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Treasure Hunt

by [Sheila Paulson](#)

The shadow blended into the deeper shadows so silently and so swiftly that for a moment, Chewbacca couldn't be certain if he had really seen it or if it had been a figment of his imagination. But strange movements in the vicinity of the *Millennium Falcon* could easily lead to trouble, and he knew better than to ignore it. Unslinging his bowcaster as he went, he melted into the deeper shadows along the outer wall of the docking bay and prepared to investigate. It wouldn't be long before Han returned from his evening's entertainment, and Chewie wasn't about to let him walk into a trap.

Yes, there it was again, a dark shape, briefly silhouetted against the entrance to Docking Bay 69, a figure, probably human, moving hastily inside. Only someone intent on trouble would enter in such a stealthy fashion, and someone intent on trouble wasn't welcome as far as Chewie was concerned. Han had some strange contacts--after six months acquaintance with the Corellian, Chewie was still discovering some of them and finding out that a lot of them could be dangerous, even those Han claimed as friends.

He reached the entrance to the docking bay and went in, keeping to the darker side, moving quickly and silently. The ship would be sealed up--only Han and Chewie could get on board without blasting the entrance--but there were many likely hiding places in the bay, places where someone could hide and take shots

at Han as he returned. Chewie intended to find the intruder and deal with him before that happened.

Finding him proved to be a lot more difficult than the Wookiee expected. He quartered the bay thoroughly, keeping one eye on the entrance to make sure that no one went past him either in or out. The place seemed deserted. But someone had come in, and unless he had gone out over the wall, which was four meters high, the only place left was the *Falcon* itself.

Chewie went over and pressed his palm against the identification plate for admittance. All was dark and quiet inside, but he had the feeling that he was not alone, and the intruder had somehow managed to board the ship before him. Impossible, Chewie told himself, but was it? There had been no place else for him to go.

From the outside came a sound of footsteps approaching. Chewie hadn't closed the hatch yet, and he could hear someone enter the docking bay and head toward the ship with no thought of secrecy. Han, returning a bit earlier than Chewie had expected, walking right into trouble.

Before Chewie could warn Han of danger, something was shoved into his back, something that felt like a blaster. "Don't move," said a voice right behind him. "At this range, I can blow you in half."

Chewie froze. That was true. But Han was coming nearer; Chewie could hear him whistling something to himself, a familiar downport melody. Chewie moved, faster than his assailant could have expected him to, and in one swift motion had swung around and brought them both crashing to the deck in a tangle of arms and legs. Chewie fell on top, and as he did, the being beneath him managed to yell, "Han, get out of here. It's a trap!"

Chewie hadn't expected to have his words preempted, so he yelled too, "Don't worry, Han. I've got him."

The lights came up in a blaze and Solo was bending over them, staring down, blaster in hand. Then he reholstered it and began to laugh. "You should see yourselves," he chortled. "Is it a private game or can anybody join in?"

"Now look," complained the man Chewie had forced to the floor. "I heard this big lummoX trail me all the way to the *Falcon* and then break in. I thought he was somebody gunning for you, old buddy."

Chewie untangled himself with immense dignity and stood up. *He broke into the *Falcon*,* the Wookiee explained, *and pulled a blaster on me. I thought he was here to ambush you.*

The man climbed to his feet, rubbing his side where Chewie's elbow had connected painfully. He was a man about Han's age and height, handsome as humans go, with dark skin and a moustache. Chewie studied him without enthusiasm. *How did you get on the ship?* he demanded.

Han laughed. "The *Falcon* used to be his," he explained, "and I guess he got on because I never bothered to change the identification plate. Chewie, this is Lando Calrissian. I won the *Falcon* from him about a year ago. And, Lando, this is Chewbacca, my partner and co-pilot." He gave Calrissian a suspicious look. "Nice of you to be worried about me," he added. "The last time I saw you, you were gunning for me yourself."

"That was right after you took the *Falcon* away from me," Lando explained. "How was I supposed to feel? But you won her fair and square, old buddy, and I finally came to terms with that." He gave Han a bright smile that Chewie didn't trust for a minute, then turned to look at the Wookiee. "Your partner, eh?" he asked. "You never ran with a partner before."

"I hadn't met Chewie before," Han said simply. "'Sides, it's good to have somebody to cover my back. Helps out a lot when old 'friends' come calling."

"Now, Han, is that any way to be? I swear I've got your best interests at heart. Didn't I warn you when I thought Chewbacca here was after you?"

"Yeah, so you did," conceded Han, without losing any of his suspicion. "What d'you want, Lando? If I know you, you didn't just drop by for a friendly chat."

"No," Lando admitted, "I didn't. Han, I need passage off Cartina, and I need it badly."

"Oh yeah? What kind of trouble are you in this time, Lando?"

"Bad trouble if I don't get out of here fast," he answered. "Han, I'll level with you. I can't pay you very much. But I do need to get off planet fast. I don't know if they'll follow me or not, but I can lose them in hyper-space. I don't think anyone--except Chewie--followed me here. But if you help me, I'll cut you in on the deal, and it just could be profitable."

"Oh yeah?" Han brightened a little. "Convince me, Calrissian. I like a nice profit, but I want to know more."

"All right." He turned toward the hatch. "Can't you seal her up first, though? They might remember that the *Falcon* used to be mine and come looking for me here."

Han sealed his ship without asking any further questions. He wasn't going to invite any more trouble. "Okay, tell me about it."

Chewie pulled Han aside. *Han, listen, I think he could mean trouble. I don't trust him.*

Han gave Chewie a confident grin. "Neither do I, pal. Not one bit. But it can't hurt to hear him out. He's not too happy with me since I won the *Falcon* away from him, but he's not stupid either. Something's got him scared. Maybe we'll take his proposition and maybe not. Just keep your eyes on him, okay? We don't want to let him get away with anything." He smiled broadly and followed Lando into the common room.

Chewie wasn't happy about the situation, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it. If the profit Lando proposed was big enough, Han was likely to take him on, no matter what the risk. There were times when Chewie would have liked to sit on Han and lecture him at length about basic caution. Not, of course, that Han would listen. Chewie knew better than that.

Lando got comfortable, pouring himself a drink without so much as a by-your-leave and sitting at the game table. With the *Falcon* securely in his possession, Han could afford to be tolerant, although he was still wary. He grinned lazily and said, "Go ahead, pal. Make yourself right at home. "

Lando had the grace to look slightly embarrassed, but it didn't stop him from propping his feet up comfortably and taking a healthy swallow of his drink. He reached into an inner pocket and produced a small holotape. "This is what the fuss is about, Han," he began. "If anybody finds out about this tape, there'll be all kinds of trouble. But if I can get away with it, we could be on our way to being rich. "

"Yeah?" Han looked skeptical. "I'll bet. What is it anyway, Lando? And where'd you get it?"

"Won it at cards, " Lando told him. "I got into a tringa game yesterday and that was one of the things I came up with. I didn't know if it was valuable or not, but the character who lost it was almost in tears over it. I didn't think he was a good enough actor to be that convincing, so I took a chance on it, and I was right. You don't know what I've got here."

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Han replied with elaborate patience. "What is it, Lando? Convince me it's worth my time and trouble."

"Have you ever heard of Wellstar?" Lando asked, pausing dramatically before the final word.

Han swore, then he laughed. "Somebody must have conned you good, Calrissian. Wellstar doesn't exist."

"But what if it did?" Lando persisted. "Think of it, Han. A fortune in jewels. Small, portable, easily disposed of."

"Yeah, sure," Han said doubtfully. Since he'd been spacing, he'd heard his share of tales about the fabled planet of Wellstar, one of three worlds that had once supposedly held all the wealth of the Old Republic. Wellstar was reputed to be the storehouse of a fortune in jewels. But something had happened, maybe a hundred generations ago, and Wellstar had been lost. The location of the treasure storehouse would have been known only to a trusted few, but there would have been some who remembered and shared their knowledge. If Wellstar still existed, its location would be known, its wealth would gradually have trickled onto the open market. But it never had. Wellstar must have been destroyed in some long forgotten battle, or maybe by a supernova or collision with a meteor or asteroid. Han said as much.

Lando only grinned. "You think so? There's another explanation, Han. Maybe nothing ever surfaced from Wellstar because nobody has found it until now. Think of it, Han. The wealth of a whole galaxy just waiting for us."

"I'm not convinced, Lando. You'll have to do better than that."

"I can play you the tape," Lando said, "but if you think I'm going to just give you the coordinates of Wellstar before I know where you stand, then forget it."

"Coordinates?" Han echoed, interested in spite of himself. "How do you know the place even exists any more? And even if it does, the Empire could have found it." He glanced over at Chewie, who was wearing a look of resignation. Han gave him an encouraging smile before he turned back to Lando. "Okay, " he said. "I'll go this far. We'll try your coordinates. If we find Wellstar, Chewie and I will split everything with you three ways. If not, you'll have to come up with passage money to pay for the trip."

"That'd leave me with only a third," objected Lando.

"That's right, but I'm your only way there right now, and you know it. You said somebody was after you. You want off Cartina fast. I say that's worth equal shares, since Chewie and I not only provide the transportation but take risks too. Somebody's after you--they might start gunning for us next. I'm not going to take those risks without getting a decent share of the profits. 'Sides, if it's as good as you say it is, you'll be rich enough with just a third that you won't have to worry about what you're giving away."

Lando thought that over, frowning. Han watched him, already knowing the answer. "Or, you can just walk out of here," he added. "Find another ship. Hire one. Hire a crew. They could easily blast you once you find Wellstar. You know where you stand with me. And you know the *Falcon*. You know what we can take on and what we can't. Decide, Lando. Play the tape for me."

Lando glared at him. "What really gets me is that you're right," he said. "I know exactly how much I can trust you, which isn't far, but it's more than I could trust a stranger. How about him?" he asked, pointing at Chewie. "You trust him with this?"

"Yes," said Han simply, "I do." He grinned at Chewie. "What d'ya say, Hairy? You in?"

If you are, Chewie growled resignedly. *Somebody has to come along and take care of you.*

Lando's chuckle proved that he could understand the Wookiee language. "Okay," he said cheerfully. "Where's your holoprojector? I'll play the tape for you."

The tape was obviously very old--the quality was poor and grainy and the picture flickered out from time to time--but it could be understood, and that was all that mattered. The speaker was a man clad in archaic clothes.

He looked as if he'd been through a war--he was battered and bloody, and his face was lined with weariness and pain. He spoke haltingly. "My son, this message is for you. The attempt on the lives of our High Council has been forestalled for now. But danger is in the air, and rebellion could strike at any time. To protect the coffers of the Republic, I have been given orders to conceal the fortunes in such a way that they will not be found by anyone who does not know where to look. You will follow in my footsteps as guardian of the treasury, and for you I leave this record. Wellstar has been well hidden, and to protect its location, I may have to die. I will put this tape where only you will know where to find it. When you do, if order has been restored, then it will be safe to return Wellstar to its rightful location. If not, then the coordinates must be handed down to your son, or his. I put this trust in you, knowing you will not fail me. And I leave you with all my best wishes and the guardianship of my honor." He sighed tiredly and recited the coordinates.

Han shut off the machine in the silence that followed. "I think we've got a problem, Lando."

"Why? They sound like valid coordinates to me. "

"Yeah, but just tell me how you're supposed to hide a planet. This sounds like they could just pick up and move it whenever they wanted to. I don't think they had any idea how to do something like that back then."

"They must have known how."

Han grinned. "I think you've been conned but good, buddy. A moving planet? Sure. I believe that about as much as I believe in your good intentions."

Chewie had listened to the tape thoughtfully. Now he said, *Maybe Wellstar wasn't ever really a planet. Maybe it was a ship constructed to look like a planet.*

Han and Lando stared at him. "A ship?" Han echoed.

"It could be done," Lando said excitedly. "But it wouldn't be without a very good reason, because a ship that big wouldn't be practical unless you needed it for something very important. I don't think they had the technology back then to equip it with lightspeed. Those coordinates could be variable. I think that if Wellstar really is a construct, it's been drifting ever since. Who would ever find it out between the stars? It would be the ideal hiding place."

"And hard to find even with coordinates," Han objected. "We only know the direction, not the time Wellstar would have been sent on its journey. We would have to track all along the course, and even if we did, we might not find it. Who's to say it didn't drift too close to a star and burn up? Anything could have happened since then."

"And maybe it's still there," Lando said. "You want to pass up a chance like this just because something might have happened? That doesn't sound like the Han Solo I used to know."

Han favored him with a scornful look. "I'm just telling you that it's not going to be easy. If it doesn't work out, you'll be running up a big bill, and I want to be sure I'm going to be paid. I want it guaranteed."

"You'll get it," Lando agreed. "I'll log it into the *Falcon's* computer right now. I think Wellstar is out there, and I'm not going to pass up the chance to find it just because you're playing it safe for once."

"Okay then," Han said. "I hope it's out there, Calrissian, 'cause the *Falcon* doesn't come cheap, and you're not the person I trust most when it comes to paying off old debts. But if we find Wellstar, it'll be worth it, won't it, Chewie?"

Chewie nodded. The lure of unlimited wealth was working on him too, but he trusted Lando even less than Han did. He frowned pointedly in Lando's direction and was glad that Han would have someone along to watch his back. He wouldn't put it past Lando to betray his old friend.

"How soon can we be on our way?" Lando asked anxiously.

"I'm not ready to leave yet," Han replied. "First I want to know about these characters that're after you."

"I only got a glimpse of them, " Lando told him, "but you can tell when you're being followed, and I was. I think I managed to give them the slip--I guess that's why I was so jumpy about Chewbacca. For all I knew, he was one more of them. " He gave the Wookiee an apologetic grin. "Sorry, Chewbacca."

"But these characters that were after you, " Han persisted. "What makes you think they had anything to do with the holotape?"

"Because they came after me right after the tringa game. And I'd seen one of them in the cantina, watching the game like it was the most interesting thing he'd ever seen. He never took his eyes off it. I thought it was the size of the pot that interested him, but that was before I rented a holobooth and played the tape. After that I was pretty sure that they knew what was on it and wanted it. I can't blame them for that. But I wasn't about to let them get it, either. " He grinned. "I managed to lose them, " he boasted. "And I don't think they can know yet where I am. But in case they find out, we ought to get out of here right away. "

"Okay," Han decided. "I've got a few things to take care of outside. Chewie, call in for clearance, and I'll be right with you."

"Do you think it's wise to go outside?" Lando asked.

"It's not wise to go into space without getting the ship ready," Han retorted. "Don't worry. I'll keep my eyes open." He got to his feet and headed for the exit.

"I'll cover you," Lando volunteered and followed him.

If anyone were watching the *Millennium Falcon*, they weren't making themselves obvious. Han came out of the ship very cautiously, blaster ready for trouble, and took a careful look around. He'd considered putting on the floodlights, but that would also make him a better target. Darkness could hide him as well as possible troublemakers. Calrissian stood at the foot of the ramp, weapon in hand, eyes moving around the docking bay, while Han went through preparations for liftoff.

The trouble didn't come until Han had finished. He was on his way back to the ramp when a blaster bolt struck the ground just in front of him. "Hold it right there!" a voice called out of the darkness. "Or the next one finishes you."

Han fired automatically in the direction of the voice and dove for cover as answering blaster fire missed him by centimeters. Pinned down like this, he didn't

have a chance; they could move in under cover of their fire and get him. He'd have to make a run for it.

Han burst out of cover, weaving his way toward the ramp and running like mad while heavy fire filled the air. Lando provided covering fire, then Chewie was there, rushing out into the open so he could get a better shot at their invisible opponents. Han thought he stumbled once as if he'd been hit, then they were running up the ramp to safety. "Let's get out of here!" Han yelled as he sealed the ramp. "Chewie, you okay?"

The Wookiee nodded and headed for the cockpit at a run with Han and Lando right behind him. He was moving all right, so if he had been hit, it must not have been serious. Han hoped not.

With practiced skill, Han and Chewie readied the ship. They were aloft a lot faster than Lando would have expected, and once in space, he was surprised at the speed of the *Falcon*. "What have you been doing to my ship?" he asked.

"Making it better," Han said promptly. "Ready for lightspeed, Chewie?"

Ready.

Unpursued, they entered hyperspace and safety. Han let out a sigh of relief and relaxed. "Well, so far, so good," he said, then turned to Chewie. "You okay, pal? I thought for a minute there they'd got you."

Chewie nodded. *I'm all right. It was a little close, that's all.* He held up his arm to reveal a slightly singed place. *It could have been worse.*

Han leaned closer to be sure, but Chewie was right; only the fur was touched, the burn not reaching the skin beneath. "You're lucky," he said. "That could have been nasty." Satisfied, he turned back to the controls, setting them on automatic. "Well, Lando," he said, "we're on our way to your coordinates. Once we get there, the hard part begins. Wellstar isn't going to be there waiting, not if it's an artificial planet that's capable of independent movement. If you think it'll be easy to find, you're wrong."

"I don't think it'll be easy to find," Lando retorted. "But we've got a better chance than anybody's had before."

"Maybe. If this whole thing isn't some hoax. Maybe there's a bunch of those holotapes floating around the galaxy. Maybe they're worth nothing."

"Sure, and those thugs were shooting at us for a joke, too. I think it's genuine. I'm taking a big gamble on it. If it's not real, I can see you're going to charge me a fortune for the charter, and that's something that doesn't thrill me one bit. But I think it's for real."

If it is, Chewie objected, *the one who had it was a fool to gamble it away.*

"No," Lando said. "My hand was a double trine. The odds against that are astronomical. He didn't think he was taking any risks."

"Did you cheat?" Han asked him, interested.

Lando looked affronted. "Solo, you ought to know that I'm good enough that I don't have to cheat." He looked around the cockpit of the *Falcon*. "There was only one time when that wasn't good enough," he said. "And that was because you've got more dumb luck than anybody I've ever met." He smiled. "Looks like you've done the old *Falcon* proud, though. With me, it was mostly just a way to get around and do business, but I think it means more to you, doesn't it?"

Han nodded and didn't go into it. He said, "Yeah, I've made a lot of improvements, Lando. Have a look around and see what you think." He turned back to the instruments for a final check, then got to his feet and went out to the auxiliary control.

Lando's holotape coordinates deposited the *Falcon* in a remote sector of the rim, far from any star system or base or traveled star lanes. Unenthusiastically, Han surveyed the area, looked over the sensor reports, then turned to Calrissian. "Well, we're here," he announced, "such as 'here' is. No sign of Wellstar, or anything else for that matter." He exchanged a grimace with Chewie. "Any bright ideas what to do next?"

Lando looked a little disconcerted at the sight of nothing but distant stars. "Well, we knew it wouldn't be easy, " he said defensively. "It's been a long time, and if the planet was supposed to drift, then it wouldn't be right here waiting for us. We'll have to track it. At least we can assume that it didn't have lightspeed capabilities. It couldn't have gotten all that far."

"In a hundred generations, it could have gotten far enough," Han disagreed. "Okay. We know where Wellstar was. And now we know where it isn't. To get from there it would have had to take a course of 285 point..." he consulted his instruments for the details. "Yeah, okay. It could have come here assuming it stayed on the exact course programmed for it. If it did, we can track it." He began to punch numbers into the navicomputer. "It would help if we knew how fast it went. I refuse to cruise along at sublight hoping to pick up something on the sensors. Assuming it didn't make lightspeed, then we can project a course and jump to the new position. If we have to track at sublight, then we'd be better off starting closer to where Wellstar ought to be right now." He looked at Lando. "You're running up a big bill, pal. Still want to go through with it?"

"Yes." Lando didn't even hesitate. "I think we're on the right track, Han. I can almost taste it. I can't see you passing up a chance of finding it, either. "

"I didn't say I wanted to pass it up, " Han replied patiently. "Only that if we don't find it, I want to be sure I get my pay."

"You'll get it. You'll get it. Don't you trust me, Han?"

"Nope." He pulled the levers and the *Falcon* made a series of short jumps in hyperspace, scanned the surrounding space, then went on again. There was nothing at all to find. "We get much farther and we'll be out of the galaxy altogether," Han complained as they came out of hyperspace one more time. But this time they weren't in empty space. This time there were a sun and planets fairly close. Han frowned, checked his charts and records. "There's not supposed to be anything here," he said, a thread of excitement creeping into his voice. It could be that someplace so remote had simply never been charted; there were a lot of places like that, stars with uninhabitable planets, or worlds too far away from anyplace else to make colonization practical. The *Millennium Falcon* was a great many parsecs from anywhere that Han had ever been before, but he knew that this system not being on the charts didn't necessarily mean that no one knew about it. It might be too remote for smugglers and pirates, but there could still be someone down there, someone who might be a threat to them and their plans.

"What do you think?" Lando asked. "Could one of those worlds be Wellstar?"

"We've got no way of telling yet." Han maneuvered the *Falcon* closer and checked his instruments. "One thing I do know, this isn't one of the population centers of the galaxy. There's life down there, but not very much of it. Second world's the only one that'd support us without suits, and far's I can tell, it's only got one settlement. The third world might have had life at one time, but look at that," he said, indicating the readings. "Looks like it's near to been torn apart. Earthquakes, tidal waves, all that sort of stuff."

"Like something disrupted it," Lando said excitedly. "If the other world was Wellstar, it probably would have had some influence on the other planets if it somehow managed to go into orbit here. I wonder how it managed to do as well as it did?"

"Maybe it didn't," Han said. "There' re a lot of asteroids in the system. Maybe they're what's left of Wellstar."

"Pessimist."

"Maybe I am, " Han said. "you don't get disappointed as much that way. Okay, what do you want to do? Go down there? I can't pick up any sign of technology. If Wellstar is an artificial planet, there should be generated energy and I can't read any."

"Maybe it's defective after all this time. Or shielded."

"And maybe it isn't here and never was," Solo retorted. "Okay, we go down. And we're going to land near the settlement, so be ready for hostile natives."

They found themselves on a twilit world, cool and gloomy. The sun was an old one, dim and nearing the evening of its lifespan, and if there had once been a civilization here, it had long since crumbled into rubble. There was evidence of life, but there wasn't much of a population, according to the scanners. Han and Chewie left the *Falcon* wearing breathing masks because of the thin air. They could get by without masks for a short time, but there was no point in taking chances. Lando trailed along behind, privately admitting that the place didn't look very promising.

"Okay," Solo told him. "We're picking up life readings not that far away, close enough for them to have heard us land, so we could be in for trouble." He held up his blaster and looked around cautiously.

"Let's go find them," Lando suggested. "Maybe they know if this was Wellstar or not."

Han looked around the barren valley. " If it is, " he said, " there isn't much hope of finding treasure here."

Lando agreed with him, but he didn't say so. If there was no treasure, if Wellstar wasn't found, he was really going to be in debt. That didn't worry him too much; on a good night, he could win enough to pay Han back. But the thought of the treasure had gotten to him, and he wanted it. He headed in the direction Han had indicated.

"Just where do you think you're going?" Han demanded.

"To find out if this is Wellstar. "

"You're crazy, Calrissian. Place like this's so remote that the people here are sure going to be suspicious of strangers. Even if this isn't Wellstar, the odds are they'll blast you just because they don't know you."

"I'll take that chance," Lando replied and kept on walking.

"Shit," Han muttered. "C'mon, Chewie. We can't let him get his head blown off. He owes me too much money."

But no one tried to stop them. Lando led the way through a narrow valley until it opened up to reveal a building ahead. It was mostly a ruin, the outer walls tumbled down here and there, but it looked far more intact than they would have expected anything to be here. Once it had been huge and ornate--the crumbled stones still bore the marks of elaborate designs--but now there was not much left of it, at least not on the surface. Lando came to a halt at the sight of the place, staring. "Look at that, " he said, pointing to a carved symbol of some kind that still showed over the door. It was impossible to make out all the details, since it was

weathered and a corner of it had collapsed with a part of the wall, but Lando was getting excited.

"Yeah? What is it?" Han asked, squinting at the mark.

"A sign of the Old Republic. You don't see it much any more--the Empire doesn't leave that sort of thing for people to see. But that means that this was once some sort of official building. This really could be Wellstar."

Ran stared at the faded carving, getting excited himself. Maybe, just maybe, Lando and the tape had been right. Maybe they were about to find themselves a fortune in jewels. His eyes gleamed at the idea, and he headed for the door. "Then let's have a look inside," he said.

Chewie growled a protest. He was pretty sure that if people were around, this was where they would be found. "Be careful, Han," he urged. "I don't think we ought to go in without checking it out first."

"He's right," Lando said.

Han gave him a sour look. He didn't like having Lando telling him his business. "Yeah," he agreed reluctantly. "Let's look around first."

They circled the ruin warily. If anyone were inside, there was no trace of them. No lights showed, and there was no sign of movement. The only sounds were their footsteps and the whistling of the wind. The building looked worse at first glance than it really was. A lot of the outer walls were down, but not all of them, and there were a lot of enclosed areas inside. It could be hiding the treasure. But it also could be hiding watchers who might mean danger. But when they returned to the main entrance, no one had disturbed them. Satisfied, Han led the way in.

Nothing happened. The place was dim and dusty, but it was evident that people came here from the marks on the floor--footprints of something, or someone. Humanoid, but smaller than human. Some kind of people came here, though they did not bother to keep the place clean and repaired.

"I've got a bad feeling about this place," Han remarked as he looked around. He was sure he was being watched, and he didn't like the feeling.

Lando nodded in agreement, sharing Han's uneasiness, and Chewie growled something untranslatable and uneasy deep in his throat and moved closer to Han.

Then they were under attack from a horde of little, grey-skinned beings that looked as if their ancestors might have been human a long time ago. They were small and not particularly strong, but there were so many of them that the three were overpowered after a fight that left dozens of the little people sprawled on the floor. Sheer numbers told, though, and finally Han, Lando and Chewie were bound with thin but strong ropes and urged to their feet by the points of sharp little spears. Chewie tested his bonds surreptitiously--it was hard to find rope strong enough to confine a Wookiee--but he had no luck. The stuff was tough as well as tight.

A bruise darkening one cheekbone, Han gave Lando a very unforgiving look. "See what your damn treasure hunt has gotten us into, Calrissian? Are you happy now?"

A spear jabbed him in the side, hard enough to hurt. Han caught on quickly that their captors wanted them to keep quiet. Another spear gestured them deeper into the building. They had no choice. They went.

Presently, they came to a thick door that looked tightly sealed. One of the little men climbed up on a box and pushed a button on the wall beside the door. It slid back to reveal a small hallway with a similar door at the other end.

"An airlock?" Han ventured, ducking away from the spear that jabbed at him again. Lando and Chewie nodded. Maybe they were heading for somewhere that had retained some level of technology, after all.

They paused in the airlock while air hissed in, then the far door slid open. Han simply stared. They found themselves in yet another hallway, but this one was well lit and clean, the walls a smooth pastel blue curving away out of sight. Lights glowed from panels in the ceiling, illuminating murals depicting life in a past age. People in strange garb went about their business in those paintings, and it would have been interesting to linger before them, but the little grey men jabbed lightly with their spears to keep their captives moving. Well, with any luck, the creatures might take them right to the treasure. Then their only problem would be getting away.

They went through several corridors that were as clean as the outer ones were dirty, all well lit, and all deserted. Doors opened off the hallways, revealing rooms for a variety of purposes, some filled with plants, some set up for strange and exotic games, one with a giant viewscreen and rows of seats before it, offices, living quarters, storerooms, all empty. The technology was not up to modern standards, but it could easily have matched that of the period of Wellstar's disappearance. It was beginning to look as if Lando's holotape had been right.

They halted at yet another door, and one of the grey men pushed a button to signal their presence. At once, the door slid open and a voice came out to them "All right, Velyn. Bring them in. Keep the rest of your people out."

Velyn was the fellow with the active spear. He used it again to jab Han and Lando painfully toward the door. He was a bit more reluctant to use it on the Wookiee, but he didn't need to. Chewie would go where Han went. He roared at Velyn, who took an involuntary step backwards at the sheer volume of noise, then followed the others into the room. Han and Lando had stopped dead at the sight of the speaker, and Chewie almost collided with them.

At the far side of the room, behind a vast desk lit with a series of buttons and controls, sat a human. He was as tall as the grey people were small and his skin was very pale, as if he had not been exposed to sunlight for a long time. Dark eyes were shadowed by thick bushy brows and he was completely bald. But what had halted Han and Lando was his resemblance to the man in the holotape. If it were not impossible, they would have sworn it was the same man. "Well," he said, eyeing them with interest. "Veryn, you have brought me two humans. It has been a long time since I have seen a human." His eyes fell on Chewie and he frowned. "And, I think this is a Wookiee?"

Han nodded. "Who're you?"

"It is hardly your place to ask questions, young man."

"We didn't come here to be treated like this," Han protested. "Your friends here," this with a sarcastic gesture at Veryn, "took us prisoner without even trying to find out who we were and why we were here. That's not very friendly."

"They took you prisoner for the same reason they always take prisoners," the man said. "For food. However, I rescue humans from them whenever I get the chance. Anyone else they may do with as they will."

"They better not try to do anything with Chewie," Han warned.

"If the Wookiee is your friend, he may remain here for the time being," conceded the man.

Veryn at once began to object in a high chirping language that sounded like none Han had heard before. Chewie gave him another savage growl and looked pleased with himself when Veryn again drew back in fright, chittering all the while. The human heard him out, then replied, "Veryn, your people have access to the structure only through my good will. If you dispute my rulings, I will have to

bar you from here, and I don't think you would like that. The Wookiee is the friend of the humans and they prefer that he remain uneaten. You will have to make the best of that."

Veryn gave Chewie a dark look, but he nodded in acquiescence and didn't reply. Han suspected they hadn't heard the last of it.

"Now, " the human said, "I'll deal with you people. I presume you have come to rob the coffers like all the others?"

"All the others?" echoed Lando in dismay. "You mean the treasure is gone?"

Han gave him a dirty look for giving them away so easily. "Then this is Wellstar?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. People come here from time to time with dreams of riches. Most of them don't leave--and those who do go somewhere from which there is no return."

"You kill them, you mean?" Han asked. "Or let them"--this with a nod toward Veryn--"eat them?"

"They have the right to live."

"And people from the outside don't?" Lando asked.

"Intruders, you mean? Come to steal that which is not theirs and never will be? My treasure that I have guarded through all these centuries? They are beings without honor and deserve their fate."

"Now just a minute," Lando objected, thinking furiously. "You haven't even asked us who we are or what we're doing here."

"And yet you spoke of treasure." He pondered. "I know from the last visitors I had that the Republic had been overthrown by an Empire. Until the Republic is restored to its rightful place, I will turn my treasure over to no one. After two thousand years, I refuse to lose it to a pair of glib-tongued rascals. So spin no tales because I will not believe them."

Lando looked thoughtful. "And what about the Rebels who are fighting to overthrow the Empire? The treasure here could help them restore the Republic to its former greatness." Surreptitiously, he gave Han a nudge that meant "play along."

Han did. "The Rebellion's just getting started," he said, dredging up what little information he had heard about the Rebels, which wasn't much--he wasn't one for causes. "But they need money to buy ships and arms. When we learned about Wellstar, Lando and I were sent to find it so it could be used to bring back the Republic and not fall into the hands of the Empire." That part was true. The last thing he wanted was for the treasure to fall into the possession of the Empire."

"Ah, yes," the man said. "A rather more imaginative story than most. I quite like it. But I don't--quite--believe it. I want more information, my friends." He sat back and waited like a man who is looking forward to being entertained.

"Can't you get these blasted ropes off first?" Han asked. "My hands are starting to go numb."

The man looked at him consideringly. "Well, yes, I believe that can be done. After all, there is nowhere to go except where Veryn's people are, and once you're out there, I can't guarantee that they won't decide to eat you after all. So, Veryn, if you would please unbind our guests."

Veryn complained all the while he was doing it, loosing Han first, then Lando, and he seemed relieved when Han went to untie Chewie. He wanted to get no closer to the Wookiee than he had to. The task finished, Veryn turned with a comment to the man and went out.

"He'll warn his people about you," the man cautioned them, "so escape will be impossible. Now, let's get down to serious business. My name is Frost, and I am the guardian of the treasury. It has been my responsibility for two thousand years, and I will not turn it over to you, or anyone, without proof of identity. "

"Two thousand years," scoffed Han, as he chafed his wrists to restore circulation. "Come on, you can't expect us to believe that you're two thousand years old."

"It does not matter to me whether you believe it or not. I have been with Wellstar since it began its journey. I was here when Veryn's people's world was ruined by the intrusion of Wellstar into this star system, and I rescued as many of them as I could and brought them here. As a result, I am the savior of their race, and they obey without question. That obedience will not extend to you. Tell me who you are."

Lando made the introductions suspiciously. "We have a tape that led us here," he said, "and the man on the tape looked like you, but I still can't believe that you're the same person."

"Perhaps you have never heard of cloning," Frost said calmly. "This is not my original body, no, but my intellect, my consciousness are still the same. When I came here, I knew there was no hope of recruiting other guardians for Wellstar. I am an educated man, and I had the help of the best computer system developed in my age. With it, I studied and learned until I was able to master the art of

cloning. I practiced on the natives; they were many and they bred quickly, so they made excellent tools for my purpose. Finally, I had learned enough, and I was growing old, so I renewed myself. I have been doing it ever since." He stared down at his folded hands, clenched a bit more tightly than seemed necessary on the desk in front of him. "I have survived to guard the treasury of Wellstar, and that is what matters."

Han and Lando exchanged glances. The Clone Wars hadn't been fought all that long ago, and while neither of them were old enough to remember much about them, they'd heard enough stories about clones to give them a distaste for the whole idea. Chewie, who remembered the Clone Wars very well, rumbled deep in his throat and looked unhappy. To call someone a clone was a dire insult. And here was Frost admitting it openly as if it were a matter of pride.

If Frost noticed their revulsion, he gave no sign of it. "Come," he said, becoming a genial host all of a sudden. "Please sit down. Be comfortable. I will have cool drinks fetched for you." He pushed one of the buttons on the desk and presently one of the grey people came in. Frost switched to the chirping language to give instructions. The being nodded and withdrew.

"Some of them make good servants," Frost said. "He will return soon. In the meantime, show me your credentials--if you possess any."

"We carry no credentials," Lando replied, thinking fast. "Imperial activity increases all the time, and searches of ships are common. We don't dare carry anything that would identify ourselves as Rebels."

"I thought not." Frost was unsurprised and slightly disappointed. "You do not look like Rebels, either of you. Smugglers, perhaps, pirates maybe. But not Rebels." He looked at them rather pityingly. "I think you'll have to do better than that."

"What do you expect us to do?" Han asked.

"Surely not to expect me to hand over what has been my responsibility for centuries simply on your word. You must realize that I cannot do that."

"Maybe he's stolen it himself," Lando said to Han, "and he doesn't want us to find out. He's had all the time necessary to do it, and the temptation has got to be incredible. He'd have had centuries to cover his tracks."

"If that is the case," Frost asked amusedly, "why am I still here?"

"To finish the job," Han said. "Okay, Frost, I can see why you won't turn your treasure over to us. If authorization is what you need, we can get it. But the Rebel leaders won't give it to us unless there is still a treasure waiting. As a sign of good faith, why don't you show it to us? Then we can go for the authorization." Somehow he felt it might be a good idea to get out of there as fast as they could.

"Show you the treasure so that you can steal it?"

Lando shook his head. "I'm sure you have it too well guarded for that. We only want to know what's available."

"Plausible. I still doubt you but, perhaps, with proper safeguards... Ah, here is our refreshment." He gestured the grey being away and poured out the drinks himself, one for each of his three guests."

"You're not drinking with us?" Lando asked suspiciously.

"In my...present state...I take different nourishment." He passed them the glasses. "Drink up. I think you will find it exceptionally good."

Han sampled his cautiously, then brightened. It was one of the best things he had ever tasted, tart and heady with a sparkle to it that promised a decent alcoholic content. Chewie was already swallowing his with evident enjoyment. But something about the setup made Han wary, and he set the glass back on the tray unfinished. If Frost wanted to do away with them, this would be the easiest way, something quick and final in the drinks. He caught Chewie's eye, but Chewie had already finished his. He seemed all right, but maybe it would take more of it to affect a Wookiee.

Lando had only drunk a little of his, more than Han, but not all of it. He saw Han's glass and nodded. He didn't trust Frost either.

But the damage had already been done. Whatever drug Frost had put into the drinks was potent stuff, capable of acting almost immediately. Chewie was the first to be affected. As the symptoms hit, he gave an alarmed bellow and tried to reach Han. He never made it. Three steps short of Solo, he suddenly collapsed to his knees, then pitched forward without a sound to sprawl unmoving on the floor. Even as Han gave an agonized cry of, "Chewie!" Lando crumpled where he stood.

Han could feel the effects of the drug working on him too, dizziness made the room pitch and buck like a ship under fire, but he lasted long enough to reach Chewie's side. He had to know if he was still alive. But there was no time for that. He staggered, then fell, his head pillowed on Chewie's arm. Frost stood looking down at them for a long time, then he went to push the button that would summon Velyn and his people.

Han woke to the conviction that a whole tribe of Tusken Raiders, complete with banthas, had trampled him in his sleep and then marched through his mouth. It was a long time since he could recall being this hung over, and he suspected that if he tried to move he would falloff the bed--only it didn't feel like a bed. It felt like a very hard floor.

Floor? Somehow that triggered his memory, and he recalled Frost and the drugged drinks. "Chewie?" he muttered.

"He's not in here."

Han turned his head and immediately wished he hadn't. Closing his eyes so he wouldn't have to see the room spinning around, he said, "Lando?"

"Yes. I've been awake a couple of minutes, and I can warn you--whatever you do, don't make any sudden moves. I don't know what was in that stuff he gave us, but I do know I'll kill him for it if I get the chance."

Han agreed. But right now, the condition of his head and stomach wasn't his primary concern, nor was the fact that they seemed to be in a cell of some kind. Forcing his eyes open again, he demanded, "Where's Chewie?"

"I don't know." Calrissian had propped himself up against one wall and was being very careful not to move. "He wasn't here when I woke up." The worry on Han's face prompted him to add, "They've probably got him in the next cell."

"Yeah." Han was unconvinced. To Velyn's people, Chewie would represent a real feast. Han was positive that Frost had turned him over to them despite his words to the contrary. It might be too late to save him.

Lando had already realized this. "There's nothing you can do," he said consolingly.

"Is that supposed to make me feel good?" Han snapped savagely. He got up and tottered over to the door, trying futilely to open it.

"I'm sorry. "

"This was all your damn idea, Calrissian. " Han turned to glare at him. "I told you all along it wasn't going to work, but you conned me into it and now look what's happened. Chewie's probably dead and all you can do is sit there and say you're sorry. I ought to kill you myself." But he made no move to do so.

Lando looked at him with a combination of anger and sympathy. He had hardly forced Han here at blasterpoint and they both knew it. But all this concern for someone else revealed a new aspect of Han Solo to him. A year ago, when Han had won the *Falcon* away from him, he was a loner through and through, deliberately dependent on no one. Since then, he'd let down his guard enough to care about someone, and now his friend was missing. Lando did feel bad about it because he knew that none of them would have come here if it weren't for him, but there wasn't anything he could do for Chewie. There might, however, be something he could do for himself and Han, although he didn't know just what yet, so he said, "At least we're still alive. If Chewie's being held someplace else, we might still have a chance to rescue him. If not, it's too bad, and I'm sorry, but you and I might still be able to get away. I don't want to pass up any chances. Blame me if you have to, but wait until we're away from here to do it."

"That's easy for you to say," Han retorted angrily, but he knew that Lando was right. Much as he would have enjoyed beating Calrissian to a pulp, it would do nothing to help Chewie, and he might need Lando to help get the Wookiee free. So he said reluctantly, "Okay. But that door isn't going to give. You got any bright ideas?"

"One," Lando said. "Frost said we might be allowed to see the treasure with the proper safeguards. He might just have been talking to himself, but he might have meant that he'd hold Chewie to insure that we didn't try to snatch something. Frost had to realize that Chewie was your friend and that you wouldn't want to take risks with his life. So he would've been smart to hold him hostage. And if I were him, I wouldn't want to take on Chewie when he was awake and fighting."

Han hoped he was right. "So that means we wait?" he asked, hating the idea of such a passive role.

Lando closed his eyes. "I don't know about you, but I don't feel like taking on a sandfly right now, let alone Frost and his buddies."

"Yeah," Han agreed, sitting down and leaning against the wall.

"And, anyway, I think Frost has got to be insane. Have you noticed?"

"No," replied Han sarcastically. "I'm real lucky to have you here to point it out to me."

"Lay off, Solo. You're only mad at me so you won't have to feel guilty for what might have happened to Chewie."

That was a whole lot closer to the truth than Han wanted to admit, so he said quickly, "If it wasn't for you, Chewie wouldn't be in any trouble in the first place."

Lando didn't argue. He sat there massaging his temples and said, "Yeah, I think Frost is crazy. He's been here alone, except for his little friends, for centuries. If he's really telling the truth and he's been cloning himself for all that time, he'd have to be kind of strange. A couple of times he sounded like he believed the treasure belonged to him personally. I think he's just having fun, amusing himself with us, and has no intention of ever letting us go. But I do think he'll show us the treasure because he will enjoy showing it off. And once we're out of here, we can get a better idea of the way things are and work out some way to escape. He said that Veryn and his pals look on him as the savior of their race. I don't agree. I got the impression they blamed him for what happened to their home planet and that they put up with him because he's the only game in town."

"You've got a big imagination, don't you?"

"Maybe. But think about it, Han, because he came right out and admitted that nobody ever left here. I don't think he really meant to tell us that. I think he got a little carried away with his 'protector of the treasury' role and talked too much. He can't let us leave. We know too much."

"Listening to you can really cheer a guy up," Solo retorted. "How do you know he doesn't intend to let us just sit here until we rot?"

"No, I don't think he will. I think he's bored and we're the first entertainment he's had in a long time. He won't even try to kill us right away, I don't think. So we've got some time to work with."

"We better have," Han replied, "and we better find Chewie or so help me, Calrissian--"

Neither of them had heard the cell door slide open, so they were startled when Frost said smoothly, "Ah, but you will find your Wookiee friend. He is in no danger, and he will not be if you are what you say you are."

Han jumped to his feet, ignoring his throbbing head. "You didn't turn Chewie over to those tame monsters of yours?"

"No," Frost assured him, adding ominously, "not yet. Come, we must go now."

"Where?" asked Lando.

"To the treasury, of course. And let me caution you first. Your friend is in my power. If you wish him back intact, you will touch nothing when I take you through the jewel rooms."

Lando brightened at the word 'rooms,' but Han gave him an angry warning glance. Calrissian might be willing to take risks with Chewie's life, but he wasn't. "Okay," he said. "We only need to see what we're dealing with."

"So that you can get Rebel authorization," Frost promptly gently.

"Yeah, what else?"

"Forgive me, but it occurs to me that you might go away for reinforcements, so that you could perhaps steal the treasure without difficulty, eh?" He laughed. "But of course you would not dream of doing so, Captain Solo."

It was starting to look as if Lando's theory was right, that no matter what they did or how convincing they were they weren't going to be allowed to leave. Frost simply couldn't take that risk with his treasure, even with all the safeguards in the universe. Han and Lando wouldn't have been the first to discover Wellstar--Frost had said that there had been others--but no one had ever returned rich. The more they considered it, the clearer it got. No one who came here had ever left. For a time, Frost might seem to play along with his guests, perhaps for amusement, or merely to assuage his loneliness, but eventually they would all be turned over to Velyn and his friends. Han didn't want to end his life as somebody's dinner, but it was starting to look as if he might.

He was careful to keep his suspicions to himself, though. Voicing them wouldn't help, and it might do a great deal of harm. So he said, "Well, what do you think? We want to get this settled as much as you do. Hey, I got an idea. We could take you with us when we go and you could talk to them yourself. How does that sound?"

"Ah, yes," Frost said. "Leaving Wellstar unguarded. "

"What about your friends?" Lando asked. "They'd make good guards, I'm sure."

"So they would. But this is something I will need to consider very carefully. In the meantime, you may as well see the jewels. Come. Oh, and as a small precaution--unnecessary, I'm sure--we will be escorted by twenty of Veryn's best warriors. "

"You've already got Chewie," Han objected. "You don't need them, too."

"Ah, but I haven't lived this long, Captain Solo, without being very cautious. You must allow me my little idiosyncracies. Come. The drug I gave you will wear off more quickly if you move around. I am sorry you are feeling poorly, but it cannot be helped, now, can it?"

Lando gave him a bitter glare but only said, "Lead the way."

The treasury was in the lowest level of the structure, reached by an asthmatic elevator that wheezed and huffed its way lower and lower, causing Han and Lando to exchange concerned looks at each jerk and hesitation. "Are you sure this thing is safe?" Han wanted to know. "Maybe there are stairs?" Useful to know in any case.

The grey people who were packed in with them chattered among themselves and waved their spears in Han's face. He shut up.

Frost chuckled. "Captain Solo, I am a very old man. Why should I walk when I could ride, eh?"

The elevator dropped sickeningly for a meter before it caught itself, startling profanity from the two reluctant passengers and a whole series of squeals from the grey bodyguards. Frost spoke to them sharply in their language as the elevator came to a grinding halt.

"We are here," Frost announced dramatically, waving an electronic device at the doors, which opened onto a room filled with light, and sparkling in a dazzling glow of faceted gemstones. The place was literally heaped with them, stones of every color imaginable, some no bigger than grains of sand, a few as massive as a man's clenched fist, from relatively cheap Crillian shimmerers to the priceless Rhondian bloodstones. Every precious or semiprecious stone known in the galaxy was represented here. A man could grab two handfuls and walk away wealthy. And this was only one room.

"I see you find it interesting," said Frost as Han and Lando stared in amazement. They had never imagined this. "A pretty collection, is it not?"

"Do you have an inventory?" Lando asked.

"An inventory? Well, at least that is a practical question. *No!* Stop that!" he snapped at two of the grey people who had reached out toward the glittering array. "Means nothing to them," he confided. "Just pretty trinkets. But you two can appreciate what you see. Look here." He picked up a bloodstone the size of a man's thumbnail and rolled the jewel between his fingers. "Pretty, eh?"

It would probably buy the Millennium Falcon several times over, thought Han, looking at the stone that seemed to shine with an inner red fire. He wanted that stone, but right now, with Chewie's life on the line, he couldn't let himself even think about it. He shrugged. "Yeah. What about the inventory?"

"Inventory? There was one someplace in the computer, but I'm afraid there has been data lost. We could get an approximate readout, but it's not important. Come along. We must not dawdle."

He led them into a room filled with stones set into jewelry: rings, brooches, necklaces, eardrops, bracelets, tiaras, all types of jewelry that could be imagined.

Han and Lando exchanged glances, united in their desire to possess this wealth. If only Chewie were with them, they would take their chances and see how much of it they could get away with right now.

One of the grey people, a female, reached out for something on a table, and it went over with a crash, scattering the baubles that had rested there. At once, Frost flew into a savage rage, shouting and striking out at the creature with his fists. They didn't look like hard blows, but she fell like a disconnected droid and lay there, her blood staining the floor. The other creatures retreated to the far side of the room, chittering in dismay and alarm, and it was left to Han to kneel beside the crumpled body. He made a quick check and raised startled eyes to Frost. "She's dead," he said. "You killed her. "

Frost only shrugged. "Oh well, there are a great many of the ignorant beasts who need a lesson. I warned them not to touch anything." He turned and barked orders at the others, and two of them crept forward to pick up the body of their dead companion and carry it gently away. Han never took his eyes off Frost. If he had that little respect for life, then Chewie was in a lot more immediate danger than he had realized; they all were.

"Why do you look at me like that?" Frost asked, wiping his hands on a cloth he had taken from his pocket.

"She didn't deserve killing," Han said flatly.

"Oh, nonsense, what does one of them matter? They're not human. They're scarcely even intelligent. Besides, it was an accident. They're so fragile, especially the females. Don't worry; they breed fast. They're a nuisance anyway, eating up all my supplies as fast as I can program them and giving me nothing in return."

Han gave him a disgusted look as he climbed to his feet. Fragile? They weren't as fragile as all that. Some of them had survived Chewie's blows during their capture, and anything that could resist the strength of a Wookiee had to be fairly tough. Frost was not a small man, but he'd killed with only a couple of careless blows and without any evidence of special training. Han frowned.

"Well, come on," Frost said impatiently, and Han realized it was not the first time he had spoken. "You've seen the treasury. We will return to the upper levels now."

Han and Lando were escorted back to their cell under guard, with Frost accompanying them, a weapon in his hand. The grey people waved their spears about but somehow didn't seem to be as enthusiastic about it as they had before. The death of the female had upset them and they made no attempt to hide their feelings. Frost noticed it, of course, but seemed contemptuous of their grief and preferred to ignore it. "You will wait here," he said to Han and Lando, as they were urged back into the cell. "Presently the Wookiee will be brought to join you. And I will consider your offer to accompany you back to the Rebels. It just might be interesting to see the rest of the galaxy again. It might indeed." He bowed and the door slid shut.

Han flung himself down to the floor and began to massage the back of his neck-- Frost's drug was still working on him a little. Lando propped himself against the wall, his face grave. "It doesn't look very promising," he said. "I'm sure he's not going to let us go."

"No, and I think you were right. He never meant to. And how'd he kill that poor female so easily?"

"There are techniques..."

"Yeah, but he didn't seem to use any of 'em. It was more like brute strength, and he doesn't look that strong. I've got a funny feeling about him."

"You and your funny feelings. So he killed one of them. Maybe he does it all the time."

"Well, I don't like it," Han protested. "Killing like that without a reason's just stupid. And we'll probably be next. He's got a reason to kill us."

"Yeah, I know," Lando agreed glumly.

"I just wish he'd let me see Chewie. He says he's okay, but I don't believe him, and he'd lie to us in a minute. Dammit, we've got to get out of here."

"Tell me how."

"We could try to short out the door."

"With what? Our bare hands? Han, look, we don't have any choice. We'll have to wait until we're let out of here again and then make a break for it."

"Just sit here doing nothing while those characters have Chewie for dinner? Damn you, Calrissian, you--"

The door slid open and he broke off, staring because it wasn't Frost who stood there; it was Veryn. The little grey man looked at them for a second, then he made a gesture for silence. "Be very still. He mustn't know I'm here."

"You speak Galactic," Lando said in surprise.

"I learned it from Frost." His lips curled in distaste as he spoke the name. "I hate him. Today he killed Antry--my mate. He kills us whenever it pleases him, but we cannot hurt him in return. He is not alive, and we can't kill something that has no life."

"What do you mean?" Han asked involuntarily.

"He's a damn 'borg," Lando replied in disgust.

"He is metal under his skin," Veryn confirmed. "We do not know how to stop him, so we must pretend to serve him. Can you stop him?"

"Yeah," Han said. "Give me my blaster and I'll stop him, all right." He added, "What about Chewie? You haven't..."

"No. He would make a feast, but Frost said not yet, and then you showed concern for Antry when she was killed, so I will let him go."

Han closed his eyes for a moment in sheer relief, and Lando asked, "What about us?"

"If you will stop Frost for us, you may go free. Come. We will release your friend, and then I will take you to your weapons. You must destroy him for us."

"We will," Han promised. "Let's go."

They met more of Velyn's people in the corridor, but this time there seemed to be no hostility in them, and none of them made any attempt to halt them.

Velyn led them to another cell, pushed a combination of buttons and stood back to allow them access. Han charged in, saw Chewie rising from the floor and greeted him with enthusiasm. "You okay, pal?" he asked as Chewie grabbed him in a hug that nearly squashed him while the Wookiee complained at length about Han's recklessness and asked worried questions. "Come on," Han said when Chewie let him go. "It looks like we're both all right, and we've got work to do."

Velyn was frantically urging haste. Soon they were entering another room where their weapons had been stored. Settling his blaster low on his hip, Han felt ready for anything. Chewie was safe, and for the rest, well, a little danger kept things from getting boring.

Velyn led them to Frost, who looked anything but pleased at the interruption. He was in the room where they had first met him, working at the computer, but at the sight of them he glared at Velyn. "What is the matter with you? I did not send for the prisoners."

"In case you haven't noticed," remarked Han, holding up his blaster, "we're not prisoners any more. You are."

"What! Velyn, explain this treachery."

"It's hardly treachery," Lando told him, perching on the corner of the desk and leveling his blaster at Frost with evident enjoyment. "Because he doesn't exactly owe you loyalty. Killing his mate was a mistake, Frost. Every being has its limits, and you have just pushed Veryn too far. Now we're getting out of here and we're taking the treasure with us."

"Are you?" Frost wondered. "I don't think so. And don't wave those blasters around. You can't hurt me with a blaster, you know."

"So he was right," Han said. "You're a 'borg."

"Veryn has talked freely, I see. Yes, that is quite right."

"Then why did you tell us you were a clone?" Lando asked.

"Because I was for many centuries. What I told you before was the truth, just not the entire story. After repeated clonings, I discovered that the process was starting to weaken. Eventually a being can be cloned to the limits, and I was nearing the end. But my task here was not ended. I could not leave my treasure unguarded--so I began to investigate other possibilities. I discovered a way to make a mechanical replica of myself and to impress my consciousness upon it. That way, I have insured for myself virtual immortality. And do you think that I would build a body for myself that could be destroyed by something so trivial as a blaster? It would take a major explosion to finish me, and as long as the treasure was secure, I would never have allowed such a thing to happen. You might damage me if you fired at me, but not before I could destroy this complex, including the treasure. You would never possess it, I assure you."

"You're bluffing," Han accused him.

"You think so? I see that you have the upper hand. You will go away and bring back others, too many for me to fight. And that I cannot permit. All I must do to

begin the destruct sequence is to say, 'This is Frost. Destruct.'" As he spoke, the computers in the room hummed to new life. "You see, Captain Solo? For you and your friends, it is already too late."

"Now he really is bluffing," Lando said scornfully.

But Han shook his head. "No, I don't think so. He knows we've got the upper hand, and there isn't any other way to keep us from leaving and bringing back help. So he's going to keep anybody from getting the treasure. He's going to blow it up--and us with it, if we don't get the hell out of here fast."

Frost smiled benignly. "Ah, what a perceptive young man. Maybe you will go far, if you leave right now. Otherwise, of course, you will be dead, and perception will be of no further use to you. " He smiled. "As for me, I have been here a long time. Immortality is a lonely business, and I think I am glad to have it ended." His voice sharpened. "You have ten minutes."

Ten minutes. Not enough time to get to the treasure, barely enough time to get out of the building. Veryn chattered urgently to the rest of his people and they fled, chirping in fear. Veryn evidently believed Frost's story. Frost ignored them. "Computer, time until destruct is implemented?"

"Nine minutes, forty-five seconds," intoned a mechanical voice from someplace in the wall.

Han leveled the blaster at Frost. "Shut it down."

Frost only laughed. "No, Captain Solo. I will not shut it down."

"C'mon." Lando grabbed Han's arm. "Let's get out of here. He really does mean it. Much as I want that treasure, I want to stay alive a whole lot more."

Han hesitated for a second, his eyes on Frost, who returned his look with a tireless, unblinking stare, then he turned in disgust and led the way from the room, Lando and Chewie right behind him.

They ran all the way to the airlock, and hesitated a second as they realized they no longer had their breathing masks. But thin air was better than being dead, and there was enough air out there--barely--to make it back to the *Falcon*, so Chewie pushed the button to activate the airlock, and they went through, joined at the last minute by a group of grey people.

They were going out the main door when the explosions began, starting with a muted rumble somewhere deep beneath their feet, a quivering and shaking that seemed to draw nearer with a continuous roar like a ship coming in to land. The stairs danced and trembled beneath their feet as they stumbled to the ground, their lungs already beginning to burn from the thinness of the atmosphere. The grey people scattered in all directions without even a glance at the humans, and they seemed to have no trouble breathing. Half supporting each other, Han, Chewie and Lando ran as the explosions grew louder behind them.

The building went up as if hit by proton torpedoes, the dim sky lit by the brilliant glare of the blast. "Run," gasped Lando. "For all we know, the whole planet could be set to go up."

Chest heaving in an attempt to draw oxygen into his starving lungs, Han ran. And then something heavy, a piece of flying debris from the explosion, came screaming down out of the flaming sky and hit him. There wasn't even time to feel pain before everything was blotted out by darkness.

"He's coming around, Chewie. I told you he'd be all right."

Lando was speaking quietly, but to Han it was as painful as a shriek. His head felt like someone was using it for a drum, beating a vicious tattoo, but even as he registered that, he realized his lungs were no longer protesting and that he was on his bunk on the *Falcon* and, from the feel of the ship, safely in space.

Without opening his eyes, he mumbled, "We got away?"

"We got away," Lando confirmed. "I thought the whole planet was going to go up for a minute there, but only the complex did. Your little friends got away, I think. They ought to be able to get along without Frost--probably they'll even do better without him."

"Yeah, but if the complex is gone, how're they going to get along?" Han wondered. His head hurt and he didn't feel up to any of this, but Velyn and his people had helped them get away, and he wanted to know.

"True, it's that much of a place, " Lando replied, "but I think they can make it. They don't need a whole lot to survive--things do grow there, and there may even be other complexes." He grinned. "They're survivors, pal. They did better at getting away from the complex than you did. You got clobbered by a piece of rubble, but you're lucky; nothing's broken, not even that thick head of yours. "

How do you feel? fussed Chewie, bending over him in concern.

Han squinted up at the Wookiee. "You look a little fuzzy around the edges, Chewie, but I suppose that'll go away. And maybe my head'll stop feeling like it's been used for target practice..." Something occurred to him and he turned to look at Calrissian, who was leaning with folded arms against the wall. "You and your Sith-be-damned treasure, Calrissian. You owe me a helluva lot of money. When're you going to pay up?"

"Right now soon enough?" Lando asked and dug in his pocket. When he opened his hand, three Rhondian bloodstones, a lot smaller than the one Frost had held, lay in his palm. "I grabbed these when you were getting all sentimental over the one Frost killed. It was all I could manage. One for you, one for Chewie, and one for me."

Han eyed the stone Lando handed him with a combination of anger and disgust. "Come on, Calrissian. This won't do more'n pay my expenses on this trip."

"It's one third of the treasure, Solo. Either way I'm clear. I meet expenses and give you and Chewie two thirds." He looked at his own small stone and a crafty look came into his eyes. "Listen, Han, do you think if we went back and started digging in the rubble we might..."

Han sat bolt upright in spite of his headache. "Get out of here!" he yelled. "I'm not going to listen to any more of your stupid ideas. I've had it with you!" And then, reluctantly, he began to smile. He looked from the jewel to Chewie and saw his own amusement mirrored in his blue eyes. He let out a snort of laughter. "Treasure," he sputtered. "Lando, remind me never to go treasure hunting with you again."

For a minute, the three of them laughed like idiots. "Treasure," Han laughed again, still grinning when Chewie grabbed Lando to lead him from the room so that Han could rest. It was going to be a long trip home.

End

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