattered 2-D portrait on the wall above the bed, no frame, just the parchment, hung on a single tack. "Your husband?"

"Yes." She flicked a pained yet fond glance toward the drawing. "That is -- was -- Lalak. A good, kind partner. I loved him very much."

Solo swallowed hard. He knew what it was like to lose all those you loved. He didn't know what would have become of him if Chewbacca had not found him. He'd be dead more than likely. And that might be better than to be alone. "Maybe," he told Talit, "some day, you will have a home again, After we unload those weapons for your people --" he shrugged. "Maybe you will know peace again Lalak would want you to go on. My father always said that -- never say die, go on for those who --" he blinked against eyes that suddenly stung and burned, "those who loved you."

"Yes," Talit said in a whisper. "Your father -- wise ." She sighed. "Just like your big friend out there!"



Chewbacca honked cheerfully, trying to break the mood no doubt. Solo decided it was the drugs that had him so maudlin all of a sudden. He stretched out on the bed and stared up at his partner who was eyeing him through the circular window.

"I will make some tea," Talit said brightly and scurried out into the other room.

Despite the stim shot, Han was nodding off to sleep by the time she returned and was glad of the revitalizing fragrance wafting from the steaming tea. Talit handed him a cup then stood on tip-toe to pass another to Chewbacca through the window. There were small slabs of some biscuit like substance decorated with fresh fruit spread and slices of cheese and vegetables. Han nibbled, but had no real appetite. It was considered bad manners in this culture to talk while you were eating, so they sat in silence until Talit again packed away the tea utensils. She gave Han a determined look as she sat down on the foot of the bed.

"Now, tell me true," she demanded in a tone that would brook no stalling, "how much will you and Chewbacca lose on this trade of Trillium for guns?"

Solo heaved a weary breath and rubbed at the arm that itched now the cast was gone. "We'll do all right."

"Chewbacca?" Talit looked up at him. "Exactly how much?"

The window ledge creaked as the Wookiee leaned inside to carefully hand back the small ceramic cup. "We will earn less than one quarter the value of our cargo," he admitted.

She blinked. "Even less than I thought -- but not by much."

Both Han and Chewie stared at her total lack of surprise or dismay. Talit simply sat there, staring at the tray and rearranging the cups, her blue eyes glinting shrewdly as she did some rapid calculating. "It is as well my people prepared for this then... but next time perhaps you should be more open and not so proud."

Chewbacca whuffed agreement and Han's jaw dropped, his mouth opening in indignant protest. The way the Spatan and the Wookiee were regarding each other they had hatched some plan between them that he as yet knew nothing of. Solos' eyes narrowed suspiciously, "What are you two up to?"

"I believe Talit has found a way to guarantee we make at least the same amount the Ochrans offered us," Chewbacca explained. "Though I suppose it may take some extra time."

Solo frowned. "How?"

"This." Talit rummaged about in a small box she had carried in on the tray. Han had assumed it was full of tea leaves. But no, as she flipped open the hinged lid, Solo saw inside a carved ceramic flower -- a trillium, and a small knife lying next to what looked like a vial of colored water.

When she said nothing more, Solo said impatiently, "That? How can that be worth as much as three quarters our load of missiles! It's an ordinary ceramic carving."

"Oh," she smiled. "Not the sculpture. The ink. It is made from the Trillium flower."

"But-- such a small amount. And we already have barrels of the stuff made into the medical extract."

"Not the ink itself is valuable --" Talit picked up the knife. "But what can be done with it is immeasurably of value to a trader from the stars. It will make a special mark that will give you exclusive rights to sell the trillium extract. No one will buy it unless they first see this mark -- only this mark guarantees the genuine pure medicine."

"What mark?"

"The flower itself -- a tattoo in its likeness. It can only be seen in night-light." she looked up at him, "the black light?"

"Infra-red light?"

"Yes that is your name for it. Now where would be best to place the tattoo? Perhaps a place normally hidden by your clothing?"

"Me?!" Han 's voice rose. "You want to give me a tattoo?"

"Of course -- as I just explained --"

"It will mean we can corner the market on this extract, Han, " Chewbacca put in. "Eventually we can make back any loss on the missile shipment. Garraf will realize that. It will save us from his wrath."

"Yeah," Solo joked weakly, "and from his bounty hunters too." He blew out his breath. "Okay, Talit. Thank you. I accept. Ahh -- this tattoo -- you're going to cut it with that knife?"

"Yes. It must be done with the sacred blade. Nothing else will make the mark authentic."

"Yeah, right. Naturally," Solo said heavily . He shrugged out of his shirt. "Okay, how about the upper arm?"

"A good place," Talit agreed.

"Easy for you to say," Han muttered. He was pleased to note that Talit used a candle flame to sterilize the sacred knife. Then she dipped its point into the tiny pointed vessel holding the ink-- the trillium dye. He tried not to flinch as the knife point contacted his flesh. It bit in, began tracing the shape of the flower. Han blinked -- there was aboutsley no pain, no sensation whatever.

Talit noticed his surprise and chuckled softly. "You are brave, Captain, that was proven by your resistance to the Ochrans. But surely you did not expect we too would give you pain in return for your assistance? The trillium ink acts as an anesthetic. The arm will itch for a few days -- no more." She looked sternly up at him, her blue eyes catching the last tays of setting sun. "Do not scratch at it. The dye will take some days to settle. I don't want you messing up my careful art. I must copy the shape of the flower exactly." She frowned , concentrating as she looked back at the ceramic flower for reference.

Solo grinned. "Not to mention my beautiful hide."

She giggled.

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There followed three days exhausting work -- a long march to reach the Falcon in its well camouflaged mountain cavern, another day offloading missiles and taking aboard dozens of barrels of trillium extract, and a third flying the wounded out to hospitals on a neighboring world. Ochran cannons made that an interesting, but the Spatans now had covering fire all their own. Han had not expected the missiles might turn out to be his own salvation as well as theirs. Solo took the pilot's seat to guide his ship clear of the rocky concealment of the mountains one last time, soaring up into a star-strewn night sky. The Falcon flew free, fast and powerful as the creature for which she was named.

Solo took one last look at the green-blue world and lifted a hand in salute to the Spatans. "Good luck." Then he turned away, smiling in pure joy as the stars shone bright and clear, free of the planet's confining atmosphere. Moments later , at Chewbacca's signal that the co-ordinates for jump were set, Solo pressed forward on the hyperdrive lever and thrilled to the power as the stars streaked and vanished behind them. Free. There was no feeling to equal it.

He leaned back happily in the pilot's seat and grinned at his partner. "Well, mission accomplished. Gaaraf can't complain. We did sell his shipment. Not our

fault if the market value dropped a little or the buyers changed sides. And we can still give him some small profit if he waits for us to sell all the trillium."

"Some small profit?" Chewbacca eyed him warily.

Solo shrugged and looked back to his flight board. "Whatever's left after we pay the impoundment fee. I figure we sell some of this stuff first, get the Falcon out of hock and THEN go check in with Garraf. Hey, maybe we'll even buy a new scanner array. We really need that, you know.." He rubbed at his upper arm. "Damm tattoo itches."

"Talit said it would heal completely in another day." Chewbacca reached out a long hairy arm and swatted at Solo's hand. "Don't scratch."

"Look who's talking. You've got a couple of bald patches under that bandoleer, haven't you?"

"Maybe. And if I do -- whose fault is that?"

Han flushed guiltily. He got to his feet. "I'm going to check the cargo -- coming?" Chewbacca nodded. "Exclusive right!" Han chuckled. "I do like the sound of that! And we can do more runs back here... "

"What!?" Chewie barked in alarm. "Not if the Imperials close their hold on this Sector. You are still an escaped felon on their records. And then there are teh Ochrans --"

Solo dismissed that fear. "Yeah, yeah. So what? I'm a felon on several lists you'll notice. And so are you"

"The Imperials are much more dangerous. Their warships can.."

"Exactly my point," Solo interrupted. "We need to upgrade our weapons system. Install belly and dorsal cannons at least. We give Garraf a downpayment and juggle the rest. It'll work out, trust me."

Chewbacca's expression was more dubious than confident. "Don't you think Garraf might notice when we come flying in with all this newly added gear aboard the Falcon."

"No," Han said stubbornly, eyes wide and innocent. "Why should he see the Falcon? We'll dock at a distance from him. Besides, the little rodent knows we're in this for the money. We'll come through with the profits." Han continued down the cargo access corridor, one hand rubbing at his tattooed arm. Chewbacca sighed and hurried after him.

"In it for the money, are you , Cub?" he said, smiling bemusedly. "Then why is it that Talit told me that tattoo is far more than it seems?"

Solo froze in his tracks and swung back to crane his head and stare in horror at the Wookiee. "What do you mean, more than it seems?"

Chewbacca whuffed a short laugh, blue eyes twinkling. "While you slept, she admitted the whole truth. She thought you would be uncomfortable with knowing the rest."

"Dammit!" Solo snapped. "I can still have this thing burned off."

"Painful," Chewbacca said, choking as he fought more laughter.

Solo bore down on him, one hand hefting a threatening forefinger, "Chewie I swear if this thing is any dishonor to the Corelli Clans --"

The Wookiee blinked, utterly scandalized. "Of course not. Calm down. It is in fact an addition to your Clan honor."

"Yeah?" Solo frowned suspiciously.

"Yes," the Wookiee hit him with the punch line he had obviously been savoring, "it is the Spatan mark of a being who puts honor before profit. Their highest recognition of valor and civil service."

"Honor before profit!" Solo yelled. Then he groaned and cursed, slapping at his holstered blaster "But, dammit -- I'm a mercenary!"

"Never fear, Cub," Chewbacca came up to scuff Solo's hair, "no one knows but you, me and the Spatans. To everyone else you will always be 'in it for the money.'"

THE END

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