

# The Universal Language

by Mary Jean Holmes  
begun July 31, 1986

for Wanda

This is original fan work, intended solely for the entertainment of the readers, and in no way intends any infringement on copyrights, trademarks, or licenses held by George Lucas, Lucasfilm Ltd., Twentieth Century Fox Studios, or the holders of any other legal rights or licenses pertaining to the Star Wars property. "Star Wars" and all related names are trademarks of Lucasfilm Ltd.

**NO PART OF THIS STORY MAY BE REPRODUCED OR REPOSTED BY OR IN ANY MEDIUM WITHOUT THE EXPRESS WRITTEN CONSENT OF THE AUTHOR.**

Author's Note: The name "Zair" is a deliberate homage to the works of Anne McCaffrey.

I

Sidereal Era, AS 5685  
Rhendaan

"Well, that's it, buddy," Han Solo reported to his partner with the grim mnest of overtones. "We've got just enough money left for one more hop to some place with a better Market than this rock, or a good couple of nights on the town to make us forget our sorrows. Which'll it be?"

Still aching from the recent abuse he had taken during his time in and escape from the clutches of Barrik Slavers — a thoroughly horrid incident he had gotten out of only through the diligence and inventiveness of his Corellian friend and Clanbrother — Chewbacca wasn't especially in the mood to discuss impending bankruptcy and its attendant problems, but it didn't seem that he had much of a choice. Shifting restlessly on his oversized bunk while Han made use of the cabin's computer terminal, he became even more restless for a moment — stars, but his bruised hip still ached, not to mention all the myriad smaller bumps and nicks and wounds across his backside — before settling down with a resigned sigh.

"I don't see that we have much of a choice," the Wookiee grumbled, displeased. "Using it to enjoy ourselves would be as good as throwing it away, and once it's gone, what would we do? You said it yourself, Han: the Market on this planet stinks — and I don't know about you, but I don't think I'm in any condition to enjoy *anything*, right now. I say we find a better port, or at least buy ourselves a cargo we can turn over at some sort of a profit."

The look on Solo's face was uninterpretable to his co-pilot, though Chewie rather fancied it held something of amusement. "I thought you'd say something like that," he said, shaking his head, "but for once, I don't see where being practical is gonna get us. If you *had* to name your own drop-off point with the Jhaal, couldn't you've at least picked some place a little bit more lively? Zhindiraan? Toprawa? Even Kessel, for frith's sake?"

"I fail to see what's so bad about Rhendaan," the Wookiee said a bit airily, defending the planet he had selected to be dumped on when his captor, Mata'ahi Zwesthu Jhaal, had finally been forced to release him.

Han snorted, a colorful expression of his opinion. "It's as squeaky clean as an Alderaani Court Gown, that's what's so bad about it. Nothing but corporate interests and charity efforts and forthright-upright citizenry as far as the eye can see. Which means nothing around that not-so-upright you and me can manage to scrape a living off. Everything's by the book on this rock. Want a job with the port? They want to see your Guild Card first. Try to beg work off the local companies? They want to see that *and* your police record. Go to find help from the charities? Fine, they'll give it to you, but only after they've made you pay for it by bleaching your soul as white as sand on Phyrast. And it'd be easier to find blue skies on Valaspin than it'd be to find anything that much shy of perfectly legal around here." He held up a forefinger and thumb so close together, they were virtually touching. There was a mixture of regret, grudging respect, and annoyance in his short laugh. "Of all the thousands of inhabited worlds you could've chosen, you picked the one world in the Empire where the authorities are actually on the ball. Great choice, Chewie, really great choice."

The furry spacer shifted position again, though his discomfort did not originate from his cuts and contusions. \*Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time,\* he admitted. \*I was only thinking that the nature of the place would work against the Jhaal and her thugs, you know. I didn't realize we were so close to bankruptcy.\*

Han couldn't blame that lack of knowledge on his friend, who had, after all, not been privy to other goings on while he was prisoner to the slaver woman. That admission of innocence did not, however, make Han feel any better about their current predicament. "All right, so you didn't know," he conceded gruffly. "Now you do. And do *you* have any idea on how we're gonna get out of this mess?"

Feeling that he was obliged to help, since the whole situation would not have come to be if he hadn't been foolish enough to let himself get trapped by the Barricks, Chewbacca made a great show of giving the matter thought. \*There must be someone, somewhere on this planet who would be willing to give us some sort of job, however small....\*

The human shook his head. "I'm telling you, I've already checked out all the usual sources, and even any *unusual* ones I could find. This is a straightlaced planet, buddy, as stiff-necked as they come. Either everyone's already full-up with help, or they want to run a full background check on you before they say yes. I can get around records-makers on little nowhere planets like Tatooine, but not in a place this sophisticated. All they have to do is punch a few computer keys, hook up to any Central Registry they want, and I'll be lucky if I don't wind up in solitary, on my way to the Kessel Mines, or in front of a firing squad. No, Chewie. We — *I* can't take the chance, not here, not with the authorities they've got running this place. They're good. *Too* good." The acknowledgment was respectful, if highly grudging.

\*Then it sounds as if we have no choice but to leave, and find a better port of call.\* The blue eyes squinted as their owner tried to remember the local stellar neighborhood. He failed; such affairs really fell into Han's area of expertise. \*Where could we go?\*

The Corellian grumbled his displeasure. "That's the problem. It's not as though we're in the middle of nowhere — though God only knows you picked the right part of space for *that*, too. Endor Quadrant ain't exactly the busiest and most profitable end of the galaxy. Here, we're near the edge with the K'halaman Quadrant, so we've got three dozen systems to choose from without wasting our last credit on supplies. They've all got some sort of viable Market — but every last one of 'em's got some sort of major problem, too." As he'd spoken, he'd called up a chart of their stellar environs on the computer screen. Tired of sitting on his sore backside, Chewbacca limped over to stand behind his partner so he could see more clearly.

One half of the monitor screen showed a colorfully keyed map of the stellar region; Chewie could see that there were indeed no less than three dozen inhabited stellar systems within reach of the *Falcon's* systems and finances. They glowed brilliant white against the blue of the screen with their names only slightly less brightly displayed beside them: Lyswyn, Aglix, K'raan, Wakail....

Chewie clicked his tongue in recognition of what Han had said. This was the part of space officially known as the Far Reaches, province of the Emperor's favorite Governor, Grand Moff Tarkin; colloquially it was known as Imperial Row, for virtually all the worlds in question showed their strong support of the Empire in some fashion that worked against small, not-always-legal businessmen like himself and Han. The region was replete with Imperial prison worlds, Imperial military bases, Imperial research complexes, Imperial training facilities.... These were planets most smugglers and Independents chose to avoid, for the potential profits in no way balanced the definite and unavoidable risks. Occasionally, a job arose that paid well enough to make a pilot willing to take the risks, but for the most part, the Row was simply not wealthy or interesting enough to make operating in it worth one's while. Leave it to the Guilds and Corporations that made their homes there; the Independents and Underworld by and large wanted no part of it.

The other half of the screen displayed pertinent data on the worlds in question; Chewie had to lean over his partner's shoulder to read the tiny font, but, as he scanned the information, he noted that a few worlds at the lower fringe of their range were not among those generally considered to be a part of the Row. Most of them were too poor to make a trip there worth their while; but one....

He reached out and, with one furry finger, tapped the bright spot in question, just barely within the green-shaded area marking the Endor Quadrant. \*What about Phan Shilis?\*

He didn't need to see Han's reaction; the aural response was expressive enough: clipped, terse, disgusted. "Forget it."

\*Why? There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with it. It's thriving industrially, it's not part of the Row, they're politically neutral — look, you even have it marked as having a strong Market, both above and below board. True, they've got an Academy, but it's only a small one in a remote region of the planet, and I don't see any indication of an excessive Imperial presence....\*

"I said forget it." The human was most insistent. "We're *not* going to Phan Shilis."

His adamancy puzzled the Wookiee, who glanced at him with an open frown. \*I can't see why not. Look, you asked me to offer a suggestion on what we should do. Well, I'm offering one — and it appears as though it's the only viable option we have available.\*

"It's not viable." One could almost hear him gritting his teeth.

\*Why not? It seems to fill all our requirements....\*

"It just isn't."

\*That's not a very good answer, brother. Is your reason for giving it equally poor?\*

There had been some genuine aspersion in Chewie's words. Han looked up at him sharply, catching the sarcasm; he then grimaced and turned back to the screen. For a few moments, his fingers drummed restlessly against the hard desktop. At length, he sighed, a sound more closely resembling a feral growl. "It's a *t'chazzitk*."

Humanoid blinked uncomprehendingly at human. After the almost-decade he had spent in Solo's company, he had picked up a fair amount of Corellian, much of it colloquial, but this word was new to him. \*A what?\*

"A *t'chazzitk*, a Motherhole. A planet that's not outright beholden to the ACS, but's so tight with 'em, business-wise, that the place's full of Motherworlders, keeping an eye on their assets." His face twisted into a most unbecoming expression of distaste; he looked very much as if some foul odor was lingering in his nostrils. "I'd rather take my chances on the Row than in a Motherhole, Chewie. I've had enough trouble with Corellian caste bigotry to last for the rest of my life, your life, and your kid's life combined."

Now understanding, Chewbacca couldn't blame his partner for his feelings, but he honestly thought that they might not have another choice. If their options consisted only of trying to work the almost-unfindable seams of the Row or putting up with a little unpleasantness on Phan Shilis.... Something occurred to him. \*Have you ever *been* to Phan Shilis, my friend?\*

He wasn't surprised when Han shook his head.

The Wookiee snorted. \*Well, now I *know* you're being unreasonable. How can you pass such judgments on the social climate there if you've never even seen the place?\*

Solo opened his mouth; Chewie waved one paw to forestall his excuse. \*And don't tell me you heard it from someone else. I know precisely how many Corellian friends you have — five — and how many of them share your particular unenviable status: none. Even if they *have* spoken to you of this planet, I sincerely doubt they would have any cause to offer up reports of social bigotry — and even if they had, I'd still say it's a foolish reason for avoiding the place altogether. By the Eldest, brother, can you actually be insecure enough to want to risk almost sure apprehension on the Row just to steer clear of some possible — and only *possible*, mind you — social discomfort in a much safer port? Honestly, Han, I hadn't thought you to be that silly — or that childish.\*

To be utterly frank, Han hadn't thought of himself in that particular unflattering light, either, and he couldn't say that he liked it. So, despite his misgivings — which he couldn't shake no matter how much he told himself to grow up and ignore them — the *Millennium Falcon* left Rhendaan and, three days later, arrived at Port Qavid on Phan Shilis.

\*\*\*\*\*

In spite of Chewbacca's wise advice and encouragements, the lavender-skyed world of Phan Shilis was every bit as bad as Han had been dreading. Unbeknownst to them, the local economy — normally in a state many worlds would envy — was, when they arrived, in the throes of a recession that had been brought about due to a breakdown in diplomatic relations between Phan Shilis and Vriaath. The latter was not what one could call any sort of key in interplanetary politics, but it was important to the Shilisians for one very significant reason: being a rocky, almost strictly industrial world with very little in terms of arable land, Phan Shilis relied heavily on imports from other systems to provide the edibles required for the survival of its many people. Being exceptionally fertile and largely agricultural in nature, Vriaath was able to provide much of what the Shilisians needed; moreover, it was a relatively close world, which meant lower marketplace prices for the average Shilisian consumer.

When an impasse had been reached between the importers and exporters on their respective planets, the Vriaathi had decided to declare an embargo until such time as their Shilisian counterparts came to their senses. With a major and vital part of their food chain suddenly gone — for thus far, negotiations had been fruitless — the importers had been forced to seek new and inevitably more distant — and more expensive — sources of food for their people. The result had been disastrous for the Shilisian economy; the normally plentiful jobs in the various local companies were now scarce, as employers and employees alike tightened their belts against the serious change in their most essential cost of living.

In less than a week, Han discovered for himself just how bad things had gotten in the Shilisian job market. Knowing that he was treading thin ice on this planet no matter which way the road turned, he looked first to the legitimate rather than illegal employment sources, figuring that if he was caught doing anything the least bit larcenous while on planet, the doubtless bigoted authorities would not hesitate to — and would likely delight in — condemning and sentencing him with neither trial nor hearing. *Zhak'rut'n* — Outcastes — were, after all, the lowest of the low in Corellian Motherworld minds, not even worth the effort of favoring with the most basic of human dignities. Stuck here as he was, he was not about to behave in any fashion that might, for him, have the most disastrous of results.

Being on his best behavior, however, was not of great help, as he soon discovered. A fair number of the jobs available for Independent spacers such as himself were so poor paying that it would not have been worth his while to even inquire after them; the *Falcon* would consume more in resources than the offered wages would cover, and they no longer had the means to cover the rest just to get off Phan Shilis to a better port. A small number of better paying offers were available, but without exception, they originated from companies, firms, concerns, and individuals with strong Motherworld ties.

Han ignored such offers for two full days until Chewie exerted several types of pressure against him. Swallowing his pride as best he could — and it gagged him thoroughly to swallow as much as he did — Han investigated nine listings in a third as many days, and soon came face to face with the parochialism he had expected. Before they would even consider signing him on, each of the employers wanted to do a complete background check, for reference purposes, they claimed — and that, as far as Han was concerned, was that. A man could only hide so much of his past from full and comprehensive computer searches. If a person was willing to take his Oath concerning his skills and trustworthiness — and such was often the case among Independents, who often had no extensive centralized background to which they could point — then things would proceed smoothly. If they weren't willing....

Han had had plenty of past experience with these straight-and-narrow employers, and he knew that as soon as the word "check" entered into the conversation, he was sunk. If they weren't troubled by his disgraced Corellian roots, then they were appalled by the dishonorable nature of his exit from the military, or his rather lengthy police record — that most of the listed accusations hadn't ended in sentences or fines didn't appear to matter to most people — or the plain and simple suspicion, often mentioned, that he had dealings with the underworld. A few were even horrified by his Wookiee friend and partner, and several had serious misgivings about the appearance of his ship. One or two had even said no on the basis of his appearance alone. No, no amount of pressure from Chewbacca was going to make this tack work. Han knew exactly where he stood in instances such as this, and he knew that pounding his head against an armored hull would be more pleasant than trying to wheedle work out of some narrow-minded *t'tchazikre*.

Five days after their arrival on Phan Shilis, what was left of their finances was showing alarming signs of imminent depletion, being absorbed as they were by the inevitable costs of daily living. Although he was not in anyway involved with the fiscal accounting of their partnership, Chewbacca received a fairly accurate picture of their impending penury when he woke on the sixth morning and found his captain eating a breakfast that consisted largely of items from their emergency stores. His initial shock, however, was quickly overcome by the smug satisfaction the Wookiee felt over his activities of the previous evening.

\*Things can't be *that* bad,\* he said with certainty as he entered the main compartment and greeted his glum companion. \*I thought you were going to spend last night ingratiating yourself to one of our potential employers.\*

Han made a sound that couldn't actually be called rude, but came painfully close. "Didn't work," he mumbled around the rim of his cup — which, from his behavior, Chewie suspected might be filled with something intended to numb the brain. That worried the Wookiee, for Han seldom drank to forget, having had sufficient negative experience with such foolishness. If he was trying to get drunk, especially this early in the morning, his growing depression must be black, indeed. "An' if we waste more money on supplies we don't need—" A sweeping gesture with one hand implied their bounty of tasteless emergency rations. "—the Port authorities won't hesitate a nanosecond to impound the *Falcon* for monies owed."

That was all too true of the Port Qavid authorities. Chewbacca acknowledged it with a grunting sigh, one compounded of submission and relief, for as Han settled his cup on the table again, the humanoid saw that it contained nothing but Corellian *shivval* — *shivval* so dark a green that the herbal brew was undoubtedly strong enough to keep him awake for a week, but otherwise harmless. At ease again, the Wookiee grinned toothily at his partner, who seemed oblivious to his good cheer. \*Well, then, perhaps I have good news to offer, if you don't.\*

The remark grabbed Han's attention; he looked up at his Clanbrother from curiosity, saw his self-satisfied expression, and scowled. "What good news?"

\*I had better luck than you last night, it seems.\*

Momentary hope brightened Solo's dour expression. "You found something?"

Chewie was loath to shake his head, but had to. \*Not quite, but I did find us a lead. While you were trying to find a way into the good graces of those hard-headed Haradams, I decided that perhaps it would be wise if one of us scoured some of the less reputable parts of town.\*

A whistly, almost disgusted sounding breath shrieked through the human's teeth. "Yeah, I'm beginning to get the idea that we might have to go looking for something a little less... legal, even if it *is* risky on a rock like this. We're certainly getting nowhere by keeping our noses clean."

The furry shoulders lifted and fell. \*Perhaps, but that wasn't why I went. Not everyone who lives in the shadows are themselves shady characters, brother — and you should know that better than most. No, I just was thinking that the back alleys might boast a few small businessmen with a need for our talents and less inclination to care if we're spotless or not.\*

"Sure, there might be a few, but I doubt if they've got the capital to offer a decent wage. Look at most of the jobs that the big operations have posted. They wouldn't pay enough for us to clear our port bill before leaving planet."

\*I remember, but I still thought it worth the effort.\* He did not seem bothered by Han's cynicism, perhaps because he was armed with a weapon to disprove it. \*And it paid off.\*

It took a moment or two for the comment to register; when it did, the hope returned to the young human's bitter expression. "It did?"

The maned head bobbed in solid confirmation. \*Not in a job, precisely, but in a lead to one. Last night, I met a rather friendly Taraxxi in one of the smaller entertainment concerns in the Far West Portside district. You know that I once shipped out under a Taraxxi captain; he taught me my first lessons in stellar piloting and navigation....\*

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard the family history before," Han interrupted with a Wookiee-like growl. "Get to the point!"

Chewie did so, though with no apparent haste. \*At any rate, Hhrrandvi — that was the Taraxxi's name, Hhrrandvi — is a distant bond-cousin to my Captain Ahrragh. He was pleased to find someone on Phan Shilis who knew of his family and—\*

"And does he own a business that could offer us work?" Han spoke politely, but there was no doubt that he was gritting his teeth with impatience.

\*No,\* the Wookiee admitted. \*But his employer has very influential connections at several companies here on Phan Shilis that often have need of outside help to complete contracts on time. At the moment, Astadar Metals has a very large order to fill, and Hhrrandvi believes that if he put in a good word for us, we could get our pick of any jobs they have available for Independent shipment....\*

The pleasure in Chewie's voice, however, was quickly diminished by the indescribable expression that contorted his captain's face. "Did you say Astadar Metals?" He winced as his co-pilot nodded. "Forget it, then," he said with utter finality. "There's no way we'd land a job with them, no matter *who* this guy knows on the staff."

Chewbacca was genuinely surprised by Han's attitude. \*Why not? I kept nothing from Hhrrandvi, and he didn't seem to think it would matter. He himself holds down a second job on Astadar's docks, and they have shown no prejudice toward him for being a non-human....\*

"It matters, Chewie, it matters. 'Cause even if they *did* offer us the best damn job in the universe out of the goodness of their hearts, there's no way in heaven or hell or any of the planes in between that I'm gonna work for that *hyaavb'dian'dt* operation."

Surprise became a sort of horror. \*Why? Because they're an interest of your Motherworlders....?\*

"Not exactly," Han admitted. "Because they're an interest of the Astreds. You remember 'em, Chewie," he added to the blank look on his Clanbrother's furry face. "Nairil Astred was the *zvind'wat* Head of the Social Council who let my dear old Commander Greysky and his cronies talk him into giving me the royal boot on my behind. His *a'k aic kh 'n* son Iltim's got his job now, and he's a perfect clone of his old man, sitting in judgment over little nothings like me, handing out decisions left and right to keep the upper castes happy and the Empire off his neck." There was none of the sarcastic humor that had first touched his words left in his tone, or in his expression. His eyes reflected nothing but a cold and intensely bitter hatred for the family who had, without a second thought, brought Han's career and self-pride to virtual ruin.

Chewbacca had faced that general hatred before, but never aimed toward a specific individual. \*Yes, I understand all that,\* he said with deep and heartfelt sympathy, \*but I genuinely doubt that the man really even knew who you were....\*

"Oh, I don't doubt for a second that he didn't. And that makes it worse. He probably didn't give a single thought to what he'd be doing to me as a person, but that didn't stop him. He just went ahead and did what he thought would be most convenient."

\*Which gives you due cause to despise the person. But his entire family? I don't think that any of them were involved. And we *need* this work, Han....\*

"Not that badly, we don't." His words were clipped, terse, unswayingly final. "I wouldn't go begging to anyone even remotely beholden to the Astreds if I was starving and on my last leg. They've caused me enough trouble."

\*But—\*

The amber green eyes turned toward the humanoid, boring through the blue with their sheer intensity of emotion. "And would *you* want to humble yourself and go scraping to Kaavaril slavers, looking for help, for work? It's the same thing, Clanbrother. I've swallowed my pride often enough in my life; it's starting to stick in my throat. And, damn it all, I won't do it to benefit the Astreds, not if it means putting the ship in storage and hiring myself out as contract labor to the mines. I won't."

That he would willingly risk the loss of his beloved *Falcon* put considerable weight behind the Corellian's declaration; Chewbacca did not doubt that he meant it, every word of it. And his mention of the slavers who had stolen so many Wookiees, himself included, gave Chewie a clear and empathetic understanding of Han's position, and his feelings. He would not press the issue, then, not even though it meant taking the less legal and therefore riskier route towards passage off this world — but he also would not forget it. Nothing was certain, he knew with old Wookiee wisdom, until it had become a part of the past.

## II

"Whaddaya mean, it's no deal?"

It was full dark in Port Qavid, three days after Chewie had first mentioned the possibility of a job with Astadar Metals, and Han's mood was deteriorating from bad-gray to foul-black with each passing minute. Given the general nature of business and The Business on Phan Shilis, finding connections to the local Market had not been easy. Other than his new friend the Taraxxi, neither human nor Wookiee knew anyone on planet, and Hhrrandvi was not the sort who could help them make contact with the local underworld. Prior experience with shady sorts had been their only lead, and it had taken time for the pair to observe enough to determine where to go, and when.

They had finally found it in the Near South Portside District, a small and typically disreputable locale frequented by the usual assortment of portside warehouses, entertainment dens, and bordellos. Although much of the clientele were nothing more than straightforward, non-Market dock and ship hands, Chewbacca had noted a somewhat better, less seamy establishment among the dregs, and had accurately assumed it to be somehow different from its neighbors. It was, and turned out to be the rendezvous point for a smuggling trade based on Phan Shilis. With no slaving or even less attractive Business going on, Han felt confident in making discreet inquiries of those who had apparently come looking to do business.

For the most part, Han had abandoned every lead before reaching the negotiations stage, for he was adept at determining whether or not he would want or be able to take the job in question, long before actual offers had been made. One, however, had seemed promising. He had approached the man on his first night in the den, and had discovered no obstacles — either physical, monetary, or ethical — which might prevent an eventual deal. The fellow — a wiry, shortish mainbreed human who worked as a gemologist for one of the larger mines — was relatively new to the Market. Over the years, he had surreptitiously appropriated portions of the gemstone lots he'd been sent by his employers for examination and appraisal. Once or twice, when he'd accumulated enough — enough, in his mind, to make the risk worthwhile — he'd sought out the local underworld to help him smuggle the jewels to a friend and fence on another, not too distant planet. His overall innocence and ignorance of the Business was, Han felt, a factor to his and Chewbacca's benefit, for the portion of gemstones he was offering in payment could, in certain markets which Han knew well, draw far more than the man felt they were worth.

Taking this all into consideration, the Corellian was certain they would be able to strike a bargain and would as a consequence soon be well away from this unsettling world. He had returned tonight as had the man — Myddre — to finalize negotiations. All had gone smoothly, until the little fellow had asked to see his clearance mark. Han hadn't known what he was talking about, which soon became obvious. Myddre then turned uneasy, and announced that he was withdrawing his offer, which had elicited Solo's shocked, almost angry outburst.

"I mean just what I said," the fellow replied, his brown eyes darting about nervously, fearing they had drawn undesirable attention. "If you can't show me the clearance mark, I can't do business with you."

Han's almost anger shifted to exasperation at the man's apparent naivete. "And I'm telling you, you're crazy," he hissed at a much lower volume. "We're not talking about me carrying a load of vran nectar, man. No port authority's going to give clearance for *this* kind of business."

Myddre swallowed visibly. "Of course not. But you need... you should have... you must know..." He gulped down his words as he realized the misunderstanding. "You *don't* know, do you?" he asked as comprehension dawned. "Are you new to this planet, Captain?"

"I told you I'd just put in last week, didn't I? Or weren't you listening?"

"Yes, but I'd assumed you'd just returned.... Oh, heavens, this puts an entirely different light on matters, doesn't it?"

"I'd say it does," Han agreed, his jaw tight, "'cause you're not making one whole hell of a lot of sense. What the frith are you talking about, anyway?"

Myddre glanced about again, now clearly agitated and wondering if he should remain in Solo's company. But he remained long enough to explain. "The clearance mark, Utar's clearance mark. I was told when I first approached the... Businessmen that he was in charge of all local operations, and everyone had to go through him."

Solo's brows arched expressively. "A crime lord?" He hadn't heard that one operated out of Phan Shilis, which surprised him, since he or Chewie generally heard everything that might be important in their line of work.

Myddre didn't like his choice of words; it made him ill at ease to hear such a frank admission of what he was about. He cleared his throat and squirmed a bit before continuing. "I wouldn't know," he hedged. "All I was told is that Surial Utar is in charge, and no one works the Business on Phan Shilis without his clearance. That's why I need to see the mark. Utar gives it to everyone he's cleared for operation. Without it..." His voice trailed off expressively; the man plainly believed that dire consequences would befall all who did not comply.

But Han wasn't paying attention to his reaction; he was having reactions of his own to the person Myddre had mentioned. The name Surial Utar was not unknown to him; indeed, Han had strong and very recent reason to know and hate it. When Chewbacca had been captured by Mata'ahi and her Barrik Slavers, the person who had offered to purchase the Wookiee had been one Kier Rintoul, a pirate of widespread and despicable reputation, known throughout the Business as a scum among scum, an opportunist and megalomaniac who believed that no one and nothing could stand in his way. By forcing Mata'ahi to release her prisoner before delivery could be made, Han had done just that, stood in the *zvind'wat's* way, but the entire incident still rankled deeply in him, and his desire to exact some form of payment from Rintoul was strong. Surial Utar was a close minion of Rintoul's; Han knew it, and was suddenly very interested in knowing the capacity in which he served the pirate here on Phan Shilis.

Myddre, however, wasn't precisely a font of information. From what he was able and willing to supply, however, Han could deduce several things: Utar was here as a representative of Rintoul, who had set himself up in this region of space as direct competition for Jabba the Hutt. Utar, as dark-hearted and vicious a thug as ever had sullied the starlanes, had managed to bully all the local operators into compliance with his demands; hence, a portion of every shady deal that occurred on Phan Shilis ended up in Utar's — and, eventually, Rintoul's — pocket.

There was apparently nothing to be done for it; exposing Utar to the authorities meant exposing all the relative innocents as well, and thus far, no one had managed to shake him off. Phan Shilis wasn't rich enough to warrant much of Jabba's interest, so the Hutt let them be. And without the sort of strong-arm backing another crime lord like the Hutt could supply, Utar was here to stay.

This did not please Han, partly because he loathed Rintoul, and partly because he had personal cause to dislike his underling. Several years before, Utar — who had a passion for speeder racing that rivaled Jabba's taste for watching death — had thwarted Han's almost surefire attempt at winning a fair amount of money in a track wager when members of an Utar-backed team had sabotaged (allegedly, the records said, for no concrete proof had ever been found) the vehicle of Han's favorite. The loss of money had been nothing compared to the loss of pride the Corellian had suffered, for his failure had occurred before the eyes of his gambler friend Calrissian, to whom he had been trying to prove that his winning of the *Millennium Falcon* had been no fluke. He desperately wanted vengeance against Rintoul, and he was beginning to wonder if he might not be able to do it through vengeance against Utar.

A thought occurred to Han as he listened to Myddre's anxious explanations: if Utar had set himself up as the undisputed man-in-charge of all Business dealings here on Phan Shilis, he might be none too pleased to discover that his omnipotence was not as complete as he had thought. There must be more people like Myddre on planet, small time, petty larcenists who would have use for the services of an inventive fellow like Han. With no surcharge needed to line other pockets, he could undercut the syndicate pilots by a fair amount, enough to make the Myddres of this world think twice before letting themselves be bullied into submission to Utar's demands. Oh, it wouldn't be as big an operation as that slime-bucket's, but it would be a loss of money, of prestige — of power. It would hit both master and minion where it hurt — in their egos — and that thought appealed to Han — very much.

It did not, however, appeal to Myddre, who was on one hand terrified of getting caught by his employer or the authorities, and on the other stood in mortal fear for his life due to threats leveled by Utar. Han could see that, though the man was timid enough to be a good target for the "cooperate or else" warnings of the syndicate, he was also greedy enough to want to continue his thefts. Han used that to his own advantage.

"But you're not thinking, man," he insisted when Myddre claimed, for the dozenth time, that he couldn't dare cross Rintoul's minions. "If you'd stop being so terrified of all that hot air they're outgassing, it might occur to you that you're getting rooked."

"But I've never been asked for an unreasonable commission..." the gemologist began.

The smuggler snorted. "Unreasonable? You're being robbed blind, and you've been too stupid to notice it. Why, this job of yours is a milkrun — any pilot worth his Credentials could do it one armed and blindfolded."

"But they'd have no reason to cheat me," Myddre insisted, beginning to sound just a bit uncertain.

Han laughed. "They've got *every* reason. They're Syndicate scrapers, not Independent, like me. This is a look-out-for-yourself business, legit or not. You ask whatever the market can bear, and expect to get chewed down in the bargaining. But if a fellow's stupid enough to pay what's asked, no questions.... Well, a good Business man gets to thinking he could make this work for him. And if he's getting sucked for payoffs to some syndicate, he'll have twice as much reason to take advantage of the poor slob who doesn't know any better. No, you're getting a raw deal around here, Myddre, at least with these idiots who kowtow to Utar. Me, I'm not under his thumb. I don't have any payoffs to make. So I could let you off with... oh, three-quarters of what you offered. More profit for you; business for me."

It was plain from the way his eyes widened when Han said "three-quarters" that the smuggler now had the jeweler's undivided attention and his active interest; but not all his uncertainty left him. "And you aren't afraid of Utar? You don't think he'll give you trouble for not cooperating?"

The Corellian's gesture was one of dismissing an insignificant annoyance. "Nothing I can't handle. What do you say to that, then? Still interested?"

Myddre was indeed; as Han had anticipated, greed overcame fear. They reached terms — which were still more than adequate, in Han's opinion — sealed the bargain, and ordered up drinks to celebrate. After two, Myddre left; Han lingered to finish a third. As he reviewed what he had just done and savored how his plans would affect Utar, he smiled to himself.

It was a shame Chewie hadn't come along; his imposing presence might've been enough to convince the reedy little gemologist that Rintoul's lackey indeed presented no threat, but the Wookiee had made arrangements to see his new Taraxxi friend that night, and Han hadn't been inclined to argue. Let the fur-brained sop keep pursuing his notion of getting work with Astadar; Han knew for a fact that he would get nowhere with that profitless line of inquiry, while he himself had managed to strike them a lucrative bargain. Pleased with himself, he drained his glass and left.

On the whole, Han was not an incautious person; hot-headed, perhaps, impulsive, rather inclined to think with his adrenal system rather than his brains — but he knew the business he was in, and was well aware of the dangers inherent in both it and its frequented locations. Hence, he had not gone into the Near South Portside district unprepared for its inevitable roughness. Shilisian law did not suffer the open carrying of arms, but convention had never stopped Han from following instincts that, for years, had protected his hide. Lacking the extra set of eyes and senses that Chewbacca usually provided, he was doubly on his guard — and therefore was not taken by surprise when he saw a group of unpleasant looking beings heading his way from behind.

The street they were on was brilliantly lit, as a part of the local anti-crime efforts, but the Corellian didn't fool himself into thinking that it would stop any of the persons moving his way, if they were of a mind to attack him. He also wasn't foolish enough to believe that he stood a chance against them. Self-preservation instincts rose once more to the fore, and Han chose to exercise the better part of valor.

Unfortunately, he was new to Phan Shilis and was not terribly familiar with his surroundings. His natural sixth sense told him precisely where he was in terms of compass orientation, but it could not inform him of such things as blind alleys, interfering walls, and dead-end streets. At first, he chose to keep to the main thoroughfare, hoping to reach a full cross street, public transit vehicle, or open business place before they caught up with him, but the tactic failed. Before he could reach any sort of safety, a second group of similar multispecied thugs appeared half a block ahead, also headed his way. Between the determined gait of the gang behind and the stonelike stance of those ahead, Han received the very clear message that *he* was the one they wanted.

A quick glance all 'round toted up the opposition's numbers: eight. And they were eight very tall, very large, very well-muscled and thick-skinned individuals whom Han — a mere slip of a human by comparison — stood precious little chance of facing down with success. The blaster he carried hidden in the folds of his jacket was better suited to the usual close quarters of a cantina brawl. Sizing up this crowd, Han quickly concluded that he could fire his weapon half a centim from their various guts and not cause them more than a moment's discomfort. He was outnumbered, outgunned, and simply out of luck. With nowhere to run, he could only grit his teeth and hope he got out of this alive.

*That's typical back-alley paranoia, he told himself firmly. Maybe they're not after me at all. What could anyone around here want with me, anyway?*

His answers were not long in coming. Once caught in the pincers of the advancing groups, he was herded into the shadows of a narrow entrance corridor to some nondescript warehouse building. Someone — a *zhin*, he thought — grabbed his arm and spun him about for a quick but thorough search; blaster and bootknife and even his microtools were removed from his person in short order. He was then spun around again to face the rather ugly countenance of some large quasi-human, the species of which he couldn't readily identify. Knowing that belligerence would get him nowhere with this mob — and had, in the past, gotten him into real trouble — Han remained outwardly passive but inwardly alert, waiting for any chance that might let him escape.

"Khriim here says he saw you talking to Liam Myddre at the *Silver Shadow*," the being said in a rather sophisticated voice that was totally at odds with its vulgar appearance.

It — Han wasn't sure if it was male or female, and the voice gave no indication, so "it" seemed a safer description — gestured toward the male felinoid behind and to its left. The Corellian squinted at the one indicated. He seemed familiar; Han recalled glimpsing him while talking with Myddre, and remembered it simply because he'd thought the thing might be another Taraxxi. He still wasn't certain, even at close range, for the thing that had spoken was wielding a wicked looking metal rod, four centims thick and as long as his arm. The spokething was waving it around so casually — even though it probably weighed a good three or four kilos — that Han had no doubt he was facing someone well acquainted with earnest street warfare.

And the spokething wasn't the only one. Most of the others carried similar weapons with similar ease; the pair of massive Oharhites even sported the long and heavy bladed ceremonial knives of their people. The local authorities permitted them to be carried, since the blades were supposedly for ritual use only, but Han was quite certain their owners would glibly find religious excuses, should they decide to employ those lethal edges this night.

Genuinely concerned with keeping his skin attached to the rest of his body, Han swallowed the flippant answer he'd been about to use and substituted another, less offensive one. "I was. Why? Is there some rule against it?"

That, he realized the moment after he'd said it, could also be taken as a shade too cocky by what passed for a thug's mind, but there was nothing he could do to take it back. He winced; the spokething replied. "That depends. Myddre's one of the faithful; you're not. What's your business with him?"

"Business?" Han put on his most ingenuous, most innocent face and inflections. "No business. He's an old friend; we were just having a few drinks together and talking over old times."

"Really? That's not what Nahrham says."

The thing's head jerked in the direction of the smallest of his gang, a humanoid taller than Han by several hands'-span, but thinner, wiry looking, jet-black of skin and dressed in that same unrelieved non-hue. A breath hissed between Han's teeth as he sucked it in. By its race and garb, he recognized the creature as a T'Shaaimitite Listener, a parapsychic humanoid with the ability to hear any voice, any language, any pitch — even, to a limited degree, the thoughts of those about him. Ancient spacer wisdom held that certain high off-key pitches — such as that of a human whistling shrilly and breathily through his teeth, or the precise nerve jangling shriek made by a standard comlink gone offline — could disturb a Listener's abilities enough to inhibit them from performing mindscans.

Having used the trick several times before, Han knew the tale to be true, but, grimacing, he also knew it was too late for him to use it now. He hated getting caught in his own lies, but if the T'Shaaimitite had been Listening in, all his dissembling had been for nothing. He began to wish desperately for heavy weaponry, the sudden appearance of friends, the police, even the Imps — anything to get him out of this no-win situation.

The spokething's own face contorted into something that could be called a smile only by inference. He settled one end of his rod on the center of Han's chest, pushing backwards until the human came into contact with the wall; Solo could feel the roughness of the rock scraping against his scalp. "Now, we're not going to be unreasonable. You're new hereabouts; you don't know the ropes. And no one can say we're the sort to take advantage of somebody's ignorance. So, listen up, friend, and listen good: this is Surial Utar's territory. He's boss around here. You want to work the Business, fine — only you work it for Utar, or not at all. He gives you clearance to work, you pay his cut, and there won't be any trouble. But just try cutting in on him...."

The rod came down hard in the middle of the thing's fleshy palm, making a loud smacking sound that echoed against the alley's blank stone walls. Han didn't flinch, but the thug clearly had hoped he would; his feral grin became a deep frown. "Remember: Utar has ears everywhere in this town. Keep talking like you were to Myddre, and he'll hear of it. And you'll pay."

"And I thought you just said you people weren't unreasonable." Again, the words were out a second before common sense told Han to swallow them. Once more, he cursed his own stupidity, though he let not a breath of that reaction show for his opponent's amusement. Let them think he was smart-mouthed; he was, after all, and it was better for his reputation for them to think him recklessly defiant than short-sightedly clumsy of tongue.

A bizarre smirk twisted one corner of the thick lipped slash that was the spokething's mouth. "We aren't," he conceded, glancing to his companions, who grunted in mocking laughter, agreeing. "And that's why we're going to let you off with a warning."

\*\*\*\*\*

When Han woke up in the hospital the next morning, his head was pounding with an obnoxious, repetitive rumbling sound that he wished would go away. As it did not, he concentrated on it for a moment or two, then groaned as he recognized it as a Wookiee's voice. Scolding, as usual, he thought. Well, he wasn't going to take the blame for this mishap, not this time.

"Lay off, Chewie," he whispered after listening to a bit of his partner's lecture on the foolishness of antagonizing the local underworld before he knew more about it. His head felt apt to split; one eye hurt; his gut ached whenever he tried to take a deep breath; and his lower extremities felt worse than stiff. He cracked open his only eye which would do so, to take in his surroundings. The glare of light off the stark white walls was painful; he closed his eye again. "It wasn't my fault. I didn't start this fight."

"\*You say that every time,\*" the Wookiee pointed out drily, "\*but I've seen enough of what leads up to these... encounters of yours to know—\*"

"This time it's different," Han interrupted testily. He was angry with himself and his own past for having given so much credence to that assumption. Like the boy who cried wolf, he found himself the victim of his own reputation. "I swear — on my Oath." He made the traditional Corellian gesture, even though it made his arm and shoulder and elbow and half his back ache to do it. "This time, it really *wasn't* my fault. I was on my best behavior, didn't try to do anything stupid when they had me outgunned and outnumbered. F'r frith's sake, how was I supposed to know Utar had a Listener for a crony?"

Chewbacca had started to protest before Han had even finished; suddenly, he stopped, a squeak slipping from his throat as he strangled the words unuttered. "\*Utar?\*" he repeated. Utmost distaste dripped from his voice like blood from fangs. "\*Surial Utar?\*"

Han nodded, then wished he hadn't. "Rintoul's right hand. When that lead I had told me he's got the Market around here sewn up tighter'n a Hyllythan marriage quilt and has all the Indies bullied into cooperating with 'im, I *had* to do something. I didn't know he had a Listener hanging around, keeping tabs on everything for him. If I had, d'you think I would've been stupid enough to stay there and negotiate to work against him?"

"\*No, you wouldn't have been,\*" the Wookiee conceded. "\*By the One, Han, why didn't you tell me this sooner? I'd've never made you go off alone if I'd known this was Utar's planet.\*"

The genuine apology in the humanoid's voice was enough to appease his captain's bruised sense of justice. "'Cause I didn't know until Myddre told me, last night," he admitted candidly. He didn't want his friend to bear any more of the guilt than was necessary, or deserved. "If I *had* known, I wouldn't've gone without you, either, believe me!"

The pounding in his head had abated somewhat, enough to make it safe to open his eyes. One was still largely swollen shut, but he could manage to open it a sliver without too much agony. He blinked against the brightness for several seconds, then focused on Chewbacca's furry shape, standing beside the nondescript bed in this nondescript medcenter room. Painfully, he attempted to sit up, and was only partially successful; he had to drop back to his elbows before he could achieve a full sitting posture.

\*You shouldn't try to move, brother,\* Chewie suggested with a trace of contriteness. \*You aren't in very good shape.\*

"I'm alive, aren't I?"

The droll humor in the statement brought a small chuckle to the Wookiee's lips. \*True enough, and despite all cuts and contusions, you needn't worry about permanently losing your status as the most handsome rogue in this arm of the galaxy — but for now, you aren't in one piece. And you should save your strength for later.\*

Han had closed his eyes again, exhausted by the effort of sitting up as much as he had. The puzzling remark caused them to reopen. "'Save my strength for later?'" he repeated. "Why? I'm not running any marathons today, I promise!"

\*Which is also true. But we must leave before the midhour, and I don't think I'll be able to carry you all the way back to the ship.\*

Puzzled became appalled. Leave by the midhour? "Why?" was all the human could ask.

Extreme disgust narrowed the Wookiee's eyes and bared his fangs. \*Local regulations. We are not citizens, nor employees of any company or concern who would pay our bills. We have neither sufficient cash nor credit to cover any debts you might incur by remaining in hospital; we do not qualify for Shilisian general aid, nor for Imperial hardship assistance, not since it is clear you are not in danger of death. We have no choice but to leave.\* From his voice, that situation rankled in him as deeply as Han's hatred of Rintoul.

It didn't sit well with Han, either, but he had had a stomach full of social injustices while still on Corellia; these things no longer surprised him. Muttering impotent curses against the narrow-mindedness of bureaucracy (especially ACS bureaucracy), he once more opened his eyes to assess his personal damage.

It wasn't too bad, all things considered, mostly bad bumps, shallow cuts, and very colorful bruises, but his right leg — the one that had felt impossibly stiff — was encased from hip to ankle in a bioplas cast. The thing was more sturdy and sophisticated than old-fashioned plaster affairs and was designed to speed healing as much as possible, but it was still cumbersome, clumsy — by and large the method used when a bonefuser was not available, or when the patient was too indigent to afford or be worth the waste of more sophisticated medical care.

Noting this and the medcenter's diligence in giving him only the most necessary and basic of attention, Han's curses became more prismatic, and were given a counterpoint of Chewbacca's own angry grumbles. But there was nothing to be done for it. They *didn't* have the money, they *weren't* the sort generally considered worth the lavishing of expensive treatment, and as itinerants, they weren't in any position to force the issue. Demeaning though this was, they'd be given no sympathy if they argued or demanded better, but Han made an addition to his private mental ledger of payment owed, to be extracted from Utar and Rintoul at the earliest opportunity.

### III

Before noon, the medcenter officials had hustled them out with an injunction for Han to come back for a checkup in three weeks, or as soon as he was able to afford it. Revolted by their attitudes, Solo decided instantly that he'd take the blasted cast off himself and live with the risk of deforming a half healed leg before he'd return here for help.

And finances *were* tight, though not as bad as they might have been. Stuck on Phan Shilis for the time being — for skipping port without payment of docking fees was not a thing to be attempted by a broken legged pilot, or so, at least, Chewbacca insisted — their meager resources soon ran out. Unable to seek landside employment in his current condition (and truth to tell, Han didn't *want* to work, not feeling the way he did), Solo was forced to concede to Chewie's demand that he be allowed to find a job that would at least keep them alive and solvent until Han was sufficiently recuperated for them to resume seeking a decent paying ticket off this rock. It wasn't difficult, for the busy port was always in need of strong beings willing to perform the heavy dock work that was somehow beyond the capacities of even the most sophisticated cargo handling droids. Wookiees were known to be among the strongest and sturdiest inhabitants of the Empire, and with the help of his new acquaintance, Hrrandvi, Chewbacca had quickly landed a fair paying job as a temporary dockhand for Astadar Metals.

This was all well and good, insofar as their debts and overall standard of living was concerned, but Han — restricted in movement by his injured leg and the awkward cast encasing it — soon became twitchingly bored. Even the environs of his beloved *Falcon* were swift in taking on the feel of a prison; he couldn't even spend his excess of free time fine tuning the starship, for that required a freedom of motion that the blasted, hampering, primitive cast denied him. For a few days, he managed to contain and control his restlessness through sedentary pursuits: log maintenance, reading, solitaire holochess, perusal of the local holo vid broadcasts, mending damaged clothing, tuning his infrequently used avllyset — any small domestic task or marginal hobby was pursued or revived to help him pass the time sanely, but it was only a matter of days before everything available had paled into disinterest.

Chewbacca began to feel the results of his partner's boredom almost immediately. Tired from long hours of dock work, the Wookiee was in no frame of mind to provide diversions for his friend whenever he returned; all he wanted to do was sleep. After a few days of such pestering, the humanoid finally bellowed that he had had all he could stomach, and told Han that if he was well enough to get on his nerves, he was well enough to leave the ship during the day in search of his own amusement. Han grumbled and bristled at first, insulted, but when Chewie volunteered to pay his transit fare if it would mean peace, his attitude improved. It wasn't such a bad idea, after all. He might not be able to find work for a variety of reasons both good and bad, but Port Qavid was not a diversionless backwater hole-in-the-cosmos. Cosmopolitan enough to boast most any type of activity, Han was certain he could find something to hold his flagging interest — especially if he didn't have to foot the cost of getting himself about.

And he was right, as he discovered after only a few hours of semi-freedom in the city's daytime streets. Drawn by personal love and professional curiosity to the part of town wherein the dealers and designers of star- and land-craft did business, he saw a particular notice card posted in most every dealer's window: *S'Luas Engineering Sponsors Design And Performance Competition at Central Track*, followed by a date — two weeks hence — conditions and instructions for entering, and the size of the winner's purse: fifty thousand credits, plus a design contract with S'Luas Engineering.

This sort of thing was not uncommon in the world of engineers. Always on the lookout for new talent in terms of design and innovation, the companies that built the galaxy's vehicles — in this case, high performance long distance landspeeders — often sponsored such competitions in hopes of rooting out the best and the brightest of untapped potential employees. Everyone profited: the companies in their talent search, the amateur designers in gaining the attention they so often craved, the thrill seekers in their pursuit of entertainment, and the gamblers in their drive to find new outlets for their passion. Phan Shilis, being a metals-heavy industrial world, had a fair number of such corporations; in the speeder business, this world was home to as many speeder manufacturers as Corellia was home to starshipwrights. S'Luas was a local outfit with a far flung reputation; it had money enough to sponsor this event, and prestige enough to attract only the best.

But with a purse of that size in the offing, Han was willing to wager that at least one of the competitors would be sponsored, if not designed, by one Surial Utar. Remembering his own past and unpleasant experiences with Utar and racing, Han studied the notice again, more carefully. Elimination trials were being held this week at the track, which was on the outskirts of town; reaching it would be no trouble — and maybe, he thought, just maybe he might find something there that would show him a way of settling his grievance with Utar — decisively.

His suspicion that Utar was backing one of the competitors was not hard to verify; as the punk exercised such tight control over his operations, he also showed a very firm hand in guaranteeing their silence. Hence, no one questioned it when Surial Utar, successful commodities broker and owner of a legitimate entertainment concern, chose to indulge one of his favorite pastimes by sponsoring a likely young speeder mechanic who showed genuine flair for engine design. Both the boy's name and his sponsor's were listed openly on the roster of competitors, though Han was sure the youth had no inkling of his benefactor's true occupation. It was with some disgust that Solo also noted the ranking of the Utar team: first after first round elimination trials.

Upon arriving at the track, Han noted that there were a fair number of spectators, a mild surprise, considering that they were still holding individual qualification trials, not actual races. The track itself was a sophisticated affair of huge plasteel tubes that separated the vehicles from the viewing stands, guaranteeing the spectators' safety while providing an unimpeded view of the action. When he reached the stands, one of the second round trials was in progress. He glanced at the central information board and saw that the team on the track was that of one Mrik Lenduvar, who had placed fourth in the first round. Enhanced views offered by strategically placed vidscreens showed a sleek double-man vehicle with a black and violet finish, impressive looking in its sheer simplicity.

Han studied it with a critical eye and made a soft sound of approval. He'd glimpsed a few of the other entries — Utar's included — while making his way along the sidelines from the main entrance to the central viewing area; what he'd seen had not appealed to his professional beliefs in what he felt were the best designs for a speed oriented vehicle. He'd found Utar's ostentatiously supercharged and high powered entry particularly offensive. But this Lenduvar's notions — the name was completely unfamiliar to Han, which came as no surprise with this talent hunt competition — were more the proper thing: cleanness of line, no needless frills to trick the eye but spoil the aerodynamics, an engine that, from the sound of it, produced power with ruthless economy. Young, inexperienced drivers had doubtless resulted in the team's lesser standing, but the vehicle itself was impressive, as Han was sure the S'Luas judges would not fail to note. From what he had seen of the other top qualifiers, this one alone stood a chance of besting Utar's over-muscled entry.

The speeder had just completed the fifth of its ten required laps when the Corellian spotted a faint stream of pale smoke leaking from the seal of the left rear fuel tank. The hazel eyes narrowed, watching the spot. There was only a wisp of smoke, nothing the drivers would be apt to notice — but before they'd more than half completed the sixth lap, the wisp became, in rapid succession, a spark, then a flame, then an explosion. Safety systems in the tubes activated almost instantly, dousing the fire before it could cause further and fatal damage, but not before the careening speeder crumpled the right side of its nose against the hard transparent plasteel. Han winced, feeling sorry for Lenduvar, for the eye of long experience told him that, though the drivers had emerged unharmed, the injury to their vehicle would be far more serious.

Another sort of experience, however, put the contortion of distaste into the smuggler's expression, experience which caused him to know that fuel tanks only exploded in this particular fashion when encouraged to do so by outside help. Morbidly curious, he looked for and found the vidscreens displaying the activity in the various pits. He was not surprised to see pleasure mixed with accident-excitement showing on the faces of some on the Utar team — familiar faces Han recalled quite clearly from the alley several nights before. He didn't need proof to know what had so pleased them, nor why.

*It figures*, he told himself with disgust. Utar always *had* gotten a thrill out of winning any game, a thrill that was not in the least diminished — indeed, was most likely enhanced — when achieved by dishonest means.

With no conscious motivation beyond pity for those injured or revulsion toward those who had caused it, the starpilot moved toward the Lenduvar pits. The screens couldn't show enough specific detail to satisfy his curiosity about the accident, and he found himself wanting to know more about the wrecked vehicle's condition. The pits were just below the foremost rail of the viewing area, in the buffer zone between the stands and the tube enclosed track. The debris had already been cleared and the next trial started, so no one paid any attention to the becrutched Corellian as he peered down from this excellent vantage above the very spot to which the crippled speeder had been hauled. A few gawkers were inevitable, though he lingered long after their interest in the scene had vanished. From below, Han could hear the curses and moans of the crew.

"It's had it!" one of the fellows in driver's gear growled viciously as he flung a useless spanner to the dirt. "Look at this, Driu, just look at this! The whole blasted fuel system's gone, the right lifters are nothing but junk — *kh'rhen*, we'd stand to make more if we sold the thing for scrap right now!!!"

The man was young, compact, a few years shy of Han's twenty-five, and very plainly new to the business of competitive racing — but something in his manner brought a small smile to the smuggler's face. The fellow was Corellian, no doubt about it; his expletive, if not his entire behavior, gave him away in a moment. Hot-headed, over-reacting — Han wondered if he was really that bad whenever he threw a fit of temper. Chewie often said he was, and that it was in his genes.

"Calm down, Mrik," the man he'd called Driu advised, though he didn't seem terribly less agitated than his co-driver. "At least the whole thing didn't blow...."

"It might just as well have," Mrik — Lenduvar — grumbled.

"Well, if anyone can fix it, Tlanni can." Han surmised that the person in question was the wiry youth who had pounced on the speeder the moment it had been dragged in and was now only half visible as he worked beneath it. "Can't you, Tlanni?"

The sound that emanated from the mechanic's direction was in no way encouraging.

The expression on Lenduvar's face went from worry to horror as he peered beneath one corner of a shielding plate he'd just lifted, one that was already half bent away from the damaged portion of the nose. "Oh, my poor baby... just *look* at this, Driu! The whole bloody power regulator's shot...." The youth's chestnut haired head drooped, chin against his chest; he looked very much as if he was about to break down and cry.

His bulkier red headed companion was solicitously supportive. "It can't be that bad...." But the clucking sounds from the rest of the crew denied that possibility. Driu took his own look at the damage in question; he grimaced.

Han himself squinted for a better look at the wreckage. He was only three meters or so above the speeder; leaning forward, he was given a flawless view. And truth to tell, he didn't think it was as bad as the young daredevils were making it. It wasn't good — especially considering that it wouldn't have happened at all if not for the sabotage of Utar's thugs — but it also wasn't as impossible as it seemed. The fuel system was gone, true, and the regulator was a lost cause, but from the remains he could see, Han could ascertain that the latter could've used some improvement, anyway. He considered the situation, and grinned.

The skinny mech pushed himself out from under the vehicle, his tongue clicking, his head shaking, his expression somber. "No way, Mrik," he announced grimly. "I couldn't patch those systems back together to save my soul. We'll have to pull out."

Lenduvar paled; Driu kept him from crumbling into a nerveless little heap. "Oh, c'mon, Tlanni," the redhead prompted. "You're the best there is. I'm sure you could rig something...."

"If I had *something* to work with, sure — but I can't do anything with nothing! Besides, I was afraid something like this'd happen, anyway. You *know* how I kept warning you about that regulator of yours, Mrik. Too much heat, not enough insulation...."

"But we had to keep the weight down!"

"Hey, don't blame it on me! It wasn't my fault!"

"Well, it's certainly not mine!"

"Don't shove the responsibility on me, Lenduvar!" There was a lot of heat in Tlanni's words, more, Han felt certain, than had been in that crash. "I told you—"

Lenduvar's temper was hardly cooler. "And I told *you*—"

"It was sabotaged."

The unfamiliar baritone from above achieved the desired affect of interrupting the pointless bickering. Most of the team looked up in Han's direction, especially the two antagonists.

"Sabotaged?" Lenduvar echoed, appalled.

"How do you know that?" Tlanni was audibly, and visibly, suspicious.

Han was not put off by his attitude. "I was watching the whole thing — and trust me, that explosion was no accident. If there's anything left of the outer shielding from your left rear fuel tank, check it. You'll see the explosion started away from the seal — nowhere near any critical juncture or hot power line."

"That's ridiculous," the mechanic grumbled, his disbelief still strong, especially in the face of this questioning of his professional (such as it was) expertise.

Driu, however, was not hampered by his teammate's egotism. Poking through the chunks of shielding that had gone flying when the tank had exploded and had been efficiently collected and returned by the track's maintenance droids, he found the one in question — a veritable scrap that was barely identifiable for all the blast contortion and char marks. But there was enough left for all to see that the center point of the explosion was a good distance from weld seams, input valves, and hot ducting, nowhere in the vicinity of anything that could have naturally or accidentally caused it.

Driu and several of the assistant mechs whistled softly; Lenduvar whimpered, seeing the point at which his ill fortune had begun. He then took control of himself, and looked up at the crutch carrying spacer. "You're right," he said, not without a certain amount of awe and respect for Han's observational and deductive skills. "But who would've done a thing like this? We've no enemies...."

"There're no friends in racing," Solo quipped dryly, didactically. "You placed high on the first round; there're those who'd consider that threat enough to work against you. I've run across 'em before."

"You know who did this?" Driu asked.

The spacer shrugged. "Let's just say I have my suspicions."

Lenduvar's expression darkened; his fists clenched. "Tell us who it is, then, and we'll call the authorities. They can't get away with this—"

"They can and they have," Han interrupted, his tone flat. "I've got no real proof; neither do you."

"There's this." Driu brandished the warped bit of hull.

"That?" Solo snorted. "That's proof of what happened, sure, but not of who did it. And the police won't go after anyone without it."

That was a reality none of them could deny. Lenduvar's shoulders sagged, deflated; Driu hurled the ruined hull to the ground with disgust; Tlanni kicked the nearest loose object and swore.

"That *is* it, then," Lenduvar lamented. "There's no way we'll get her ready in time. And with someone working against us...."

"Oh, there're ways around sabotaging punks," Han said with a sort of airy assurance that made the youngsters look up at him again. He and they weren't all that different in age, but the green naivete of these boys made the pilot feel like the oldest of experienced sophisticates. Han felt himself lucky that these veritable kids weren't sharp enough to find his knowledgeability of such underhanded activities reason to suspect *him* of complicity. He nodded toward the speeder. "And the damage isn't as bad as you seem to think. Just the fuel system and the regulator, right?"

"The right lifters, too," Tlanni added glumly.

Han shrugged it off. "Small change. You show the track authorities the sabotage, and I'll bet they'll waive the trial requirements for you and let you directly into the finals. They're two weeks off, and you ought to have plenty of time to get her up to performance standards again."

"Not with Mrik's regulator design," the mechanic complained. "It took us two months to tinker the first one together, and a week more to get it fine tuned and calibrated with the other systems. There isn't enough time to do it again."

"There would be if you'd modify your primary coil systems to handle parallel instead of serial inputs."

Several of the mechs, Lenduvar included, made noises of surprise and denial at Han's suggestion. "I tried that," the driver/designer insisted. "And I'm telling you it won't work."

"Not if you insist on using the generators you've got. I can't tell for sure from here, but they look like Rhemstron 96/80's. They are? Well, believe me, kid, there're better ways to do it than with outdated junk like that. Trust me."

Tlanni wrinkled his nose at him. "And just what makes you think you know better than us, huh?" he whined before anyone else on the crew could open his mouth. "Mrik's father was a core engineer in the Qavid Speeder Works, and I had training in their apprentice program. You think you know so much." He snorted. "Where'd you learn the trade, smartass?"

Han smiled at him condescendingly, the way one might smile at an annoying insect he has just trapped and is about to delightfully kill. "The Corellian Academy, to start with, with an cadet/internship program at Elethin Engineering, and then a couple of years in piloting and tech work on an Imperial Military Base." Normally, admitting to those details of his past left a bad taste in his mouth, but on this Motherhole world, he had a feeling they might be a most effective sarcasm silencer. Although the Elethins were one of the Vansherra Clan families who had long ago chosen to leave the Motherworld and become *elkuchai*, they were also the family who nonetheless retained the closest ties to it, having significant holdings and influence in the business of starship manufacture and design, which they were reluctant to entirely relinquish. Although some members of the Elethin family were sufficiently brazen to maintain residences on Corellia itself under their true Family name, most had taken cover under false surnames, such as Han's.

Lenduvar and Driu exchanged surprised looks, both knowing well the prestige and quality of education these Motherworld based operations had to offer. One did not get taken into the internship program at Elethin without having already demonstrated a significant talent in the design and practical engineering fields, and anyone who managed to make it as a tech on a Corellian Base — be it local or Imperial — couldn't, by definition, be an engineering hack.

Tlanni was shocked, but he tried very hard to regard this as a matter of no consequence. "Big deal. That's all starship stuff, not landspeeder—"

"Which makes it harder, not easier," Lenduvar interrupted, elbowing him. "If you can't do anything but talk like a pessimist, you can just keep your mouth shut, Tlanni." The driver looked up at the starpilot with interested hope. "Look... Mister...."

"Captain," Han corrected. "Solo."

The youth accepted the correction with the grace of one eager to make a friend. "Captain. If you think you could help us get our speeder into shape by the race...."

A crooked smile tugged at the elder man's mouth. "Not with tech work, if that's what you mean." He indicated his less than perfect condition with a rueful grimace. "But I could show you a few tricks, give you some advice. All it'd take would be a little hard work, some replacement parts...."

Driu groaned very audibly. Lenduvar's expression echoed that displeasure. "Tlanni's right, then — that is it. We've run out of money; there's nothing left to buy extra supplies or replacements."

Han felt momentary frustration at that revelation. He'd been hoping to use his expertise and innovative powertrain designs to help these kids trounce Utar, who had thought them neatly removed from consideration with his despicable, petty destruction. But experience and knowledge was all he had. Despite Chewie's generosity in providing him with money for transportation, that small altruism was the only extra burden their finances could afford, and it alone wasn't enough to buy what was needed to effect repairs. The repair items kept in the *Falcon's* stores were not the sort they would need to mend the wounded speeder, so offering them would be of no use, either.

For a second or so, Solo grumbled silently over this obstacle; then, taking note of the team's overall appearance, a thought struck him. "Were you sponsored?"

Lenduvar nodded. "A fellow I work for nights put up the money. He's not into speeders or design or anything, but he's all right. He knew how badly I wanted a shot at an engineering career; he had the cash to spare, and he was willing to put it up for me. But he's given me an awful lot already. I don't dare ask for anything more, especially not with the speeder in such... questionable condition."

"And none of our folks'll put it up, either," Tlanni added, distaste darkening his words. "They all thought we were crazy to try this in the first place. They wanted us to go the old tried and true route: apprenticeships or academy training or whatever." He obviously had no use or liking for those ideas, and his sidelong glance at Han indicated his opinion of those who chose those approaches to a career.

Knowing the boy's prejudice to be a stupid one — for whatever else could be said of Elethin and the Imperial Academies, they had certainly impressed some of the best minds and instructors into their service — Han ignored him. He was, in fact, more interested in this backer Lenduvar had mentioned. From the youth's words, he sounded like a decent sort, and that type could usually be counted on to respond favorably to a sob story. "So *you* can't ask," he conceded, nodding. "But what if *I* did?"

Tlanni gave him a look of puzzled shock. "What, ask our parents?"

Driu, who was much quicker on the uptake, gave him a glare of pure exasperation. "Sure, *k'shass'ten*, and a fat lot of good *that'd* do us!"

"Your backer sounds pretty reasonable," Han continued. "You need an expert to explain the situation to him, convince him that he won't be wasting his money on a lost cause. I'd be willing to take the part."

Lenduvar was genuinely grateful, but he was equally dubious. "But he doesn't know you, Captain. *I* don't even know you. I couldn't expect you to vouch for us anymore than I could vouch for you. I've just met you!"

Han grinned. "Oh, that's no problem. Aren't we both Corellian, after all?" He had asked the question in common dialect Corellese.

The would be designer blinked, then made a sound that was very close to relief. "I didn't know," he admitted, but seemed nonetheless quite willing to accept racial kinship as all the familiarity he needed. A refreshing attitude, Han thought, after all the abuse he'd taken in the local business offices, Qavid Speeder Works included. But it was all in a good cause: revenge. "I'd be very grateful for your assistance, Captain. But may I ask why you've taken such an interest in our welfare?"

Han tried very hard not to laugh at the lad's politeness; only a small, half suppressed chuckle escaped him. "You may ask, but I'm not inclined to tell."

Tlanni scowled at him. The spacer didn't think the pinch-faced boy would ever like him, no matter what Han did or said or offered. His pride had been too thoroughly wounded, his place as an expert supplanted by this seemingly altruistic stranger. "Then what do *you* expect to get out of this, huh?"

Solo's grin turned positively wicked. "Satisfaction," he said simply. "Plain old everyday satisfaction."

#### IV

There was some argument over accepting Han's offer to play expert and go between to Lenduvar's backer, mostly from the disgruntled Tlanni, but in some part from other skeptics on the crew, who thought they were being set up to be taken advantage of. Only after Han gave his BloodOath that he would let the man whose initial investment had permitted this venture decide what, if any, financial remuneration he would get were the protestors sufficiently appeased and he was given an address at which he would find the fellow in question.

It hadn't occurred to Han until he was halfway to his destination that he'd been given a street number but not the name of the man for whom he was searching — undoubtedly an oversight resulting from Lenduvar's youthful enthusiasm, but a potential problem, nonetheless. For a minute or so, he considered telling the cab's driver-droid to return to the track so that he could procure this missing bit of information, but he was running low on pocket change and decided to give it a go on what he already had.

The hack took him into the Mid Northern Cityside District, an area that was distinctly different from the bulk of Qavid's various regions. As they turned onto the district's main thoroughfare, Han was struck by the sudden change in appearance of the surrounding buildings. Constructed of native stones, fashioned along architectural lines now considered gaudily archaic and excessively ornamental, the place seemed to have been pulled out of the mists of some distant time and dropped into the midst of Qavid's modernness in response to some deity's serendipitous whim. It was late afternoon by the time Han arrived, so the street lights had not been activated, but he felt almost morally certain that, if they had been, he would've been treated to the sight of positively ancient gaslight, not state-of-the-art cold fluorescent glowstrips. The fixtures certainly seemed of the former sort, which was perfectly in keeping with the general ambiance of this very peculiar place.

The streets here were quiet; only a few pedestrians and one or two cargo speeders passed them on their way to the address Lenduvar had provided. The shops and other business places seemed to be closed, for all the traffic they were displaying; intrigued by this oddness, Han peered at one or two signboards to see what they proclaimed. What he read confirmed his suspicion of both slow trade and closed shops, for half were bizarre, low volume outfits such as ultra-specialist boutiques — herbalists, woodcrafters, handweavers and the like — while the others were cafés and bistros opened during restricted evening hours. This was not the sort of place where Han would have thought to find a sponsor for an up and coming design engineer. Perhaps the droid was merely taking a shortcut to their eventual destination.

That theory was shot down as the speeder drew to halt while still in the heart of this quaint district. The droid announced the address — the correct address, Han noted with a sigh — and his passenger had no choice but to get out and have a look.

The building in question was not large, but it stretched the Corellian's definition of the word *strange* to new dimensions. A typical looking three story stone structure at heart, the place was embellished around window and door with intricately chiseled carvings of fanciful creatures straight out of Corellian folklore, in greater assortment than Han had ever seen in any lavishly illustrated collection of mythology. Rather out-of-place amid all the antiquated critters hung a sign displaying the contemporary (for this area) name *The Black Hole*, the address Han sought, and an arrow pointing down a flight of stairs. That was the place Lenduvar had mentioned, all right. Sighing heavily for the inconvenience stairs presented in his current condition, Han grit his teeth, took a firm grip on his crutches, and headed down.

It wasn't easy going, for the night lighting had not yet been activated, even though the sun was now behind the east-facing building, casting deep and very dark purple shadows in the below-street stairwell. The pilot took the steps one at a time, cursing softly whenever the darkness caused him to rap his knee or bark his fingers against the rough walls. As he neared the bottom, he began to wonder why he'd even bothered making this potentially treacherous trip down the stairs. According to the sign outside, the place wouldn't be open for several hours, and he rather doubted that he'd find anyone about this *Hole* beforehand. He added a few more imaginative curses aimed at his own short-sighted stupidity before deciding to take a look around, as long as he was here.

To his surprise, he heard an echo of his expletives as he reached the base of the stairwell. At first, he thought it was nothing *but* an echo, until the sounds continued long after he'd ended his swearing. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he saw a door on the left, inlaid with thick stained glass; there was a faint lightening of the shadows beyond it, indicative of occupancy. He tried the latch, which gave way before him.

Opening the antique hinged door was a bit awkward to manage with his cast and crutches, but the mechanisms were well lubricated. Once unlatched, it swung open with ease, and he could now hear sounds other than his own voice within: the pinging of thin wire being stretched, the creak of something small being turned while fighting some sort of strain, then a sharp snap, a loud *thwang*, and a searing, ear-scaldingly furious string of curses in expletive-fluent and oath-colorful backstreet Corellese.

Grinning to himself in the sudden certainty that he had found his quarry — for whoever it was raged in a fashion Lenduvar plainly imitated — Han moved inside more boldly. He was greeted by the sight of a low lighted hall, high ceilinged, in the same style as the local architecture, filled with tables and comfortable chairs for the enjoyment of entertainment. The sides of the room were lined with darkened booths, for those who required more intimacy — or, from the look of the place, more romance; at the back of the hall was a bar, designed to dispense a variety of beverages, mostly innocuous. The far end of the room was dominated by an unpretentious stage, equipped with modest lighting and raised slightly so that all patrons would be afforded an unimpeded view. The place was both dark and empty, except for the staging area, in which a single lamp had been lit for the benefit of the one person who was at work there.

The man — and there was no doubt of the fellow's gender, for the timbre of his voice alone had betrayed that — was at work restringing a concert floor harp, a task with which he was apparently having some difficulty, from the sounds heard without. As Han entered, the fellow was sucking the thumb web of his right hand, mumbling curses around it about shoddy strings and the untrustworthiness of certain merchants.

Reasonably certain he had found the nameless person for whom he'd come searching, the spacer still hesitated just inside the door. He knew nothing about this man, other than the fact that Lenduvar clearly held him in some sort of awe — which was only to be expected, given the man's indulgence of the boy. He really didn't know why he was here, nor what he thought he might be able to do or say that the racers hadn't already tried — but the notion of seeing these eager kids win, besting that *zvind'wat*, Utar.... Well, it was too good a prospect to pass up. He didn't have anything better to do with himself, after all. He simply had to give it a try.

While he was trying to settle on some sort of opening line, however, the man called to him. "Say, friend, could you do me a favor and bring those cutters from the bar? The red handled ones, not the blue." Whoever he was, the fellow had an amiable manner and a pleasant low tenor voice so well trained and modulated, Han found himself complying without question. Just as he was beginning to wonder why he'd done that so readily, the man made a sound of surprise, followed by words of intense apology. "Oh, I'm blind, so I am. Here, don't trouble yourself. I'm not crass enough to make an injured person do an errand I'm well able to run myself." He was on his feet and striding toward the spacer, once again before Han could make so much as a half voiced squeak.

He bore down on the pilot, took the requested tool, and gestured for Han to take a seat wherever he liked, all in such short order that Solo couldn't have made a sound, even had he been able to think of something to say. The man went back to the harp, immediately attacking the recalcitrant string; rather than sit, Han stared at him in amazement.

And he was rather worth staring at, by any estimate, having the sort of striking appearance which generally requires a moment's study, or one good long stare. He was tall, taller than the already tall starpilot by a good Wookiee's handspan, only a bit shy of two full meters in height. He was not quite so correspondingly broad of build, being more lithe than muscular — the structure of Corellian descent, or Han was no judge of his own people. His coloring suited certain clans of that same heritage: pale tan of skin and jet black of hair, the unguilt condition of the latter indicating someone still in his youth.

With his back turned to the seating area, Han couldn't see the fellow's face to confirm that hypothesis; when he'd come to fetch the cutters, he'd moved too quickly and the light had been too dim for Solo to get a good look. But the man's clothes also said something about him: plain, simply cut, dust gray fine fabric, with nothing ostentatious or uniform about them; they told that their wearer was his own man, comfortably well off but not inclined to flaunt it. Such small clues were things Han had learned to pick up on over the years, by necessity; they now gave him a tentative feeling of relief. If this fellow was Corellian, as Han assumed, he seemed by visual cues to be less Motherworld-bound than most of that distinction on Phan Shilis. He might be wrong, but.... At least he could take the shot with some hope for success.

When the man had removed the broken string from the harp and turned about to get a replacement from a cluttered toolbox at the edge of the platform, Han suddenly felt a ripple of doubt. Perhaps he'd made the wrong assumption in thinking that he'd found someone free from social pretension and caste bigotry. This fellow wasn't

wearing fancy clothing because he simply didn't *need* to. If good looks were a form of outerwear, then there existed no finery more expensive or attractive than that with which he had been naturally gifted. And worse, Han knew he'd seen that face somewhere before — if not on this particular man, then on someone who bore the strong stamp of their mutual genes and blood. The neutral expression, the coloring, down to the unusual large silver-gray eyes — it was all so familiar... *too* familiar....

*Stars*, Han thought, suddenly uneasy, *what the hell am I doing here? How'm I gonna talk some t'tchazikre into helping those kids on my word alone — much less make him believe I know what I'm talking about in the first place...?*

Nausea settled into the pit of Han's stomach as he hastily began to devise an excuse for his having come here that would permit him to make a fast retreat. He had abruptly realized that, not even for the sake of vengeance on Utar did he want to tangle with some prejudiced Motherworlder. He hadn't thought it so — it had been eight years, after all, and many parsecs of experience — but the pain of the emotional drubbing he'd taken on Corellia was still strong and fresh and bitter indeed.

Then, just as abruptly, the man grinned at him, a puzzled and curious expression that, to Han, seemed totally out of character. The similar face he remembered would've cracked if it had tried to smile.... "Well, don't just stand there," he advised. "Take the load off that leg while you tell me why you're here." There was nothing demanding or suspicious in his tone or demeanor, just simple curiosity. "Could I get you something to drink? I'm afraid there's not much available, at the moment. My bouncer keeps the keys to the cabinets with the hard stuff — I'm not much of a drinker — but I could find something...."

Han shook his head, unable to speak while he swallowed the lump in his throat. This was an unexpected turn, no doubt about it. The man seemed genuinely friendly, offering hospitality to a stranger who, for all he knew, had come to cause him trouble. The spacer revised his estimate as he settled into the nearest chair, relieved to sit after the stress of half-stumbling down the stairs. Perhaps there was hope with this fellow, after all. "No, thanks," he finally managed to say. "Are you the person who owns this place?"

Rummaging through the box looking for another A string, the man nodded and glanced up at his guest. "Yes, I'm Zair. I take it there's something you want of me...?" He trailed off on a questioning note, prompting the provision of a name.

As "Zair" was not any Corellian family name or adopted *elkuchai* handle that Han had ever heard (and he'd made a thorough study of both to keep himself from having avoidable trouble with Motherworlders, and to know those of his people to whom he might safely turn in a pinch), he responded in kind, with only his personal name. "Han. And I'm not here for myself."

"Oh?" A note of amusement crept into Zair's tenor; as he stood straight again, he looked down at the spacer with an intent expression in his silver eyes — and plainly, he was not looking down *on* him. "A mercy mission?" he asked, humor making his voice ring richly.

Han almost found himself grinning back. There was something infectious about this guy's manner, and there was no denying that he had a voice trained to influence his audience. *A deadly weapon in a politician*, Han thought, wondering if that was where he'd seen him before. But no, there was none of that ineradicable stink about him. Zair was merely a performer, well practiced in his art. "Of sorts," he admitted. "I was at the S'Luas time trials today, and I happened to be there when the team you're sponsoring had an accident—"

Zair's pleasant demeanor instantly turned to one of deep and genuinely strong concern. "An accident?" he echoed, interrupting as he spun on his heel to face his guest. "What sort of accident? Was anyone hurt?"

Inwardly, some small part of Han was pleased by that reaction. No questions about the condition of the vehicle and the protection of his investment, only worry for the lives involved. His ideas were looking more and more possible all the time. "No one was hurt," he was quick to assure the man, "but their speeder wasn't so lucky. It's going to take a lot of work to fix it, or they'll be out the race for sure."

This man was apparently not one for artifice; as plain as he had worn worry a moment before, Zair now wore unadulterated relief. "They're sharp kids," he sighed, expelling the previous moment's tension. "They'll get it ready. I just thank God they're all right. They aren't really professionals at this, you know."

"I kinda thought so," the spacer drawled with his own amusement.

Just as he was about to resume restringing the harp, Zair caught the less obvious note in Han's voice; he glanced back over his shoulder at him, catching an unspoken inference. "And you are, I take it?"

Han shrugged amiably. "You might say that." The statement was double-edged: the perfect truth in that he was indeed a professional engineer, and something of a white lie in that the type of races with which he was familiar were those in which he was pitted against the vessels of authorities or enemies he was trying to outrun. "The kids you're backing have some real talent, but it's not going to be enough to get them into that race."

His host's face darkened as he settled himself on the harpstool, where he could once more attempt to tune the troublesome string. "You're saying that they won't be able to fix their speeder, is that it?"

"Not without the capital to buy replacement parts, supplies. From what they told me, they haven't got it."

"But they *do* have the nerve to talk you into coming here to ask for more, eh?" He was fast on the uptake, this performer, though there was mostly humor in his voice, not condemnation.

Han figured the kids didn't deserve the bum rap, even if it was only in teasing. "Nobody talked me into anything; I volunteered."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I wasn't joking when I said those kids have talent — at least, Lenduvar does. I think they stand a damn good chance of winning that race — or they would've, if some *tchaig'tn* coward of a punk hadn't wiped them out."

"I see." Zair carefully twisted the tuning knob with the appropriate instrument, being ever so cautious lest the string snap again. His attention seemed to be centered more on the harp than on Han's words. "Do you have any idea of how much money I've already given — they say it's a loan, but I really don't expect to see it back again — how much I've already given Mrik so that he and his friends could go after this dream of his?"

Having watched the man intently from the moment of entering, Han decided to take a chance in being bold. "I've got a pretty good idea, yes. I spent enough years working in cadet apprenticeship at the Elethin shipyards and in service at a Base to know how much it costs to build something like that from scratch. Just doing some modifications on my starship was expensive enough."

"Then you know I wouldn't be behaving stingily if I refused to put up anything more."

The spacer conceded the point with a gesture. "I know. But... look, I don't know anything about you, except what I heard from Lenduvar, and I don't even know him. But from listening to the kid I got the feeling that he didn't exactly have to twist your arm to get you to give him what you already have. You said you did it to give him a chance to go after a dream. Can you really refuse to help him now when he's so close, and when he's going to be cheated out of it if you don't?"

Zair looked up from the harp, staring at Han in such a fashion that the spacer was certain that the man *hadn't* been entirely attentive to what he had been saying. "Cheated?" he repeated. "How...?"

"I guess I wasn't the only one who thought they were good — *too* good. I was watching their second round trial, and I'm positive that an accident happened because somebody deliberately put in the fix."

"Put in the fix..." The silver eyes widened to even larger proportions, reflecting utter horror. "Sabotage?"

Solo nodded. "That's the general idea."

Zair completely forgot the instrument he held between his knees; his eyes focused on the face of his guest, though Han didn't feel as though he was actually being seen. His expression changed from horror to anger, back to horror and then to perplexity. "How... who...?" His eloquence fled him. "How do you know?"

The pilot licked his lips quickly, considering his answer. "I've had experience," he said candidly, returning his host's gaze with a level regard. "It's been done to me, often enough — and I've done it to others myself, once or twice. That wasn't any accident. Someone wants Lenduvar out of that race, and whoever it is is willing to make sure of it, no matter what he's got to do."

Han had taken a chance, admitting that much, and he knew it, but he felt — why, he didn't know — that the risk would be worth it. For a minute or more, Zair studied him — and this time, Solo was sure he was the focus of that stare — then took a deep, slow breath. "A daring admission," he finally said, his tone reflective rather than critical. "You wouldn't happen to know who did it, then, considering how knowledgeable you seem to be in these... delicate matters?"

"I do," was the reply, continuing in the same vein of honesty. "Or at least I have a pretty good idea. But," he forestalled when the man opened his mouth, "it wouldn't do any good for me to tell you, or anyone else. Proving that sabotage happened doesn't mean we can prove who's responsible — and that really isn't the point. I didn't come here to tell you to go hounding the police about it. I came here to see if I couldn't talk you into giving those friends of yours a little extra help. They sure need it — and I think they deserve it."

Zair kept watching him for what felt like a terribly long time; then, a curious smile spread slowly across the performer's face. "You have an awful lot of... hmmm, I don't know that a word exists for what you have. Nerve? Guts? Bravery? Compassion? None of them seem right, yet all of them are. Of course, I may not be the most worldly person in existence, but I'm not naive enough to think you haven't some sort of ulterior motive. What do you expect to get out of this..." He paused, blinking. "What did you say your name is?"

"Han." He opted once more for openness; it seemed to have done him good service thus far. "Solo."

"Solo," Zair echoed. His eyes lost his focus again. "Now, why doesn't that seem right?" he breathed to himself, causing Han a moment of real alarm, until he shrugged it off. "Ah, if it won't come to me, it isn't important." He squinted at his guest. "Engineer, hm. Independent spacer, by any chance?"

This time, Han chose greater evasion. "What makes you think that?"

"Your clothes. Attitude. Speech habits, turns of phrase. I was trained to notice vocalization, you know."

"I didn't *know*, but I got the idea pretty quick."

Zair laughed, a bright, uninhibited sound that gave no indication that he held a negative opinion of Han, despite the observations he'd just made. "Yes, well, I suppose I'm not the only one around who has a knack for deductive reasoning — I just like to *think* I am. Then tell me, Captain Solo—" His eyes danced with mischief at Han's briefly visible reaction to his correct assumption. "—what is it you expect to get for your trouble, if you *do* manage to convince me to give Mrik more money? Which, by the way, I'd like to know why you think I have it?"

It was Han's turn to give back a similarly mischievous glance. "It's obvious. He said you were his boss, and had the money to spare, which to me seems to indicate that you've got a fair sized regular income. And since neither you nor this place of yours seem to be any the worse for the wear, I can pretty well assume you aren't hurting for business...."

The musician's explosion of mirth was full of wryness. "You'd be surprised, friend. I didn't name it *The Black Hole* for nothing. It seemed appropriate, considering how much money I keep pouring into it, and how much of it vanishes into thin air!" He shook his head, shaking off with the motion the last of his overt laughter, though the sparkle remained in his eyes. "But you're right, neither of us are any the worse for the wear, and money isn't really much of a problem, especially since I have so little to spend it on, outside the *Hole*. Good conclusion. I like people with quick minds. One question answered. But what's in this for you?"

"Why, whatever you decide to give me," Han replied with totally guileless ease. "I gave the kids my Oath that I wouldn't ask for anything more than what you decided to give me — if you agreed to go along with this. Now, that's only fair, isn't it?"

One corner of Zair's mouth twitched. "Quite fair — and rather trusting of you, too, I'd say. You *are* expecting to get something from this, aren't you?"

The smuggler was blunt. "I'd be a Jedi saint if I didn't. But I'm not counting on it."

"Though you could use it, I'm sure."

Han was droll, his curiosity suppressed. "Why would you think that?"

The performer raked him with one eye, his air that of an authoritative detective. "One, though you're perfectly presentable for the run of polite society, there's a certain quality to your clothing that would indicate they've been through more than their share of reprocessing through a 'cyclor. Two, you wouldn't be crutch-and-cast-bound if you'd been able to afford full medcenter attention — unless, of course, you've had some reason for foregoing the centers entirely, although I think that unlikely, since the crutches you're using have the mark of local manufacture, along with the stamp of the Portside Emergency Facility. And three, you haven't denied that you're an Independent. I happen to know in exacting detail just how poor our job market has been of late — and, since your mannerisms give you away as a fellow Corellian, I believe I'm safe in interpreting certain of your other manners as those of an *elkuchai*, which might explain why you've been unemployed, aside from your injuries."

The silver eyes glittered with satisfaction as the hazel ones widened with submerged surprise. "Well? I *am* right, aren't I?"

"Almost too right," Han found himself admitting after digesting it all. His expression turned to one of wonder. "You're sharp."

Zair made a gesture of humble acceptance, adding a flourish that indicated some small but smug pleasure on his part. "And you're too kind. I've only pointed out what should be obvious to anyone with a half-active brain. What I can't deduce from mere observation, however, is just how much your advice might be worth considering." His amusement faded as his eyes once again narrowed, fixed upon his guest. "I could swear I know you from somewhere, but I just can't seem to remember where."

Han knew just how he felt, but he wasn't inclined to provide any clues that might lead to some potentially troublesome conclusions. "I've already given Lenduvar and his friends my BloodOath. Would that satisfy you?"

"Ah, now that would depend on a lot of variables — most of which I've no way to verify." He was speaking to himself as he plucked the new string, tuning it to others. "Are you honest, reliable...?" He stopped his work to grimace once more in Han's direction. After a moment, he blinked, the expression turning to a sort of puzzlement. "Say, didn't you used to go by the name Khaiven?"

Han had had years of practice denying that claim and keeping the reactions it inevitably stirred strictly invisible. But this time, it had come so very unexpectedly that he could not stop himself from stiffening. The moment he felt all his muscles contract, he cursed, both his body for betraying him to this all-too-observant fellow and Zair for being so blightedly sharp-eyed in the first place.

He didn't need to say a word; the muscular twitch was quite enough. Zair's squint relaxed into the pleasure of successful identification. "Yes, of course, that's it," he said, going back to his tuning. "I remember your face very well, Captain, even though it's been a few years."

"If it's been so long," Han replied, his defense a dry and totally expressionless manner that could be easily construed as disinterest, "then how can you be so sure you haven't got the wrong person?"

"Oh, I'm not mistaken." The performer waved one hand in casual dismissal of the understated protest, the abstracted quasi-arrogance of the utterly confident. "I've got a fairly decent memory, if I do say so myself." He smiled

at his own professed prowess. "You see, you and I are just about the same age, only a month or so off, if I remember correctly."

"And of course you do." Han wasn't so sure he liked the direction this conversation was heading.

The acridness of the spacer's remark did not diminish Zair's assuredness. He chuckled softly. "Of course. Youngsters have a way of wanting to know *everything* about their idols, and when I was about seventeen, you were the nearest thing to a living one I had." He paused briefly as a fondly amused remembrance passed its shadow across his face. "Not many people manage to win fame and recognition by the Empire for their heroism when they're still a full year from their majority, Captain. You may not know it, but after you were decorated with the Bloodstripe, you went through a period of intense popularity among your Corellian peers, at least in my neighborhood. A mere cadet, after all, honored by both the Empire and Motherworld! Magnificent! It certainly gave some of us other youngbloods something with teeth to throw into the faces of parents and relatives who wanted to decide our lives for us — since, by their definition, no seventeen-year-old is capable of knowing what's best for him, much less what he's best able to do by virtue of his natural talents."

Though the man spoke with a definite edge of serious resentment toward parental domineering, his words held no discernable trace of condemnation toward Han himself, which came as quite the shock to the starpilot. He was unused to hearing anything but hatred — or, at best, contempt — whenever a stranger spoke of his past. To hear this musician mention it, in some detail, without the invariable censure and *with* considerable praise was a unique situation, indeed. For that alone, discounting all the other reasons he'd noted thus far, Han began to feel a genuine liking for this Zair.

"Of course," the fellow went on, in the same blithe tones, "they got a chance to throw it all *back* in our faces, when..." His tenor faded out on a dramatic note.

Solo winced. *Here it comes.*

But Zair merely shrugged, laughing to and at himself. "I got my comeuppance worse than anyone, I guess. My Grandfather and Great-Grandfather kept holding up that entire ridiculous affair to me as an example of what would happen if I didn't start minding the wisdom of my elders."

"Ridiculous?" The smuggler's tone was tight. "That's the first time I've ever heard a Motherworlder call it that."

Zair looked up, his hands going still against the harpstrings. "But it *was* ridiculous, Captain. Surely, you know that better than anyone else! The prosecution based its entire case on circumstantial evidence; the 'concrete proof' they paraded before the court was nothing that couldn't have been planted by your accusers. They hadn't one witness to the actual crime, save for the man who himself was being counter-accused. You, at least, had the support of someone who had been an actual victim, had suffered because of the real criminals' business.... Oh, I suppose it doesn't seem very laughable to you, and I don't mean to belittle your feelings on the matter, but from my point of view, that whole trial was a farce, a puppet show being put on by a puppet court full of puppet-brained idiots who dance and scrape and bow whenever someone with the stink of the Emperor about him even blinks in their direction."

He laughed heartily now, a sound with a thread of wicked satisfaction running through it. "They'll eventually see the mistake they made, Captain, have no fear. Those idiotic, empty-headed, ever-so-superior, self-righteous, outdated, narrow-minded *kaich'assten* fools on the Social Council..." He shook his head, his handsome face wrinkling with total distaste and disgust for the people he was so mentioning.

The relief that washed over Han was strong with insuppressible gratitude. In all the years since that horrible, horrible day on which his homeworld and his Empire had tried to crush and reject him, he had never met a single Motherworlder who had expressed so fierce a loathing for the Council, nor a person who, without knowing him, had viewed the demoralization of his trial and discharge with such keen eyes for the truth. But that was plainly a powerful and undeniable part of this Zair's personal makeup: a passion for deductive reasoning, for ferreting out the truth, and an understanding of essential justice that would not allow him to close his eyes to a fact once he had seen it. Would that there had been more than one person sitting on his jury who had had such innate humanity! Relieved that he would not have to argue in support of himself and his past to this man, Han knew in that instant that he and Zair could and would be friends, given half a chance.

"You *are* a Motherworlder, aren't you?" the spacer said, more statement than question. "I thought for a while you might be just a local who follows the old traditions."

A look of mock indignation came over the performer. "I, my good fellow, am never 'just' anything, but—" And the friendly humor returned. "—you're right. I was raised on the soil of our dear — well, not so dear to you, perhaps — Motherworld, until I was eighteen and was told by my relatives that I could either take a job with the Family concerns out here, where I wouldn't be an embarrassment, or I could stay home and very likely be Outcaste, for dirtying the family honor."

Han now believed he understood why Zair had been so sympathetic toward him; he only wished that he'd been given a similar choice. "Why? What did you do?"

The musician made a very disagreeable sound. "As far as I'm concerned? Nothing worth all the commotion. But my Mother and ranking Grandfather and Great-Grandfather wanted me to follow in the family footsteps, which did not, under any circumstances, permit the pursuit of my arts. They insisted I forego them; I refused — we had quite a few fights over the matter. Grandfather wanted to kick me out of the family outright, but Mother fought him — I'm her baby, after all — and we finally reached a compromise, for Mother's sake. I tend business for them here when it's needed, they pay me quite adequately, and the rest of my time is my own, to spend as I wish. It's a fair deal, though I wish they'd picked someplace a bit more cosmopolitan than Phan Shilis. My talent's being wasted out here, without a proper audience to appreciate it!" With that, he tossed the tuning key back into the toolkit, finished.

He was very impassioned on the subject, which led Han to believe that he meant every word he had said concerning his dislike for the stratified Motherworld society and Council. But his display of righteous indignation made the smuggler chuckle. "It could be your kin aren't as convinced of your talents as you are. Tell me, do you actually know how to play that thing, or is it something you just knock around and make noise on when you're in a bad mood?"

Zair stared at home for a moment, speechless; then, he burst into laughter. "A worthy question, very worthy. But..." He promptly demonstrated that his pride was not false by playing a vigorous rendition of an ancient N'Bhragian folkdance, complete with embellishments which were generally reserved for woodwind renditions. Han had to concede the validity of his complaints; if this was any sample, Zair's talent for music was genuine, and was being wasted in these back alleys of Phan Shilis.

Honestly impressed, the spacer applauded politely when the last massive chord faded. "You know your business," he granted with a nod of approval. "I've heard worse from first class solo performers on the Centerworlds. So why do you let your family shove you into a nowhere hole like this where you aren't being properly appreciated?"

Zair's smile was small, but extremely expressive. "Why do you waste your piloting talents — and I know you have them — working as a low paid Independent?"

Han could not help but bridle at the remark, even though it had been made with no aspersion or calumny. "You wouldn't understand," he began defensively.

"Ah, but I do. Our reasons for following the lives we do are not so different as you think, Captain not-Khaiven. I readily admit that my lot is easier to deal with, since the results of my choice were not so bitter to swallow. But we both chose our paths out of honor. Yours was abused by that travesty of a court who condemned you, so you now keep your light concealed to spare yourself further harm. My family believes that I'll disgrace them if I choose to pursue a performing career; it mightn't be so, but my mother would be put in a very awkward position if I did. She's my ranking parent; my siblings have even less flair for the Family business than I, so it seems that I'm the most likely candidate to inherit the Family Honors when she and my various grandparents decide to retire. If I'm lucky, I'll be dead before that happens. I don't want the job, not at all — I wish they'd give it to one of my cousins, if they can't choose one of my siblings — but I have some of the stubbornest relatives in creation. If I were to do anything that they could interpret as a smear against the Family reputation and honor, they'd be furious — and I wouldn't be the one who'd suffer the most. The indignities they'd heap upon my mother...."

He shook his head, as if he hoped he could shake off that unpalatable reality as easily. "Despite all the trouble I've had with her father and grandfather, I still love her. I could, of course, disown them entirely, go off on my own and the Family be damned, but I couldn't put Mother through that disgrace, either. So here I came, and here I'll stay, even

though this isn't the life I'd've chosen for myself, given the chance. I'd prefer it otherwise, yes, and I'm sure you feel the same about your own circumstances, but I'm trapped on this prison planet by decisions I was honor bound to make."

"At least you were given a choice," Han grumbled, half under his breath. He had listened almost against his will; he didn't really want to hear the man's excuses for what had seemed to him an insult, but Zair's skill with words and inflections made him impossible to ignore. Attention, however, did not automatically generate agreement.

The musician recognized his guest's acerbity, yet oddly enough, it caused him to smile. "And so were you." He raised his hands to ward off the instant surge of venom that shot toward him through Han's mere glance. "But you were. The Council had the right to Cast you Out; you had the right to Protest. You could've exercised it after your trial; to be honest, most everyone expected you would. But you didn't."

Venom turned to less caustic sourness. "I'm not stupid, and I wasn't that naive. The Imps had the Council bought, just like my Commander paid my flightmates to lie against me. With the way things stood at the time, I'd've had a better chance of making a hyperspace jump by flapping my arms than of getting a Reversal. Besides, who wants to live someplace where everyone thinks he's the worst scum ever spawned?"

"Which is precisely why I chose my exile here." Zair sighed hugely. "It could be worse. I've learned to live with my lot, though I hate it — sounds familiar, doesn't it? Do you really think I don't know how you feel?"

Han opened his mouth to say no, Zair couldn't possibly understand, it wasn't the same situation at all, but he knew it for a lie. As he had listened, he could not help but recognize that Zair was right. Their positions weren't terribly different, for all that on the surface, they appeared to be separated by parsecs. The musician's cage and shackles were pretty and more comfortable than the spacer's, but they were no less of a burden to bear. The time Han had lived without starflight due to the prejudice of the Guild had made him understand, intimately, the pain of having a true talent which one is forbidden to use.

"Yes, I guess you *would* understand it, at that," he admitted with a little sigh. "But I still think it stinks. Hell, a droid can be taught to fly a starship — *adequately*," he amended at the performer's dubious snort. "Doing that—" He pointed at the harp for emphasis. "—well, that's a talent you've got to be born with. And only a real *zwind'wat*'d force somebody to waste it for the sake of some idiot's misplaced Family pride."

His sincerity was not disguised; and it brought almost preening pleasure to Zair's face. "Why, thank you, Captain; it's very kind of you to say that. Not many people would. I find that, on the whole, only other musicians have any kind of sympathy for my problem."

Han shrugged modestly. "Don't mention it."

"If you insist." Zair cocked his head to one side, looking around rather than through the harp to study his guest. "You wouldn't happen to have any musical background, now, would you?"

"Me?" Solo laughed, head shaking. "Hardly. I went through music therapy a few years back, as exercise for my hands during recuperation after a serious accident, and I suppose I can carry a tune, 'least well enough so I don't offend myself or my partner, but that's about all."

"That's more than some people," was the cryptically voiced response. "What instrument did you use? String? Wind?"

"String. Avllyset."

The mention of the rare, complicated, lute-like K'vesian instrument brought the gleam of intrigued surprise to the musician's silver eyes. "An avllyset? Really? I've always wanted to get my hands on one, you know, just to try it out, but they're so hard to find these days, and so expensive when you do that most people have obnoxious 'pay before you play' policies...." He gave Han an excited, little-boy-hopeful glance. "If you still have it, do you think I could convince you to let me handle it, just once?"

The wistful pleading in his voice was amusing, making it difficult to say no, but in it, Han could see a useful possibility. "Oh, I think we might be able to work something out," he replied, his meaning plain.

Zair could hardly have missed it; his mouth twitched with responding humor. "I give Mrik what he wants, and you give me what I want, eh?"

The spacer shrugged innocently. "Something like that."

The musician considered his bluntness with what appeared to be black suspicion; then, laughing, he stood up, abandoning his harp to join his guest at table. "I believe we can strike a bargain, Captain," he said, his eyes aglint with mischief, "if you'd be good enough, first, to explain to me how you came to be in such deplorable condition...."

As he settled down, expecting to listen attentively, Han grinned. He knew, for inexplicable reasons, that he could trust Zair — and this was one person he wouldn't mind telling the truth for a change, not at all.

## V

Han found, in an amazingly brief time, that his trust had not been misplaced. Having heard the squalid details of the spacer's encounter with Utar's muscle — an encounter that could not be whitewashed to the point of masking the fact that Solo was operating in the shadows of legality — Zair had not reacted with the horror, indignation, and rejection that usually followed any such revelation Han chose to make to those of exceptionally straight-and-narrow character. He didn't delude himself with the notion that the performer had failed to make the connection; he was clearly too much the arm chair detective and too good at it to have missed what, to him, surely was obvious.

Zair's only apparent reaction, in fact, was to click his tongue and respond, dryly, that one was apt to get burned playing with matches. He'd have thought that Han, having been scorched to the elbows by his run-in with Imperial corruption, would've learned enough to stay away from the sometimes bigger blowtorches of the underworld. After that, he reiterated his eagerness to see the avllyset, and that was the end of it.

The smuggler had a difficult time believing how easy it had been to gain Zair's cooperation, but apparently, Han had made as good a first impression on him as he had made on Han. Even Chewbacca announced his immediate liking of the fellow after he'd met him less than an hour later. With some time to spare before the opening of his bistro, Zair had insisted on going back to the port with Han and had driven them there himself in his smallish but supremely comfortable and well tuned speeder, a possession which confirmed Solo's suspicions of the man's financial security.

The excitement and awe he displayed upon seeing the avllyset made its owner look upon his instrument in a new light. He'd kept it around, largely because he felt awkwardly grateful to the thing for having been so... instrumental in the rehabilitation of his badly damaged hands; but for the past three years it had sat in his cabin as little more than a unique dust collector. Not *entirely* ignored, for Han was occasionally seized by an urge to prove to himself that he could still play it, but not something he regarded with the reverence and respect Zair so candidly felt. He, the consummate musician — and the spacer had seen evidence of his versatility in the wide variety of instruments he kept about his Hole, all well tended and well used — could only make fumbling attempts to play the complex avllyset, attempts that brought a rise of amusement and pride to the watching spacer, who knew, with no arrogance, that he was much, much better.

Frustrated, Zair requested — politely — a demonstration, which Han refused, feeling suddenly loathe to admit any skill at it, for fear of humiliation. The musician pleaded wistfully, wanting so badly to learn the secrets he was certain the starpilot knew; Han continued to refuse, Zair accused him of not knowing how to play the thing at all, whereupon Chewbacca rose to his captain's defense with the blasé remark that his Clanbrother knew the skill only too well, a fact with which he was thoroughly acquainted, having suffered through all the long and painful months of Han's struggles with therapy.

Zair accepted that as sufficient proof — startling both spacers with his apparent understanding of Wookese — although he also added that they had not heard the last from him on this matter. Having been tantalized by this brief encounter with the rare instrument, he was determined to have more, which meant, he said, that they would be seeing a great deal of him, which was probably only fair, anyway, since Han would undoubtedly be spending so much of his time — and Zair's money! — with Lenduvar and the speeder team. It was only fair that the one footing the bill for it should steal a few moments of indulgence now and then in payment for his generosity, wasn't it?

Han knew then that the performer would give Lenduvar anything he needed to get his speeder ready for the race, up to and including his support in asking the Race Officials to waive their trial requirements. And after listening to the speeder team's joyous and uninhibitedly grateful reactions to that announcement, he also knew that they should never have doubted it for a second. Zair was only human; he had his faults — which several youngsters on the team were only too ready to enumerate: an overwhelming urge to show off his musical talents at every opportunity, unpredictability, occasional wild eccentricity, a tendency to be proud, opinionated, and somewhat self-indulgent — but his outrageous behavior could by and large be excused by the fact that beneath exterior impressions, he was a genuinely decent, humane, and altruistic person who would never use his talents and fiscal advantages to gain personal power of any sort over anyone. Han had seen it in very short order; Lenduvar and those who had known him longer could have had no reason to think their benefactor would back out on them once he'd heard of their plight. No, Zair's financial support had never been a matter seriously worth questioning, as far as Han was concerned.

What was a problem, however, was a minor detail Han hadn't considered when he'd decided to throw in behind the Lenduvar team to help them beat Utar. He had experience and expertise aplenty; he could show these kids how to improve on Mrik's basically good design and turn it into something unbeatably spectacular. He could give them sound advice, innovative help — only they didn't *want* his help. Or, more precisely, they felt compelled to refuse it. This was a design competition, after all; they would win or lose as much on the strength of their speeder's design as on its performance. If they won only after Han helped by showing them how to do what they should have been able to deduce on their own, they wouldn't be winning at all. To adhere strictly to the rules, they had to keep Han from working on the vehicle; to feel that they had truly done it themselves, they had to forbid him from showing or even telling them what to do.

They would allow Han to supervise, to give them advice and warn them if they were going wrong, but they simply didn't want him to hand them the answers on a gilded platter. If he could point them in the right directions, they felt they would be able arrive at the correct answers on their own; if not.... They surrendered that possibility to Fate.

Han thought it a rather hopelessly naive attitude — after all, did teachers teach by *implying* all the answers to their students' questions? — but he wasn't really in any position to tell them how stupid he thought they were being. And when all was said and sifted, he had to admit, privately, that the youngsters were to be admired for their honesty and honor. It would never help them win races, nor would it do them much good in the Real World, but he knew from his own youth the feelings of self-respect and pride that came from knowing one had done his best, and done it honestly. Such idealism left one open to be hurt, it was true, but it also laid the best possible foundation for a healthy and strong self-image. One can never be wholly crushed by one's enemies when he has been honest with himself, knowing both his strengths as well as his limitations, and if these youngsters lost to Utar, they would come out of the match wiser for the experience of having faced down the adversary who had tried to deny them even the opportunity of a fair match.

But while that was just wonderful for these young- and soon-to-be adults, it was the pits for Han. Not only was supervisory work dull as hell — and much as he hated it, he felt compelled to oblige them by sitting around to offer advice as needed, if for no other reason than it was he who had forged the agreement to get them the money and the needed parts — but he had been counting on making a more direct contribution to the work as a part of his backhanded revenge on Utar. It wasn't easy to sit by and twitch when he knew the opportunity might slip by at any moment, lost because of some *t'tchazikre* kid's sense of fair play. It also didn't help for him to know that Chewie supported this activity, partly because it would give the human occupation while the Wookiee was at work, and partly because it would keep him quiet — *too* quiet, Han thought grumpily — and off his feet.

Things were getting heartily boring for the smuggler when, on the third day of work — frenetic activity for the team, dull thumb-tiddling with occasional moments of genuine interest for Han — Zair decided to come around and have an actual look at the mess he was helping finance back into shape. The musician claimed to know absolutely nothing about speeders outside his everyday driving of one, but he clicked his tongue in required sympathy at the wreck which the team was trying so hard to return to prime condition. He expressed his doubts about the likelihood of success, although he wished them all the best in their efforts — but he showed an inordinate amount of interest in the discarded chunks of twisted plasteel and metal that had been kept to show as proof to the Race Officials. They were now sitting in a trash bin, ignored, their purpose served to positive effect: The required trial had been waived, and they would go directly into the final competition, if they were ready.

"A proper mess," Zair declared to Han with a shake of his head after he peered and poked and sniffed at the debris for several lengthy moments. "Have you any idea what was used to do it? It couldn't have been terribly conspicuous, or I'm sure someone on the team would've noticed it — I swear they see every speck of dust that doesn't belong on that speeder. But if these people are as loathsome as you've described, I can't imagine they'd have had an easy time getting hold of something that would be so inconspicuous yet so destructive."

Han — who, after finally prodding the youngsters onto the proper path in their attempts to redesign the powertrain, had joined Zair in a desperate bid to avert terminal boredom — came very near to laughing at the fellow's seemingly blind innocence. "I hate to disillusion you, but you'd be surprised to know just how easy it really is."

A querulous glance of the silver eyes prompted a more detailed explanation. "I'm not saying that the *zvind'wats* who actually did the dirty work could've gotten their hands on restricted high-tech items like sensor-invisible explosives without one hell of a lot of trouble — but you obviously don't know Utar. He's plugged into outlets you wouldn't expect, and the slime he works for has connections that make his setup look like a kiddie network. There's scum everywhere in this galaxy, in every city on every planet, working every kind of job you can think of. If Utar wanted something that

he could use to quietly wipe out an opponent, he could get it — guaranteed, and it wouldn't matter if the source was a backalley drunkard or an Imperial Senator. For him, sabotaging Mrik's speeder was a snap."

Zair absorbed this without so much as a sound; Han found him to be a delightfully polite listener, thoroughly attentive, no doubt a byproduct of his obsession with deductive reasoning. He studied the wreckage as he listened. "Perhaps we should have a chemical analysis done of the residue," he reflected, scraping the dirtied plasteel with one fingernail. A brownish-yellow film came off along with flakes of the scorched violet enamel. "If the compound used was unique enough, it might provide us with important evidence to use against the culprits...."

"Wouldn't do any good," he was assured. "Not only were the Race Officials 'way ahead of you, but I could've told 'em it'd be useless. Utar may stink, but he's not entirely stupid. He knows enough to cover his tracks, or not leave them in the first place."

Zair rubbed his fingers together, divesting them of the dirt, then dusted them off against his black slacks. He blinked at the spacer. "How so?"

"The stuff he used wasn't sophisticated at all. It's common — *real* common. You could mix it in your own kitchen; I'll wager you've got all the ingredients right on hand. A little of this, a little of that — you can buy everything you need at any mediocre mercantile — let it sit for a few days under refrigeration, and when everything's precipitated out, you dump the liquid residue and end up with a lump of goo that looks like plumber's putty but could blow a hole through armor plating, given the right stimulus. And the speeder provided *that* all by itself: a minute or so at a high enough temperature, it eats through the fuel tank, and *boom!*"

A frown of disappointment darkened the musician's features. He gave the debris a bit of extra scrutiny, then sighed. "A shame. After listening to you recount this... creature's abominable habits and having seen their result, I'd begun to entertain the notion of finding some way to use this affair to have him and his organization removed from our locale."

"A marvelous thought," Han agreed, "but you aren't the first one to come along the idea. Utar's too clever, too thorough. If assassins with years of experience, illegal weapons, and no moral compunctions couldn't do in the *tchagran*, what makes you think *you* can?"

Zair's eyes glittered impishly. "Maybe because I *do* have morals."

Han snorted. "I'll bet a lot of the Imps and local police who've tried it thought they did, too — and look where *that* got them. He's *still* on the streets."

"Ah, but I have something valuable that they didn't."

"Which is?"

"Someone who has firsthand familiarity with the man, his methods, his associates — the very world in which he operates." He gave the smuggler a winningly charming smile.

The charm, however, was wasted on Han. "Oh, now, wait a minute, don't count me in on this!"

"Why not? You want to see this Utar get his, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"And you're certain he was ultimately responsible for Mrik's 'accident,' aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"And you would like to see him permanently incarcerated and out of all our hair, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then what's the argument?" The performer made it sound as if Solo was being inexplicably obstructive. "I want to see justice done, you want revenge, we'd both enjoy knowing we helped achieve it—"

"But I can't sing on him!"

"Not even on Utar?"

He asked it in ever so reasonable tones; Han made noises of frustration. "That's not fair! You don't understand...."

"Oh, I understand better than you think," Zair assured him quite casually. "You don't want to get a reputation as an informer. A deadly label to acquire in your business, I should think. I can appreciate that. But I have also come to appreciate your contempt for this — how shall I put it? — *ans'thikhre* bastard, and I can't imagine a better way to avenge yourself against him. I'd do all I could, of course, to make certain your name isn't officially involved...."

"That'd be a trick," the spacer quipped sardonically. "How do you plan to pull it off?"

Only a small, rather secret looking smile touched the taller man's features. "I have my ways," was all he would say.

It was a frustratingly enigmatic answer. Zair had money, but Han doubted that any fortune he held would be enough to buy the cooperation of the police, the Imps, the S'Luas company, the Race Officials, and whatever media carrion eaters might be attracted by a scandal. He made a rudely skeptical sound. "And *unofficially*?"

The smile became a grin. "Well, I'm certain Mrik and his friends have told you by now what a terrible showoff I am, and how I pride myself in my ability to unravel mysteries. You wouldn't hold it against me, would you, if I enlisted your help but took *all* the credit for myself — would you?"

His emphasis was subtle but pointed, gravid with implications. Han gave him a long, blank look, then burst into laughter. "And those half-brained idiots who work for Utar would never get away with pinning the blame on me without so much as a whisper of proof, not even in the Business. You—" he leveled one finger at the still grinning musician in amiable accusation "—are too damn sharp for your own good. But taking on all the responsibility to divert Utar's people from me isn't as simple a solution as it sounds. Aren't you worried about making the wrong kind of enemies for yourself? Just 'cause you're a law abiding citizen doesn't mean you're immune to retaliation. If we *do* find a way to pull this off, those heavies that used me for mugging practice wouldn't think twice about doing worse to you, if they know who are and what you did." He was genuinely concerned, for he liked Zair and didn't even want to imagine the horrible things those singleminded killers would do to him as a simple matter of vengeance.

A sort of utter seriousness settled about the performer. "If they know who I am," he said, his voice flat, "they won't." There was no humor in his voice; he meant what he said, in deadly earnest, though clearly with great reluctance.

Han caught his abrupt change in mood; he stared at the man, as if he were seeing him for the first time. At the bottom line, he knew very little about Zair; although he found no reason to start changing his overall opinions of him, he did begin to wonder if there was more to the fellow than met the eye. That he had heard no surname whatsoever connected with "Zair" had not escaped Han; could it possibly be because the face he seemed to remember belonged to—

"I'm not worried," the musician added with sudden brightness, shrugging the matter aside and very effectively derailing the train of Han's thoughts. "And you shouldn't, either. It'll all come right, Captain, believe me. If, of course, we manage to find the hard evidence we need to finger Utar in the first place. Tell me: Just how familiar *are* you with him and his people and their methods?"

The enthusiasm in his voice was in itself a sort of cajoling palliative; it defused the smuggler's suspicions for the moment, although it did not and could not entirely still his less conscious ruminations. There was something important being left unsaid about this puzzling man, a deliberate if unacknowledged omission of certain facts. He didn't have an answer yet, but Han decided to take his lead from Zair himself: He would watch, observe, find the information he needed, and before long, he would know just who this mysteriously likeable Motherworlder was.

## VI

Maintaining a properly aloof and suspicious bearing was rendered difficult, however, when, later that very afternoon, Zair suggested that the investigations he had in mind might be more easily accomplished if Han were able to get about on two whole legs. To this end, he arranged everything with his own physician — an eminently talented, properly equipped, and no doubt top-flight lady whose office Han was certain he would not have been so much as permitted to enter without full references attesting to his character and fiscal solvency — paid for the services, and even went so far as to take Han there himself. Cynically, the spacer felt the last had been as much an act of kindness as a necessity, for the aforementioned reasons; emotionally, he was no less than astonished. Sensing his amazement without verbalization, Zair forestalled inquisition by claiming that this was indeed a necessity, if he was to indulge his passion for amateur detective work to the fullest, but Han was not convinced. Skilled though the performer may have been at dissembling, he had not been able to fully mask his reaction to Solo's condition.

And it had not been a matter of sympathy for abuse at the hands of criminals: it was a subdued but deep and abiding contempt for the callous indifference of Shilisian society toward those who, for whatever reason, fell under the heading of underprivileged. Zair did not seem to be philanthropic — he had none of the social activist or angel of mercy demeanor — but if he had always been susceptible to generosity out of empathy or pity or compassion, Han could well understand why his Motherworld family might not want him about where his altruistic tendencies could prove to be an embarrassment to their social stoicism.

All of this occurred to Han while the doctor went to work fusing the various cracks in his leg bones. It tempered his suspicions about the man into mere — if all the more powerful — curiosity, but it also did not prompt him to refuse the help. He was becoming thoroughly tired of his temporary handicaps, and if he could lose them by allowing the musician to indulge his altruism.... Well, who was Han to deny him the small joys in life?

And it did turn out to be beneficial for them to both have full freedom of movement, for, as soon as the doctor pronounced him fit to walk again, Zair explained his first plan of action: to talk with all the competitors in the race to see if any of them had seen anything suspicious — the Utar team included. Still sore in spite of the clinic's fine work, Han was not terribly inclined to meet his assailants face-to-face while still hampered by cast and crutches. He didn't expect anything to actually happen while they were there, but streetfighting reflexes were hard to suppress.

Over the next few days, they found nothing useful in their chats with Lenduvar's opponents, at least nothing more than they had already known and expected. As with Zair's quasi-protégé, the members of the other teams were single-mindedly busy with their own entries and hadn't paid a attention to anything that didn't directly affect them or their speeders. They were treated to a bit more loquaciousness when they approached Utar's group — or, rather, when Zair approached. Han remained in the background, having assumed the role of an innocuous and totally uninvolved chauffeur. The actual racers were relative innocents who either did not know or did not care who Han was, and, at this point, the heavies who provided their muscle and protection had no way of knowing that the spacer had developed any personal interest in his "new employer's" racing team. In mutual agreement, the two Corellians had decided to take every effort to make sure they remained ignorant of that fact.

Two of the three "security personnel" — the spokething, the zhinth, and the T'Shaaimité from the mugging party — seemed amused by Han's presence. The latter pair exchanged mutters and uncharitable chuckles, glancing repeatedly at the shorter human while their leader, a Bholgrani, answered Zair's questions. Han noticed their attention — he figured that the laugh they were having at his expense was rooted in contempt: he had, after all, tried to set himself up in opposition to their master and was now, apparently, reduced to hiring himself out as a mere speeder driver — and deliberately filled his mind with thoughts of the most boring and innocuous drive he could summon. He didn't know how much he believed in the T'Shaaimité reputation for hearing thoughts, but he wasn't going to take any chances.

Zair, in the meantime, was covering the same ground he'd covered with the other racers, and getting just as far: nowhere. "I can't imagine," the musician said with overt petulance after the Bholgrani had answered all his queries with definitive negatives, "that with more than three hundred people in constant residence on these grounds, all with some sort of round the clock security, that not a single person saw anything out of the ordinary that might give us some clue as to who's responsible for this... heinous crime." He spoke with the exact amount of righteous indignation to give his listeners the impression that he was very much what he appeared to be: a pampered brat of the upper classes, loaded with money, and very much used to having his way; he had even gone so far as to cultivate it by wearing a sinfully — and ostentatiously — expensive outfit of the most fashionable black and violet silks. His performance amused both Han and the thugs, but in very different ways. The smuggler was reasonably certain it was largely an act, for the

others' benefit; the heavies chortled uncharitably at what they took for a display of naivete, which they felt they could use and manipulate to mask their culpability.

The Bholgrani shrugged. "With that many people about, it's not easy to spot something or someone a little out of the ordinary." God, but that smooth voice sounded incongruous coming out of that face! "My staff and I—" He gestured to the others. The zhinth made a gargly sound that was either an expression of laughter or nausea; the T'Shaamite merely sniffed, unwrapped a piece of candy he had taken from his pocket, popped it into his mouth, then made a great show of neatly folding the bit of foil before tossing it to the dirt, all the while giving their guests a most unimpressed eye. "—have been most conscientious in our jobs, but we haven't seen anything unusual or suspicious. Have we?" His comrades made innocent remarks of agreement.

Zair, however, crossed his arms and assumed a stance of stubborn frustration. "But it can't have gone entirely unnoticed!" he insisted. His words were filled with an elitist's hard-headed certainty of rightness rather than the conviction of the genuinely knowledgeable. "My lads didn't do it themselves — someone had to have gotten into their quarters and set it!"

"But maybe they did," the Bholgrani suggested darkly.

Zair feigned shocked astonishment. "Wha—what do you mean? What are you trying to say, sir?"

The thug shrugged, as guileless as a babe. "Nothing — except, perhaps, that you might not know your associates as well as you think. You're backing them financially, aren't you?"

"Yes...."

"Well, what's to say they didn't take your money, spend only as much as they needed to make a passable entry, then pocketed the rest, counting on a conveniently timed 'accident' to save them the effort and exposure in actual competition?"

The musician sputtered, his mien that of one trying to deny something he knows is true. Han smothered the laugh he wanted to release — leave it to punks like these to try to twist the blame onto the victims themselves — but it escaped in a half-voiced snort.

The T'Shaamite heard him, and regarded him with cold, calculating jade-colored eyes. "Perhaps it was not your young colleagues at all," he suggested in a whispery, almost pitchless tenor, "but another employee." He insinuated but did not directly accuse; such was the manner of his people.

That manner, however, worked very much to the Corellians' benefit. Zair was able to pretend that he did not understand. "I'm very careful in selecting those who work for me. I can't think of a one who would have reason to do such a thing."

The zhinth giggled, an ugly sound; the T'Shaamite merely shrugged and ate another piece of candy. It made no difference to him if the man was dense. The Bholgrani intervened. "If we hear or remember anything that might be useful, we'll inform you, of course. But I'm afraid we've simply been too busy to have noticed any goings-on outside our own quarters."

Zair smiled, pure sympathy. "I understand. I do appreciate your cooperation, however — it's more than I've had from some. You will remember to keep in touch, won't you?"

The spokes thing smiled back. It was uglier than the zhinth's cackle. "Of course. We do have to stick together in these things — after all, we could be the next ones the criminals hit, couldn't we?"

"We should only be so lucky," Han grumbled to the musician as they headed back to the Lenduvar garages. "I'd love to see one of their own bombs blow up in their faces. You didn't honestly think you'd get anything useful out of them, did you?"

The darker head shook. "No, nothing directly applicable, at any rate — but I had to try. And we've given them no reason to think they're suspect; we did question everyone else in the competition, after all." There was the coloration

of reflection to his timbre; Han glanced at him and saw it mirrored in his expression. "Just how well do you know these people, anyway?"

The spacer shrugged. "Utar I know only too well. His hired creeps I only know from our little dance in the alley, last week. Why? Did you see something that might connect them to the sabotage?"

This time, Zair's head shake was heavy with regret. "Not really. But they're a peculiar lot. Most peculiar...."

"I could think of a few better descriptions," Han quipped sarcastically.

The musician half smiled, crookedly. "I'm sure you could."

"So, what do we do next? We've talked to everyone, checked everything twice, gotten everyone's alibis...."

"Not quite everyone's," Zair corrected. "Maybe our hideous friends had the right idea, after all. I think it's time we asked a few questions of Mrik and his friends."

Solo found the announcement appalling. "You don't honestly believe that shit the Bholgrani was shoveling? Stars, man, I know they're the ones responsible; this whole thing has Utar's stink to it...."

"I know, and I'm not maligning your expertise. But think a moment, Elthan." Since they'd embarked on this detective venture together, he had acquired the habit of calling Han that, and the spacer hated it. It made him wince every time, without fail, but he couldn't seem to find the heart to tell the performer how much he despised it. It was clear to him that Zair meant no discourtesy. Han knew more than he had ever cared to learn about the traditional forms and fashions of the Motherworld's elite society, and one was the custom of addressing adults by the full given name, as a deferential acknowledgment of maturity and social acceptance. It seemed somehow an over-reaction for him to correct a person who was simply trying, in the habitual fashion of the circles in which he had been raised, to indicate his respect for the one so addressed. Recognizing that, Solo bit his tongue and allowed him the quirk, making Zair the only person who would ever have his tolerant permission, however tacit, to call him by his loathsome legal name.

Zair did not so much as glimpse his companion's shudder of reaction; his eyes were fixed on a bit of gilded paper he'd picked up from the ground on their return walk to the speeder, and with which he had been toying ever since. With a sidelong glance, Han identified it as one of the candy wrappers the T'Shaaimites had littered about his team's compound. The spacer wondered how this might be connected with the kids on Lenduvar's team, but Zair's remarks provided no such link. "If the culprits will not admit to having seen anything out of the ordinary," the musician mused aloud, "then perhaps our young friends — who are considerably more motivated to recall such matters — will. It's worth the asking, wouldn't you say?"

## VII

It was late afternoon by the time they finished talking with Utar's lackeys; the grounds of the track facilities were large, and so it was nearly sunset before the pair returned to Lenduvar's assigned facilities. Two of the larger and more threatening team members had taken up a post guarding the main entrance to the garage/hangar. They were quite alert, almost excessively so, but they recognized their various benefactors in an instant and let them pass with no more than smiles of greeting. Inside, Mrik, Tlanni, and five others were at work on the speeder's ignition system, made nervous by the interested observation of one rather imposing Wookiee.

Chewie bared his teeth at his friend and captain as he and Zair entered, the feral mischief of his grin revealing. The boys on the team had seen Chewbacca before, of course — the humanoid had been intrigued by what he had heard from Han, and could generally be counted on to show up after his dock work was completed, to see what progress had been made — but they had not yet been able to reconcile his ferocious seeming exterior with Han's pledge of his gentility. Chewie didn't mind; he said it was good practice for him, honing his acting skills for those times when he needed to present a fearsome face to the punier foes who so often delighted in disrupting his and Han's existence.

"I think that perhaps our young friends here may have a real chance of besting the competition," he announced to the elder humans, nodding toward the results of an afternoon's worth of diligent work. "It will be a sight to see, will it not? Surial Utar, losing to a group of younglings. Does it not delight the imagination?"

From his small, room shaking chuckles, the humanoid was clearly enamored of the prospect; Han, however, displayed greater skepticism. "It'd delight mine more if we could add a good, long vacation in an Imp prison to the formula."

Alerted by his partner's tone, Chewie looked up from the activity surrounding the speeder. "You found nothing?"

"Nothing we didn't expect to find. It seems everyone around here has eyes only for his or her or its own equipment."

"The law of the jungle," the Wookiee snorted. "Look after your own interests first, last, and always. You can't have been surprised to discover how true that is yet again."

Han grumbled. "I'm not. Just... disappointed. I guess I was really counting on finding *something* to blow the wraps off those *tchaig'tn* punks."

Having moved at a slower pace, Zair only then drew up behind the pair of spacers. He made a sound that somewhat resembled both laughter and a grunt. "Don't listen to him, my good Wookiee. For someone of such a stubbornly determined bearing, your Captain seems also to hold the Galactic Record for the lowest frustration threshold."

"And do you blame me?" Solo rebutted. "We just spent the last six hours trying to get answers out of a few hundred people with all the conversational flair of a wall. That isn't exactly what I'd call encouraging."

The musician didn't share his attitude. "There *is* a solution to this puzzle. We just haven't had time to collect and assemble all the pieces."

Han mimicked the sound Zair had made earlier to perfection. "And this nutcase—" He cocked one finger at the taller Corellian while addressing his Clanbrother. "—keeps forgetting that we don't have all the time in the world, either. If we're going to pin this rap on Utar and his people, we have to do it before they clear out after the race. And I do mean 'clear out,' friend," he said with pointed emphasis for Zair's benefit. "The longer we give them, the more we take the chance that if there *is* any evidence, they'll find a way of making sure we never find it."

"Which is precisely why we must dig more deeply," was the performer's unruffled response. "In order to be successful criminals, they must know enough to remove or avoid any obvious traces of their culpability, from the start. What we need to find is the *inobvious*: the small clues they might not even think of as a potential link to their activities."

Solo's response was a dubious noise; Chewbacca gave him a reproving glance. "Well, that *does* seem to be a logical conclusion...."

"Logical?" The hazel eyes assumed the proportions of a skeptic's surprise. "We're talking about Surial Utar, here. Y'know, the guy who picks 'em for the highest muscle versus brain ratio he can get, emphasis on the muscle. He wants 'em strong, not smart. I don't think the word *logical* has ever entered into his thugs' vocabulary, not even that smooth talking Bholgrani."

"Which only serves to further strengthen my case," Zair insisted with the greatest of assurance. "If they *aren't* very intelligent, they can't possibly have thought to cover every tiny remnant of their tracks. Oh, they can wipe off their fingerprints, erase their footprints — but some clues will still be there, Elthan. With patience, we'll find them."

Han deftly twisted his now habitual grimace into an expression of exasperation. "And how patient will we have to be? Like I said, there isn't much time...."

"There'll be enough."

His confidence did not inspire a like reaction in the spacer. The day's activities hadn't been the sort of diversion for which he'd been looking. As Zair had been the logical — that word again! — choice to do most of the talking, Han had stayed in the background, watching, listening, trying to spot anything which might be used to help their case against the saboteurs — and all he'd found was a new sort of boredom. To make matters worse, he hadn't especially enjoyed their little visit to the Utar compound. Perhaps the crimelord's sniggering henchmen had been right all along; all this talk about finding hidden clues and putting together puzzles out of pieces he couldn't even see was making Han feel remarkably useless. Tired, frustrated, and eminently cranky, he glanced from Zair to Chewie and back again, favoring their placid faces with a sour expression. "And do you really think one of these kids is the key?"

Zair made a vague gesture. "Think? Yes. Know? Not for certain. Not yet. Not until I ask a few salient questions—"

"Then ask!" Han's patience was displaying definite limits.

Abashed, the performer conceded the point with a grin. "Mrik!" As Lenduvar was not in sight, he called in a voice that carried to every corner of the spacious hangar.

Almost immediately, the youth's head popped up from the tangle of equipment and bodies working on the speeder's open powertrain. "Sir?"

All the youngsters on the team called Zair that to his face, a display of politeness which, every time he saw it, tickled Han's curiosity as to the man's precise identity. Chewbacca had suggested that he ask Zair outright, but Solo was not inclined to be so obvious. The musician must have reasons behind his pursuit of semi-anonymity; simply asking for an explanation would doubtless be an effort doomed to failure. Besides, Han had developed a perverse urge to prove to himself that he could play this amateur detective game as well as anyone.

"You're best informed as to what goes on around here, aren't you?" Zair asked in his normal voice.

Lenduvar snorted softly, indignant. "Well, it *is* my project, sir."

"Indeed it is. Do you think you could recall a few details concerning the day before the accident?"

"What sort of details?"

"Oh, nothing of a major nature. What work was going on, who was doing what, the hours you kept — that type of thing."

Lenduvar straightened fully, slamming the spanner he held down onto the speeder's body; the resulting clang was sharp and harsh. "You *bet* I remember details!" he grumbled. His anger over the incident was still quite strong. "How can I forget? We'd been working on that regulator for two days — it kept going out of calibration, and we were trying to get it locked in."

Zair's brows arched with his startlement. "Surely, you don't mean you *personally* worked on it that long? For two entire days?" Such persistence was quite beyond his belief.

Han tried very hard, with only partial success, not to laugh. Obviously, this man had never worked in any field even remotely associated with design engineers, pilots, drivers, or even hobbyist enthusiasts, else he would not have questioned the statement. "Of *course* he means he worked on it personally, that long," the spacer could not help but tease. He liked the musician well enough, but sometimes, Zair could be too adamantly artistic and out of touch with the rest of creation for Han's tastes. "But was everyone else on the crew at it for that long, too? Eyes that tired miss things, y'know."

"I know," Lenduvar assured him, the tone of his voice such that Han suspected he had recently missed something very important for that very reason — the planted explosive, perhaps? "But no, it was really just Tlanni, Driu, Marial, and me." He gestured to each as he spoke, the third being a slim and tallish young woman of a similar Corellian-type build and coloring. "The rest of the crew came on and off in shifts, some sleeping, some working, some running errands, some standing guard." At the last, he glared pointedly at a largish, chubby youth of his own age, black of hair, ruddy of complexion, dressed in gray coveralls; he was the team's computer expert.

The lad glared back, indignant. "Let's not start *that* all over again!" he snapped in a nondescript tenor. "I'm telling you — I swear on my BloodOath, blast it! — I *didn't* fall asleep on watch that night!"

Chewie whuffed softly; Han and Zair exchanged glances. They'd heard the same particulars Lenduvar had given the authorities, but none had heard of this argument before. "What's this?" the latter asked of anyone who would provide an answer.

Both Mrik and the accused youth started speaking at the same time, making their debate unintelligible; Zair ordered them to speak one at a time, Lenduvar first. Mrik did so gladly, all the while enduring his adversary's heated glance. A warning sniff from his backer cautioned him against exaggeration, so he tried to speak fairly.

"The regulator got knocked out of sync during our first trial; it took us a long time to get it working right again, almost up until the last minute before the second round — a couple of hours before dawn that morning, in fact. Since Driu and I had to be awake enough to make the drive that afternoon, we decided to catch some sleep before race time. Tlanni and Marial were worn out, too, so I told them to get some rest. There were still a few minor things to be finished up before the trial, but they wouldn't take long, so we got Jynari to sit watch while the rest of us took a break. I *thought* he'd be the best choice; he's had some self defense training, and he keeps telling us he's an insomniac, can't sleep much at nights. How was I supposed to know he'd pick that night to fall asleep on the job?"

"I *didn't* fall asleep!" the accused, Jynari, defended. "I'm telling you, I was wide awake the whole time, and *no one* came into or out of this hangar!"

"Then when *did* it happen, bantha breath?" Tlanni demanded. "I came back about an hour after dawn, and I sure as hell didn't see anyone else around."

"Maybe *you* fell asleep on the job," was the acid retort.

"Not bloody likely...!"

"I came to work not long after Tlanni," Marial supplied, "and he was wide awake."

"Then maybe *Tlanni* was the one who planted it!"

That accusation resulted in a cacophony of denials, arguments, and furious remarks, ended only by Chewie's ear shattering roar. Most everyone fell silent, except for the indignant Tlanni, whose sense of injury demanded an apology. "You know damn well I wasn't the one!" he spat at Jynari. "Why would I waste all my time working on this thing if I knew I was only going to blow it up, eventually?"

"I don't know — maybe to make your cover convincing."

"You're grasping at straws," Lenduvar insisted. "I've known Tlanni for years, and I know he wouldn't do this to me."

The chubby young man gave his crew chief a glowering glare. "You've known me for years, too, but I don't see that making a difference. You always believed my insomnia was real before — how come you don't believe it now?"

The sullen hurt in Jynari's voice caused Mrik sudden remorse and confusion. "... I don't disbelieve you, Ari, but..." He ran one hand through his hair. "Oh, I don't know anymore! *Someone* planted that charge on the speeder after I turned in that night; it wasn't there before I left. They couldn't've done it while Lanni and Marial were around — too many people too close to the speeder. Right?" Uncertain, he looked to Jynari, who seemed unconvinced, then to Zair, the resident expert on deductive reasoning.

"It sounds possible to me," the elder man conceded blandly, preferring to stay out of the youngsters' fight.

Lenduvar licked his lips. "Then it *had* to have happened while you were on watch, Ari. Somebody slipped in without you seeing it—"

"Not past me." The boy was adamant. "I kept my eyes open, Mrik."

"Maybe they came in some other way. It's a big place, after all."

"Yeah, and with only two entrances. The bay doors were barred and sealed — we would've known if someone had broken in."

"Which means they *had* to have come in past you," Tlanni concluded with a sort of vengeful glee.

"No way!" Jynari insisted. "Once everyone else was out, I locked up tight. You remember, Rial." He looked to the girl for support. "I had to let you in when you arrived — and come to think of it, I had to do the same thing for *you*, Beranis." He pointed at Tlanni. "If *you* couldn't get in without my knowing it, how d'you think someone *else* did it?"

"Maybe *you're* the traitor, then," the shorter boy shot back, vengeance for Jynari's earlier remark.

That set off a new round of shouts and accusations and counter-accusations, this time with the addition of a few flailing fists. Jynari managed to land one solid punch on Tlanni's jaw before Chewbacca intervened, literally blocking one from the other. The antagonists continued to glare at one another, but, daunted by the Wookiee's intimidating presence, each withdrew.

"Y'know, this is just the kind of stupidity Utar's probably counting on to keep him above suspicion," Han said once a semblance of order had been regained. "You start blaming each other for it, forget that you *know* none of you did it, and pretty soon, you also start forgetting just who was responsible." He made a soft and thoroughly disagreeable sound. "Maybe I made a mistake, thinking you kids'd be of any use."

"That's not fair!" both Tlanni and Jynari began in protest.

The spacer was not impressed. "Isn't it? From the way you've been acting — like a bunch of *k'shassten* idiots — I was getting the impression you don't *want* to nail the people who really *did* do it."

The antagonists spluttered denial; Chewbacca chuckled quietly. \*An impression applicable to someone else we know, isn't it, Han?\* he added under his breath, nudging his partner to be certain the human knew precisely what he meant.

Han flinched his arm away from the Wookiee, unappreciative of his attempted humor, needling the human for his own negative attitudes. Zair spoke up. "It seems to me that we have a paradox here, then," he said, his manner almost sing-song reflective. "Jynari claims to have been alert all through his watch, the unbroken seals and unforced locks would seem to support him — yet Mrik assures us there was nothing suspicious about the speeder before he left for the evening — or, rather, morning. I know you both to be as honest and trustworthy as the next person, but your claims simply are not supported by the immediate evidence."

"I'm *not* lying!" The heavier youth was most insistent.

"Neither am I!" Mrik echoed.

"I'm not saying either of you are," the musician soothed. He paused briefly, silver eyes narrowing, visible evidence of hard thinking. "Could it possibly have happened at the track itself, just prior to the trial?"

"Not likely," was Han's opinion. "I saw the setup they've got around here, all the monitor systems, scanners, vid-equipment. Utar may be underhanded, but I doubt even his hired punks could've gotten into the track systems and wiped out all the records — too obvious, too suspicious. The authorities would know something was up, just by the omissions. No, if anyone had been hanging around Mrik's pit area, it would've been recorded, and it would've been seen by now in the investigations. We haven't heard anything like that from them, have we?"

"No," Lenduvar verified, nodding. "And once my crew started work again, any unauthorized person hanging around would've been spotted. I'm sure of it."

"You can't be too sure," the smuggler quipped cynically.

Chewbacca nudged him, growling a rebuke for his pessimism, which the youths did not need. Zair agreed with Chewie. "We could spend forever on this investigation if we're going to take *that* tack. Let's assume everyone's telling the truth: the locks were untampered, nothing was wrong with the speeder prior to the evening break, Jynari didn't fall asleep, and no one outside the crew came near the speeder between the break and the trial."

Han's laugh had a rather scornful rasp to it. "Fine, go ahead and assume all that. But it sounds to me like you've just alibied yourself into a corner."

The performer studied him for a bit, then smiled, sheepishly. "Well, yes, I suppose I have, haven't I? No one's perfect, after all."

The hazel eyes rolled heavenward. "Oh, wonderful! How the hell do you expect to prove anything, then, if you're willing to concede everyone's excuses? That's not what I'd call good detective work."

"There's good and there's good...."

"Yeah, and there's useless and there's useless, too. If no one came into the hangar that night, how *did* the explosive get set? By magic?"

Zair frowned. "I wouldn't say magic, but...." He hesitated, nibbling at one corner of his lower lip, then looked up suddenly, directly at Lenduvar. "Are you *certain* nothing out of the ordinary happened that evening?"

"As sure as I can be...."

"Think! Did anyone or anything unexpected come around, perhaps on the most innocent of errands or business?"

"No, at least no one I know of. It was just the usual gang. Oh, Jynari called for some food a little while before we turned in, but that was all...."

The three elders' attention was once again riveted. "Delivered?" Han asked.

Mrik shrugged. "Sure, but we'd called the same outfit before. The track people recommended them to all participants — they've got good rates, and the food isn't bad. Everyone uses them, the other teams, too." He shifted position uncomfortably. "I didn't think there was any reason we shouldn't," he defended. "They had S'Luas' okay, and Jynari and some of the others'd been working for ten hours without a meal break."

"I'm not criticizing," Zair assured him. "But did they arrive before or after you broke for the night?"

"Before," Tlanni provided. "I remember pretty well. The delivery guy showed up 'bout ten minutes before we pulled out. Glutton there got the stuff people decided they were too tired to eat."

Jynari favored the smaller youth with a look of pure spite; a soft rumble from the watching Wookiee warned him against more graphic displays. "I didn't eat *everything*, bit-brain," he growled back at Tlanni. "I ate my share, and dumped the rest of it. I'm *not* greedy, like some people I know."

The mech made a face back at him, childishy close to sticking out his tongue. Zair sighed reprovingly. "How wonderful to know that the money I give you is used so diligently." His tone was pleasant, but undeniably chastising as well. Aware of their wastefulness, several responsible parties found reason to look elsewhere. "Did you recognize the delivery person?"

"Sure—" Tlanni began.

"Don't lie, Lanni," Marial interrupted. "You weren't the one who dealt with him. I was — and I can't say I remember having seen him make the rounds before."

The eyes of her teammates immediately centered on the girl. "You mean, you let a stranger into the hangar?" Whoever said it sounded appalled.

She flushed, but her glare was lethal. "No, I don't mean that. I picked the stuff up at the door — he never came inside."

"Why didn't you mention this sooner?" Lenduvar asked, sounding betrayed. "A stranger in the compound—"

"I didn't say he was a stranger!" Marial defended. "I've seen him around the track before this. I think he's on one of the other teams — and before you start railing at me about that, Gamrik Lenduvar, let me remind you that I'm not the first person to have let other crew people into our compound! There've been plenty of other deliveries brought in by people from the other teams — you've done it yourself, taken stuff to the people next door to save the delivery guy the time. I didn't think it was anything worth mentioning. He never even saw the inside of the hangar, for frith's sake!"

She was quite righteously incensed; the smile Zair gave her was pure mollification. "I'm sure you did nothing wrong," he said, "and I'm also sure your friends know it. But do you remember anything about the person? What he or she looked like, dressed like, acted like?"

Marial shrugged. "Not too clearly. It was awfully late; I was tired, it was dark — but I'm telling you, he never came inside. He couldn't possibly have done anything to sabotage the speeder."

"For a fact. But do humor me, Marial. Can you remember anything about him?"

The girl's dark eyes narrowed; she twisted the end of one equally dark braid as she scoured her memory. "Not much. He was real thin, taller than you, sir — and dark, I remember dark. That's why I know I've seen him around before. I haven't seen too many people with black-black skin." She squinted more deeply, then shook her head. "I only saw him for a few seconds. That's all I remember."

"I'd say that's quite enough." Zair's smile became one of approval. "Quite enough." He turned toward Han, who, by his expression, had come to a similar conclusion. "Sounds like a T'Shaaimite to me, don't you think?"

"Well, I doubt there're too many other people who'd be hanging around the track in the middle of the night who'd fit that description." A network of fine thought lines crackled the spacer's face. "Doesn't it sound just a little bit suspicious to you? I mean, the last one outside the team anyone remembers seeing around the compound just happens to be one of Utar's heavies — and what in the name of all the stars was he doing up at that hour, anyway? T'Shaaimites aren't nocturnal, and his team had already completed its second round trial; I doubt they'd've been up that late if they weren't up to something underhanded. You can't tell me he just happened to've felt the urge for a midnight snack."

"It's always possible," Zair conceded, "but I agree, it seems highly unlikely." He turned back to the youngsters. "Do any of you remember seeing anything like this lying about?"

From one pocket, he withdrew the candy wrapper he'd picked up earlier. The youngsters passed it about, but no one recognized it. "If I had," Lenduvar admitted, "I don't think I'd remember it. That looks pretty much like any other wrapper I've ever seen."

"I suppose so," the musician conceded, nodding as he retrieved and repocketed the scrap. "I thought it might be useful in proving that our T'Shaaimite friend had been in the vicinity."

Tlanni made an unpleasant noise. "Even if we *had* seen one like that, it wouldn't *prove* anything — not unless we found one inside the hangar itself, with the guy's fingerprints all over it."

"And even *that* wouldn't answer the big question," Jynari sniffed. "If this guy *did* do it, how the hell did he get in here? I swear, sir, I didn't fall asleep, and I didn't see or hear anything, either."

"Sure," Tlanni grunted under his breath, getting a furiously stabbing glare from Jynari and a warning grumble from Chewbacca.

Zair intervened quickly. "None of that, now. Fighting about it isn't going to solve anything — and it *will* keep you out of that race if you don't have everything prepared in time." He glowered at them meaningfully. "Now, I suggest you let us worry about proving guilt and get back to work — unless, of course, you'd rather pull out of the race and pay me back all the money I've sunk into this project..."

That notion was met with a chorus of negatives and the swift resumption of labor as everyone returned to the tasks he or she had been about when their backer had arrived. Content that the friction had been erased, at least for the moment, Zair turned back to his newly acquired friends. His expression was commingled thought and puzzlement; both spacers recognized it.

"You do believe they are telling the truth, then?" Chewbacca asked quietly, even though he knew none of the crew could understand him.

"I don't have any reason to believe otherwise," Zair answered, equally subdued. "I've known most of these kids since I arrived on Phan Shilis; Mrik and Marial have been working at the *Hole* for the past year, too — they have a very good duet, quite pleasant to listen to. Besides, they're all Corellian, local or transplanted. They wouldn't do this to me, I'm sure of it."

"You're putting an awful lot of faith in racial loyalty," Han remarked as he watched the vigor with which the crew returned to their work. "That can get you burned, friend — as you ought to know. If your own family'll turn on you, what makes you think these kids won't? They don't owe you even *that* much."

"They wouldn't." As he had been when discussing possible retribution from the underworld, Zair spoke with utter and unshakable certainty — an almost regally frosty sort of attitude that left Han with an uneasy feeling in his gut. But before he could investigate the feeling further, the performer continued. "On a purely personal level, they've never given me reason to doubt their honesty. I won't start doubting it now."

He was adamant; Solo could do nothing but concede him his attitude. "All right, but that doesn't leave you with a whole lot to go on. You've got yourself a classic locked room mystery here. The only time those punks could've gotten at the speeder was during that watch the night before the accident. If the kids didn't do it and had all the doors barred or monitored, how in the names of all your ancestors did the saboteurs get in?"

Zair glanced back over his shoulder at the crew; his eyes did a quick sweep of the floor, the doors, the skylighted ceiling overhead, then returned to the crew. "Is it possible Jynari was drugged?"

Both spacers registered some degree of surprise. "Drugged?" Chewie echoed. "As in put to sleep so he wouldn't know anything was going on?"

"Something like that." The taller Corellian's tone was evasive.

"But you said you believed him when he said he didn't fall asleep...."

"Yes, I believe *he* believes he didn't fall asleep. But it wouldn't have taken long for the trap to be set."

"Wait a minute," Han interrupted, suddenly seeing something the others did not. "Maybe both you *and* the kid are right."

Zair studied him dispassionately, curiously; the Wookiee frowned briefly, then brightened. \*Cinadin?\* he ventured.

Han nodded; Zair scowled. "Hold on, hold on, what are you two talking about?"

"Cinadin," Solo replied. When all he received was a blank look in response, he explained. "No, you wouldn't know about it, would you? I guess there must be some advantages to running on the Edge, after all. Cinadin's a psychotropic drug the T'Shaaimite priests use in their religious ceremonies to 'expand consciousness,' as they put it, get in touch with their gods. It's illegal off T'Shaaim, largely because the religious hierarchy wants to insure their supply of the stuff. The source tree only grows on T'Shaaim, and it's not exactly common. The Empire put a ban on the stuff in a fit of humanitarianism, 'cause the stuff's toxic to almost anything warm blooded."

"Then why would the Empire find a need to outlaw it? It would seem to me that anyone with common sense would avoid it...."

"Sure — but drug peddlers and users aren't exactly brimming with what you could call common sense. Unless it's very carefully measured and prepared, a small dose of the stuff'll bring on a high kinda like some of the Kessel spices — before it kills you. Some of the slimier racketeers aren't above using cinadin to cut their other merchandise; some even use it as a cheater's substitute. And the users never get a chance to complain, 'cause they're dead by the time they realize they've been had."

A restrained shudder passed through Zair's tall frame; distaste shadowed his features. "This all sounds very grisly, but I don't understand what this has to do with our current situation."

This time, Chewbacca offered the explanation. \*Cinadin isn't lethal in small, controlled doses; witness its use in T'Shaaimite rituals. It is very tricky, which is why there isn't much of a market for it off T'Shaaim — but it does, when properly administered, have an effect that would be very much to our point: the state of "expanded consciousness" the T'Shaaimite priests describe is actually a sort of trance, one that, by all accounts, is very much characterized by memory blanks.\*

Zair blinked. "Memory blanks?"

The maned head nodded. \*This is why the more knowledgeable crimelords who traffic in controlled substances will often seek out T'Shaaimites as cohorts. Not only are the Listeners useful in the obvious respects, they also have access to and the ability to use cinadin to this purpose. It requires about an hour for the drug to take full effect; once it has, they can walk right past a guard and do whatever they want under his nose — and he'll never know that anything had happened. There'd be no recollectable loss of memory, no suspicious gap, no unexpected nap, as with a knockout drug. Even under a memory scan, there would be no apparent loss of continuity. That's why those criminals who are knowledgeable of this often prefer to keep it quiet — their little secret. If everyone knew, everyone would want in on it, and there just isn't a big enough supply to go around.\*

The musician had listened in polite silence, though his expression darkened as he absorbed Chewie's words. "Devious," he breathed when the explanation ended. "Most devious. The T'Shaaimite could've slipped it into the food delivery; even if more than one of the team was affected, no one would've been apt to notice, not with everyone settling down for the night." As he spoke, he nodded to himself, making note of all this implied. "You say it's not traceable via memory scan — but does the same hold true for other tests? Residual traces in the blood or tissues?"

Han shrugged. "I don't know; I've never heard. But I doubt the stuff'd stay so popular if you could trace it through a simple blood scan. And it's too late, either way. By now, it's probably flushed clean out of the kid's system."

That synopsis was entirely too logical. His momentum punctured by it, Zair seemed to deflate visibly. Han saw it, and began to feel uncomfortable, almost guilty. He must not have been as annoyed with the performer as he'd thought earlier, for he found himself regretting having caused the man's frustration. Wondering what he might do to provide new impetus, his eyes wandered aimlessly about the garage — and abruptly settled on the overfull, overloaded trash container near the sealed exit doors for the speeder. Just as abruptly, he grinned.

"Maybe we don't need to check out Jynar's system," he said, clapping the dejected musician's shoulder and pointing toward the dumpster. "All we need to check is the food, the containers — and I'll bet you they haven't emptied that thing in over a week."

The silver eyes followed his line of indication; potential brightened Zair's expression. "I shouldn't be surprised," he agreed, instantly heading for the receptacle in question. The two spacers followed.

The topmost layer of trash consisted largely of damaged plasteel scraps that had been removed from the speeder to facilitate the installment of new, healthier parts. Zair tugged the fragments away, aided by Chewbacca, to whom even the heaviest scraps posed no difficulty. Beneath that was a layer of half-burned insulating material, discarded for similar reasons; it flaked and itched at Zair's exposed skin as he dug through it, but the musician paid it no mind. A moment later, however, he paused.

"Ah — just how long has this stuff been sitting here, anyway?" he asked, the look on his face priceless.

Han shrugged, amused by this rare show of upper class distaste. "You know as well as I do. What's it been? Four days? Five? Something like that."

"Five." The performer winced, then withdrew the hand with which he had been digging. Something sticky coated the fingers, painting a terribly aristocratic grimace on the man's strong features. He observed the violated digits, critically. "I think," he sighed, "that I may have to insist my young friends be a bit more diligent in their adherence to sanitation procedures. We don't want the health officials coming down on them for improper disposal of organic matter."

His dismay was so plaintive, Han had no control over his reaction: laughter. "Don't complain," he suggested as Chewbacca — whose rearing in far more primitive surroundings had taught him immense tolerance for all manner of things humans considered disgusting — calmly finished the task, bringing forth a half-empty container of some sticky fluid and two food containers, one empty and the other still full, untouched. They gave off no scent that would disturb the Wookiee's sensitive nose, causing him to rumble a soft remark concerning Zair's overreaction. Han continued. "If they'd been diligent, we wouldn't have the evidence."

Trying to shake off the offending glop on his fingers — he was sufficiently fastidious so that the notion of ruining good clothing by using it as a hand towel never even entered his mind — Zair eyed what Chewie held, doubtfully. "We still don't know that for sure; it might be nothing *but* trash. We'll have to find a lab somewhere to do tests, someone we can trust to report honestly...."

"Might be quite a trick, in this town," Solo quipped. "If Utar needs labs to do his business, 'honesty' might have a whole new definition, hereabouts."

\*Which is why I'll take care of it,\* Chewie whuffed conclusively.

The musician considered him with surprised awe. "You can do that? You're a chemist?"

\*Not precisely. But our... line of work sometimes requires us to have our own facilities, in case we cannot trust the locals — or the people with whom we're doing business. For the moment, the equipment on board the *Falcon* will provide us with as much evidence as we need.\* He chortled quietly, his laughter for himself but the glint in his eye for his companions. \*And if I take the responsibility upon myself, why, that will spare you poor, mere humans the discomfort of dealing with it.\*

It was not often that Han saw men of Zair's age and apparent sophistication flush, but the performer did, in crimson splendor, abashed of his blatant upper class habits. For himself, the Corellian spacer muttered something only his partner could hear concerning Wookiee idiosyncracies with which he'd become intimately familiar during his early childhood. Chewie said nothing in return, but he did leave off his needling.

Composing himself, Zair sniffed softly. "And if those—" He indicated the containers Chewie held. "—show nothing out of the ordinary, will you... repeat the process with every likely carton in the bin?" The notion made him nearly lightheaded with revulsion. Determined as he was to find solutions to such mysteries, there were times in which such searches for the truth ventured into realms he felt would be best left in their virgin state — untouched by mortal hands, as it were, his in particular.

Chewbacca magnanimously refrained from laughing at the man's shudder. \*If I must. But I think these will reveal much. I can't imagine these youngsters are so wasteful as to discard untouched food every day, as a matter of habit.\*

"True...." The thought was encouraging.

\*I'll take this back to the ship, then, and get started right away. Are you coming, Clanbrother, or will you find your own way back?\*

"Go ahead without me. I promised Mrik I'd give his regulator a look when we got back from talking with every blasted living thing on the grounds. If he won't let me do any of the real work, at least I can check it out and make sure he's not heading into a big mistake."

Chewie sniffed. \*A worthy occupation. I'd never have thought you'd care so much....\*

Han shrugged evasively. "Hey, it's my *reputation* I'm protecting, buddy, not some green kid fresh out of the Primaries. How would it reflect on me if he puts together something that can't last through the first two laps?"

The Wookiee accepted that with a mild bark of acknowledgment; it didn't pay to argue with a truth Han knew as well as he did. With that, he excused himself and headed out. Zair did likewise, as it was already well past sunset and he was late for work at the *Hole*. Han watched him leave via the personnel exit, heard the sound of a speeder's ignition, then went to have a look at Lenduvar's reconstructed systems.

## VIII

His "look" took a full three hours, since Mrik wanted his opinion on virtually every bolt, every solder point, every weld. Almost in spite of himself, Han felt flattered by the youth's apparent respect for his expertise, won after less than a week's association. The young, of course, are easily impressed, or so the pilot told himself in an attempt to write it off as a matter of little consequence, but after both Mrik's and Zair's ready acceptance of him, he was beginning to feel that he might eventually find a reason to temper his catholically harsh attitude toward those who bore even the faintest scent of the Motherworld.

Feeling in excellent spirits, Han was finally able to take his leave of Lenduvar and his crew, who remained behind to finish up the job they were doing on the damaged powertrain. It was a fine night, even by dirtside standard: warm, gently breezy, smelling not of machines and track vehicles but of the greenery that had been planted in thick swards to separate one compound from the next and to buffer the entire track grounds from the surrounding habitations. Phan Shilis boasted a plethora of moons — seven in all, of widely varying size — but at the moment, only two were visible, one a mere nail paring sliver near the western horizon, the other almost full, just rising redly in the west. The stars were obscured by the combination of satellite and city light, but overall, it was quite acceptable, for a planetside view. Reveling in the evening and his good mood, Han whistled softly to himself as he left, intending to head for the main track entrance and the public transit that would return him to the starport.

Then a glint of something caught his eye; he glanced in the proper direction. In his profession, it paid to give everything a cursory glance, just in case it turned out to be an enemy lying in wait. He easily identified the source: moonlight reflected off a speeder parked to one side of the main hangar building. He didn't recall seeing one there earlier, so he gave it a second glance. It was Zair's — one could not mistake that odd purply-black finish, not even in the meager light of evening — so he dismissed it, and moved on.

For about five paces, after which he stopped dead.

Zair had left three hours ago, off for his night's work at the *Black Hole*; Han remembered hearing his speeder fire up and pull away. With all the noise in the hangar/garage, he could have easily missed the sound of its return — but he couldn't fathom why the musician would have returned in the first place. Had he come back all this way because something new had occurred to him, something pertaining to their investigation which he'd felt compelled to check *now*?

Curious, nothing more, the Corellian decided to investigate. But he saw no trace of Zair near the speeder, heard no motion of anyone or anything but wind rustled tree branches — and the vehicle's engine block was cold, stone cold. Realizing it, Han frowned. He knew how far it was to the bistro, how long it would take to get there and back, how hot the engine materials would become in that time.

His frown deepened. There was no way it could be this cold by now, not if the speeder had been taken any distance — and if it hadn't been, why had Zair neglected to make his presence known? It wasn't like the man; by now, Han felt reasonably comfortable in making that conclusion. Zair, like Solo, considered this probe a joint effort; if he'd had a suspicion that he felt was important enough to warrant his absence from the *Hole* — his personal pride and joy and possibly his only true love — he would've at least come in to see if the spacer was still there, and mention it to him. He'd have had more than enough time since his arrival, if the vehicle's condition was any indication, yet he hadn't even poked his nose into the hangar.

Why?

Now more than merely passingly curious, Han scanned the area surrounding the speeder, seeking any clue that might provide an answer to this new riddle. His earlier, momentary wish for less moonlight and more starlight was now reversed; the extra illumination of a few added moons, in full or near full phase would be most welcome. Lacking that, he popped the entry seal to the speeder's enclosed passenger compartment — grateful that Zair had taken his role as supposed driver far enough to adjust the security recognition system to include Han — rummaged through the equipment cubby, and came up with a small emergency handlamp. It wasn't as bright as a multiple full moon night, but it would serve.

With better equipment for surveying, the smuggler quickly spotted cues that had been invisible in the darkness. Just outside the vehicle's right passenger entrance, the hard packed ground had been torn up in very specific patterns, indicative of two things: the distinctive clawed boots peculiar to a zhinth, and a struggle. Han recognized both from long

experience, as he recognized a third item: a few small bits of gilded paper, precisely folded and scattered randomly, not so much near the speeder as near the tall shrubbery along the hangar's west wall.

Under other circumstances, Han might not have made the proper connections; his survival had often been too much a matter of acting on instinct, doing now and reflecting later for him to have developed the skills specific to a detective. But he was a keen, nimble minded observer — a talent learned and honed through his lifetime of association with Wookiees and visits to Kashyyyk — and this particular conclusion was so obvious, it could have been reached by the greenest novice.

He remembered Zair's interest in the candy wrappers, recalled seeing the T'Shaaimites take exacting care in folding the things just so before discarding them, and knew what their presence near the bushes meant: Utar's thugs, Zynth and Listener, had been hanging about, waiting, watching, and, at whatever they deemed the appropriate moment, had snatched Zair, his struggles to avoid capture notwithstanding. Han didn't understand the *entire* puzzle — since the speeder *had* moved, the musician apparently hadn't been jumped the moment he'd left the hangar, which rekindled Han's curiosity as to why he'd returned — but he understood all that was necessary.

He knew, of course, where Utar's compound lay and how it was arranged — precisely the same as every other team's compound on the track grounds — although he had no assurance that he would find the musician there. Brazen enough to kidnap the man in the first place, they might have also been brash enough to take him through the main gates, off the grounds, and to whatever place of security they might choose. That, of course, was the most pessimistic of all available options; remembering his partner's admonitions against negativism, Han decided to keep an optimistic bearing while he checked out the simplest solution.

He was forced to employ the utmost caution and discretion — being spotted would very likely earn him another "warning" at the hands of Utar's heavies — but, in the end, optimism paid off. The crescent moon was down and the full moon riding high and bright in the night skies by the time Han found the clue he sought to lead him to the kidnaped Zair: At the rear of Utar's compound, as in all the others, lay a small storage building with a single door and single ventilation window. Lenduvar and his team used theirs to store equipment and supplies needed only during an actual race or time trial; Utar's people clearly had a far different use for their shed.

From his observation point among the shrubs of the barrier wall, Han saw both T'Shaaimites and Zynth heading from it to the main hangar, some twenty or thirty meters distant. As they carried nothing with them, they obviously had not been sent to fetch something for the legitimate team workers, so the smuggler felt confident in assuming that they'd instead left something valuable behind. When the pair was out of sight, Solo carefully slipped through bushes and shadows to reach the shed, unnoted.

A peek through the smallish eye level window showed nothing but darkness within; a pass of the handlamp's beam across the interior verified Han's original suspicion. There, amid the equipment and junk and just plain trash sat Zair, gagged, restrained, disheveled, looking thoroughly uncomfortable but otherwise unharmed. He glanced up at the flash of light from the window, but made no reaction of recognition until Han pried open the grate and hauled himself in. The musician attempted to speak, but was thwarted by the cloth bound about his mouth.

Solo removed the gag, then investigated the restraints holding the performer's hands bound behind his back. "You all right?" he asked softly, just in case unfriendly ears were listening.

Zair nodded. "A bit shook up, but unharmed. What are you doing here, anyway? How did you find me?"

"Wasn't hard. Saw your speeder, figured something was up, used a few of your detective tricks, and here I am. And what were *you* doing, hanging around the compound? I thought you were late for work."

"I was, but I had an idea I wanted to check out, so I turned around and came back. Never did get much beyond the main gate. I didn't know those... criminals would be lying in wait, or I would've reconsidered the action."

Han snorted faintly, little louder than an exhalation. "It's no surprise to me. But why'd they grab *you*?" He was having difficulty getting at whatever was constricting the musician's hands. Zair's arms had been twisted so that he could be tethered to some heavy piece of equipment; between darkness, the bulk of the machine, and the man's particular position, Han could not see the restraints, not from the angle at which he was standing. He moved to the left, seeking a better point of view.

Zair, in the meantime, had been flexing his lower jaw, which was stiff from the position forced upon it by the gag. "They *said* they didn't like me snooping around, asking questions, but I hardly think that'd warrant kidnappings — not unless they've something important to hide."

"Backstreet paranoia, maybe. I know / don't like people pushing their noses into my business, no matter how innocent they seem. There's always the off chance they'll stumble onto something I don't want advertised. Don't just sit there, man, lean forward or something so I can get at these things. I can't spring a lock unless I can get at it..."

At his initial request, Zair began to comply, inclining the upper half of his body, but abruptly, he leaned back again, blocking Han's efforts. Perplexed, the spacer frowned at him, a dimly seen expression. "This is no time to fool around," he began testily.

"I'm not fooling around," was the calm reply. "I don't want to be sprung, not just yet."

Han wasn't quite sure he could credit his ears; he peered at the performer for confirmation. Receiving it, his scowl deepened. "You *what*?"

"I don't want to leave yet. I'm not insane," he forestalled when the smuggler began a heated protest. "But it's Utar we're ultimately after, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, the two gentlemen who escorted me here said they were going to fetch him. Isn't that just grand?"

"Grand?" Han couldn't believe what he was hearing, much less the tone in which Zair had said it: pleased, one might almost say childishly delighted. "It's crazy!"

Zair was insistent. "No, it isn't. If I leave now, I'll be throwing away a magnificent opportunity."

"To do what? Die?"

The captive's head shook. "To get the goods on Utar. Look, Elthan, it's not that difficult to understand. Examine all the evidence we have on hand. Right now, we have plenty of possibilities to implicate our T'Shaaimite friend, but simply because he's employed by Utar doesn't mean Utar himself is in any way responsible. We need a concrete link between them. If I stay, I may find something that will be just what we need to bring him up on charges."

"Yeah, but for assault and battery, not sabotage. Get your head on straight, friend! This isn't another artist or racer or businessman we're dealing with. He's the Number One boy for one of the slickest racketeers in this arm of the galaxy. If he brought you here, it was to *hurt* you. And all the bruises and cuts and broken bones you get for staying won't prove that *he's* the one who did it."

The musician seemed appallingly unconcerned. "Verifier scans could provide that. Besides, I honestly don't think even *he* will have the audacity to assault me."

His certainty in the matter was *more* than appalling; Han found it both horrifying and worthy of contempt. He had known, from virtually the start, that this man had some rather naive ideas concerning life, society, and his position therein, but never had Han thought that he would maintain those blithely ignorant attitudes in face of a very real, very personal, very physical threat.

"You are crazy!" he returned with something very close to aghast wonder. "You aren't living on Corellia, Zair, and even if this *is* the closest thing to the Motherplanet herself, Utar isn't Corellian. Just 'cause rank's protected you from facing your local version of reality doesn't make you invulnerable. Utar's an Outsider, and you can bet every credit you and your Family owns that he isn't going to give a tin-plated damn for who or what you think you are if he's got reason to want to get even with you."

Han had spoken with every bit of persuasive conviction he knew how to summon; he winced, then, at Zair's guileless response. "But for what? I've certainly never done anything to warrant such vengeance—"

"Maybe *you* think you haven't — but what matters here is what *he* thinks. And if you do have some sort of clout around here, that means he's after something. He wouldn't kidnap you if he wasn't, and he'll do whatever he believes is necessary to get it. Look at what he did to me."

Zair listened in attentive silence. For a moment, Han thought he'd gotten through to the fellow; then, the performer smiled faintly. "I appreciate your concern, Elthan, but I do believe the situation isn't as dire as you're imagining. So long as I do nothing to overtly antagonize the man, I'm sure I won't be harmed, and I just might discover something of inestimable value to our cause. Surely, that's worth a little risk, isn't it?"

Han couldn't tolerate his gullible assuredness any longer. He liked the man, and he was willing to allow him his eccentricities on certain points, but it was unendurably frustrating to stand by and watch his advice be carelessly tossed aside in preference for unrealistic upper class convictions that Han knew were untenable. "But it *isn't* just a little risk, blast it! Can't you get that through your thick skull? Utar's no rookie — don't you think he *knows* you could finger him on a verifier? You stay here and chances are you won't be leaving — *ever*. Don't you understand?"

The musician was so quietly, perfectly calm, Han wanted to scream. "Of course I understand," he replied smoothly, with the faintest touch of condescension one generally finds in the supremely confident; it came only a hair's breadth short of actual arrogance. "But *you* don't understand—"

That was more than the spacer could take. "Oh, I understand, all right. Your almighty rank is going to save you. Fine. You're stupid enough to believe that, then you don't need my help."

Roughly, Han pushed himself to his feet, started to head for the window, then paused, remembering to leave things just as he'd found them. He located the discarded gag and put it back in place with nothing resembling gentility. "Have a nice funeral," he said in sarcastic farewell before climbing back out the way he had come. He caught a last momentary glimpse of Zair watching him as he put the grate back in place.

With the window grid firmly where it belonged, Han headed once more for the anonymity of the hedge that had masked him on his way in. Under its cover, he was halfway to the exit point when he stopped, glanced back, and sighed heavily. Zair was out of his mind; he had no doubts on that account — but he couldn't just skip out and leave the idiot to Utar's lack of mercies, either. Hard knocks were some of the best teachers in the schoolroom of life — a fact Han knew from frequent firsthand experience — but given the musician's naivete and the sort of knocks Utar was apt to employ, it was likely that Zair might not survive the experience in order to make use of whatever he might learn from it.

Han groaned as, with its usual damnably inopportune sense of timing, his conscience kicked in. Zair might be frustrating as hell, enough to try the patience of a Jedi Master, but knowing what he did about their adversaries as intimately as he did, Han couldn't just leave the poor *k'shass'me* to the fate he saw coming. Grinding his teeth against the onslaught of inevitability, he turned and headed back for the storage shed.

While he'd struggled with his own anger and sense of right, however, a trio of humanoids had emerged from the main hangar, making a straight line for the shed. They were closing in upon it too quickly for Han to reach it first, unnoticed; he remained under cover of the shrubbery as they passed by, his ears tuned to catch their conversation.

"...and you're sure Memris is on the level, not trying to swindle us?" Utar — a large, fair haired and fair skinned human who looked well able to hold his own in a fight with any of his hired muscle — was saying as he and his two lackeys headed for the shed. "I've always had my doubts about him, calling the shots for laundering *my* money..."

"He's clean, I'm telling you," the zhinth rasped back, its voice low and gravelly. "Nahrham and I checked him out again, just like you asked, and he's on the level."

Utar glanced at the T'Shaaimite. "You Listened?"

Nahrham nodded. "With eyes and ears and all my gifts. Memris is honest, at least in the matter of our dealings with him. He honestly believes that, in order for him to handle your... excess money and return it to you without rousing suspicion, you must bet on your own team and insure that it wins. He is not cooperating with the one we hold; he knows nothing of him. Of this, I am certain."

"Then what the hell is this bastard doing, snooping around the track and pushing his nose into our business?"

"He says that he is merely conducting an investigation into the sabotage of his team's vehicle," Nahrham offered.

The crimelord snorted. "The hell he is."

The T'Shaaimitite shrugged. "It is possible he is being truthful. He has a reputation for such behavior. And though Solo may have tendered his suspicions concerning our involvement, he could not be able to prove them to satisfaction."

"Which gives me all the more reason to believe he's on to something I don't like."

With that, the trio arrived at the shed's door, paused for a moment as the zhinth released the lock, then proceeded inside. Han watched from the cover of the bushes until he could move undetected; when the door closed again, he slipped from his hiding place to crouch beneath the window, where he could listen without being observed. Cautious, he made his motions with as little noise as possible, not wanting to alert the sharp senses of the Listener, who might be able to detect his presence if prompted to look for it. So long as the thugs had no reason to suspect anyone else was about, he would be safe.

He could not, unfortunately, say the same thing for Zair. As he moved within earshot, the spacer could instantly detect notes of more than mere unpleasantry in Utar's voice. "...for you to be involved," the crimelord was saying. "So, you're the spoiled rich kid I've heard so much about, ever since I moved into the neighborhood. What's his name — Iltim — 's brat? Funny, I was expecting someone a little tougher looking from the way the locals act whenever your name comes up. Not much to look at, are you?"

Han could more easily picture Utar's expression than Zair's; though the musician had a fair number of centims over the Outblood, he was fettered and did not seem to have had any sort of training or experience relating to nonverbal combat, while Utar fairly reeked of confidence in his own fighting abilities. It permeated all the man's dealings; Han himself had encountered it in the past, and knew that the thug often used such intimidation as a weapon.

There was a pause followed by an inarticulate grunt and scuffling sounds; momentarily, Zair responded, his voice slightly distorted by residual choking, an aftereffect of the just removed gag. "Perhaps that explains everything," he ventured coolly, ignoring his captor's more snide remarks so thoroughly, he came across as too naive for belief. "You must be new to this planet, else you'd know that I am *not* a child and certainly no one's 'brat,' not to mention the fact that Iltim is my *grandfather*, not father — and unfamiliarity might also explain your apparent lack of awareness concerning our local laws against kidnappings...."

"Did I hear anyone say anything about *kidnapings*?" Utar asked so innocently, Han had to push his last meal back where it belonged. "I just told my friends here that I wanted to talk with you, and I guess they got a little carried away, wanting to make sure you stayed put 'til I could come around. Isn't that right, Nahrham? Tszhiu?"

The T'Shaaimitite mumbled an affirmative; the zhinth chortled unpleasantly. Zair made an effort to ignore their humor as he'd ignored their master's sarcasm. "Well, here we all are. Now, what do you want?"

Utar shrugged; there was a hint of blitheness in his tone. "Information. Answers. Such as why you've been nosing around the track grounds these last few days, asking questions of everybody and everything you can corner."

Zair matched the scum's nonchalance with ease. "That should be obvious. As I told your men here, I have reason to believe that the accident the team I'm supporting had during the second round trials was the result of deliberate sabotage. I have a fondness for solving puzzles, so I've simply been looking into the matter to see if I can find any useful information to solve this one."

"Isn't that a job for the police?"

"I suppose it would be, but official investigations take time, and I'm anxious to get to the bottom of this as quickly as possible."

"Why?"

"Why?" Han could almost see the wide eyed innocence in the echoed question. "Why? Because I don't want it to happen again, that's why! I've sunk a lot of money into this project, and I don't want to see it all go to waste because we didn't have enough information to protect ourselves from potential enemies."

There was a long moment of silence, much longer than the earlier pause had been. Han could not see what was going on inside; he dared not risk peering into the window for fear of detection. But he didn't like what he seemed to feel, an odd itching at the back of his head that made his instincts tingle with an impression of imminent peril, a familiar sensation he always thought of as portending danger. Briefly baffled, he leapt to a sudden conclusion; in reflex, he made a blank of his thoughts as best he could, concentrating on the void of space, the black emptiness between the stars.

He didn't know why he suspected what he did — he *never* did on such occasions, though he never questioned it — but his instincts were right on target. The T'Shaaimite had employed his psionic abilities to gauge the prisoner's veracity; when Utar spoke again, his words confirmed it. "I don't believe you. Nahrham thinks you're lying, and I want to know why."

Zair's indignation was not entirely feigned; what he'd told the man *had* been the truth, even though it wasn't the whole of it. "I don't know what gives you that idea, sir, but I can assure you you're profoundly mistaken...."

"Oh, am I? You aren't the only one with his eyes open, friend. Nahrham and Tszhiu here tell me you've been paying particular attention to *our* compound, *our* people, asked a few more questions here than anywhere else. Why? Not just because that punk you hired undoubtedly had a few bad things to say about us?"

"Punk...?" The musician's puzzlement was genuine. His blink was very nearly audible. "Oh — Elthan? He isn't fond of you, if that's what you mean, but I make it a policy never to put too much stock in the grudge-grumblings of my employees. No, I've merely been following what few leads I've discovered, and thus far, they've led me to nothing conclusive. I've no more interest in *your* compound or *your* people than in anyone else in the competition—"

Someone within hissed; Han suspected it was the T'Shaaimite. Utar's temper sizzled accordingly. "I believe that about as much as I believe you aren't interested in winning, either. Stop playing games with me, friend." The crimelord's voice took on an unpleasant edge that made the hairs at the back of Han's neck stiffen. "Either you come clean with me, or I'll let my associates here practice their special brands of 'persuasion' on you."

"I *am* coming clean with you," Zair insisted. "I've been investigating the sabotage of my team's vehicle...."

"Enough of that!"

"Enough of *what*?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't, I swear I don't. All right, maybe the things I've heard *have* made me pay a bit more attention to you and your people, but as I said, I haven't found anything conclusive—"

"And you won't, either." Ice limned the words. "I'm not as stupid as you look; I'm not buying this 'innocent' routine. Either you cut the crap right now and give me a few straight answers, or...."

He let the dramatic fading of his voice make the suggestion for him. Han could almost hear Zair swallow. "Or what?"

Utar offered no explanation. Outside, Han heard the shuffle of feet, the movement of the two guards assuming positions. In reflex, the spacer's muscles tightened, the bracing in preparation for disaster. "Why have you been sticking your nose into my business?" Utar demanded once again.

This time, the swallow was audible. "I told you, I'm trying to determine who tampered with my team's vehicle—"

His words were choked off abruptly, halted, from the sound, by a hard punch to his gut. Han closed his eyes, wincing.

Utar spoke again, as calmly as before. "Who put you on to us?"

"No one," Zair gasped. The sound of the blow that silenced him was not self defining; it might have been either a fist across the jaw or a bludgeon at the back of the head.

"Now, why don't I believe you?" Utar asked guilelessly. "Why can't I believe that someone with your position, your authority would trouble himself with such a petty investigation if he didn't have ulterior motives?"

"But if you know who I am, then you must know that I *don't* have any ulterior motives—!"

"You mean, you've been worrying yourself and spending so much time poking around just 'cause someone caused trouble for a bunch of kids you're backing?"

"Yes!" Zair plainly, desperately wanted him to believe that, for it was indeed the truth.

Utar, however, could not see his desperation, or chose to give it a different interpretation. "Don't give me that garbage," he snorted unpleasantly. "The track authorities bought your alibi, let your team back in. You don't *need* to hunt down the culprits; justice was served. Now: You tell me the *real* reason you've been asking questions about us."

"But I've told you—"

The sound of knuckles ripping across flesh convinced Han that Utar had struck the musician himself, so swift was the reaction to Zair's half spoken response. "One last chance," the crime lord said evenly, warningly. "Tell me what you've been up to and why, and I *may* let you live."

There was genuine anger in Zair's response, the righteous anger of one unjustly wronged. "I've *told* you the truth," he spat. "If you're too dense to hear it or understand it, that's hardly *my* fault...!"

Han closed his eyes and tried not to listen. He knew how well Rintoul's second would take his captive's words; he also could not help but feel for Zair, who *was* right, but was too inexperienced to realize how unwise he was being in pressing the matter. In Zair's world, safely insulated from the harsher facts of what many knew as reality, truth was the great equalizer, the ultimate power that could win justice. With such a background, his anger toward Utar's persistent disbelief was both inevitable and damning. More acquainted with such matters, Solo knew precisely what was coming, though he tried his best to will it not to happen, for Zair's sake.

Utar sniffed his contempt. "Suit yourself. Tszhiu, Nahrham ...."

It was the bitter truth of the backstreets brought again into agonizing focus: If you can't get it any other way, take what you want by force. Since, in his frame of mind, Utar could not get the information he was seeking through the use of words, he was perfectly willing to extract it by physical means.

In all his life, Han could not recall a longer or more painfully spent five minutes as he crouched outside the shed, hearing a friend be hurt but helpless to stop it. He was sympathetic but not stupid. Unarmed as he currently was, his intervention would give the thugs two prisoners, not one — and captive, there was nothing whatsoever he could do to help the performer. All he could do for now was wait and hope that whatever Utar wanted, he wanted it badly enough to let Zair live. Invoking every deity of which he had ever heard, Han fervently prayed that such would be so, for he would find it difficult to live with himself if his choice to remain inactive permitted the musician to die.

He had begun to contemplate the possibility of distracting the enemy when they stopped of their own volition, heading for the door and leaving Zair with the admonition to reconsider his stubborn silence. The musician did not respond — more likely *could* not, Han was sure. When the trio was gone and well out of sight, the starpilot again loosened the window grate to climb inside. Dropping to the floor, he listened intently for a moment, shivering with relief at a small sound, one of great pain but still a sound indicative of life.

Life, but not precisely consciousness. No matter how many fights and brawls and battles he had and would ever live through, Han seriously doubted that he would ever grow jaded toward the sight of injured friends, the smell of blood shed for no good purpose. Glad for the meager lighting, he examined Zair quickly, to make certain he had sustained no imminently life threatening injuries and wasting as little time as possible. Having seen the punks leave in no way assured Han that he had all the time in the world to effect escape; luck, of late, seemed all too fond of turning against him at the worst possible moments.

Satisfied that bruised and battered through he was, Zair was in no immediate danger of death, the spacer unfettered him, then, using the handlamp, searched the shed for anything to facilitate transporting him back to the Lenduvar compound and Zair's waiting speeder. Confident of his own strength under most circumstances, Han was equally confident that he would do himself — and Zair as well — serious injury if he tried to carry the significantly taller and doubtless heavier musician any distance.

There was a fair amount of clutter filling the smallish storage shed, mostly backup equipment, spare parts, used parts, worn pit coveralls, and just plain trash. But among all the debris, Han managed to locate a handheld null-g generator of a sort used by emergency crews. Intended to help free persons trapped within crashed vehicles by allowing emtechs to move large or weighty objects by hand, Han figured it would work equally well in allowing him to move Zair. Disentangling it from the other oddments filling the box in which he'd found it, the spacer checked the thing for an adequate charge, made a small noise of satisfaction, set the controls to produce a more or less Zair-sized field of effect, clipped the device to the performer's wide belt, and activated it.

Maneuvering an unconscious man through a window was awkward, even with an antigrav field, but Han managed it quickly and in silence, without attracting attention. Once outside, he spared only the few moments needed to re-secure the window grate, then fled with his injured friend.

The spacer had given considerable thought to what he should do next by the time he reached Lenduvar's compound. He was in the process of implementing his decision by settling the musician in the passenger's seat of his speeder when an incoherent groan heralded Zair's return to semi-consciousness.

"I'd try not to move, if I were you," Han warned as he deactivated the antigrav field, allowing the man to settle into the thick padding of the speeder's luxury model upholstery. "I *told* you Utar'd walk all over you if you got in his way, but did you listen?" Though his words were harsh, there was no biting edge to them, evidence that his anger was all for the thugs who had done this, not for their victim. "I should've just left you there, but... hold still!" he warned again when Zair attempted to shift position. "I don't know what all they've done to you, and I don't want you making it worse before we can get it checked out at a medcenter—"

"No!" the musician gasped, not very loudly but nonetheless quite firmly. "Not — not a medcenter. Home."

"Home?" Solo frowned. "Are you crazy?" he asked for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. "This isn't just a scraped knee, Zair — you've been hurt...!"

"No medcenters," the darker man repeated, his insistence unshakable despite the effort it took for him to speak the words. "Records — officials — could catch Utar...."

The spacer snorted. "And it'd be about time, too...."

The battered head shook, very slightly. "Too soon," he rasped. "Don't want — battery charges. Want... to *naïl* him—!" The last phrase held deadly emphasis, delivered with such conviction, it drained the speaker and left him panting for breath.

Like a light flashed into a void-black room, Han suddenly understood what Zair was trying to say. If they took him to a medcenter now, they would have to face all the usual police questions: how this had happened, who had been responsible, etcetera. If Zair's influence was as locally strong as he claimed it to be, there was no doubt that the constabulary would pick up Utar and his cronies — but on the wrong charges.

Oh, the punk *deserved* to pay for the damage he'd inflicted on the poor musician, Han was quite decided on that, but a mere battery charge was precious little more than a misdemeanor when compared to the considerably more serious crimes for which they wanted Utar to pay. And if he was hauled in now, before they could find a way to pin him

with a rap they hadn't yet fully identified, it would ruin their chances for ever achieving that goal. If Utar was accused and found guilty of assault, the two or three years he might spend in prison would give his cohorts on the outside time to hide their operations to the point where only a Jedi would ever stand a chance of finding and exposing them. Much as Han hated to admit it, Zair was right: A medcenter was the *last* place they wanted to take him.

With that unpalatable reality firmly in mind, the spacer muttered to himself while he reassessed his companion's condition. Unless there were serious internal injuries he was too inexperienced to diagnose, there was nothing wrong with Zair that he hadn't dealt with before, either in himself, his partner, or one of their cohorts in the Business. Persons dancing in the shadows of the law were frequently forced to act as their own doctors, since their more serious injuries were often obtained during the execution of blatantly illegal acts; the official nature of medcenter procedures was reason enough for Business people to give them a wide berth. Lingerin scars and the possibility of death were both preferable to the long, slow, and painful death of life in an Imperial prison.

Touching the scar on his own chin and thus the memories associated with it, Han swiftly decided that this was nothing he couldn't handle. *Besides*, he told himself as he fastened Zair's safety straps and settled himself into the driver's seat, *with the kind of money this guy flashes around, he's probably got a private med droid hidden in one of his closets.*

That brought another hitherto unconsidered question to mind. "Where's 'home'?" he asked the musician, realizing he had no idea whatsoever. Since they'd met, all Han's dealings with Zair had taken place either at Lenduvar's compound, the *Black Hole*, or on the *Falcon*.

Weakly, Zair stirred; almost on instinct, he reached out, touched a particular button between the two seats, and brought to life a small but detailed computer grid screen on the control panel. The touch of a second button lit two small icons on the map, one indicating their current position and the other the location of Zair's home. It was some distance from the track grounds, but easily accessible via the city's rapid transit network.

"Got it," Han acknowledged, starting the speeder's engine. "Hang tight. We'll be there in no time."

## IX

The speeder's directions led Han out of the Portside districts into parts of town similar to those surrounding the *Hole*, but a region far quieter and of much more obvious wealth. The final indicated turn took them onto a short but serene tree lined street with filigreed iron fences separating each lot from the sidewalk, beyond which lay, to either side, a row of beautiful townhouses. Each was large, unique, and expensive. At last, Han stopped the speeder outside the residence bearing the address the computer indicated. The building was as quaintly antiquated in appearance as all the others in this part of town, and somehow moreso. Not only did the place have all the fanciful masonry and gingerbread of the others on the block, dim security lights within revealed elaborately beautiful stained glass arches above the many windows, and matching inset panels in the heavy cameewood front door and narrow casement windows on either side. No, Han thought for the thousandth time, Zair was in no way hurting for money.

Looking at the flight of stairs which needed to be navigated before reaching that front door, Han planned to use the hand lifts to help maneuver the bigger man inside. But once they were out of the car, Zair insisted he could stand on his own two feet, albeit with considerable assistance.

As Solo helped the battered musician to the door, he used the opportunity and their physical contact to assess more of Zair's condition from the way he moved. At worst, he felt the man might have suffered a cracked rib or two, but no broken bones. His breathing was heavy with pain and labored from exhaustion, but reasonably clear; probably no internal injuries, either. Utar's lackeys had been careful, Han decided; they'd wanted to cause Zair sufficient harm to "teach him a lesson," but not so much as to threaten his life and stir up the outraged hounds of the local law. Clearly, whatever else the spacer knew or thought of the man, Zair was indeed somehow an important figure in Shilisian society, one whose untimely death would be investigated to the fullest. Han didn't usually care much for that type — people who for no apparent reason were deferred to without question — but when one could make a gross slimebag like Surial Utar think twice about mistreating him, it bespoke a considerable clout that might be made to work to their advantage.

At last, they reached the top step and the door. Security systems invisibly set around the portal scanned the new arrivals, recognized the master of the house, and instantly opened the door for him and his companion. Once they stepped inside, the same system swiftly closed and relatched the locks; Han could hear the soft click of invisible bolts being thrown somewhere inside the door itself. Lights in the foyer came up to a pleasantly soft level, enough to provide illumination without irritating eyes that had just entered from the dark outside. If Han had had the time, he might have appreciated the eccentric beauty of the place, but for the moment, he had far greater concerns.

"Where to?" he asked, hoping the musician wouldn't direct him up the long spiral staircase that lay just beyond the foyer. If he did, Han was going to use the antigrav, whether Zair liked it or not.

He was relieved when a feeble gesture indicated they should go down the hall to the left, and then to a room perhaps a dozen paces beyond the foot of the stairs. Again, hidden sensors were alerted to Zair's arrival; the double doors opened with the whisper of well tended hinges, and again, they closed and locked automatically once the pair was inside.

Han was puzzled by the locking of the doors, but puzzled for no more than a moment as Zair pulled away from his support to stagger two steps and drop onto a luxuriously padded couch. The spacer helped him into a more comfortable prone position when it appeared Zair would be unable to lift his legs on his own. The darker man closed his eyes for a moment, reveling in the softness of the cushions below him, then lifted one hand to indicate a narrow door in a far corner of the room. "There're medical supplies in there," he said, his normally resonant voice weak from pain and hoarseness. "If you'd be so kind...."

Han didn't even have to be asked once; he was on his feet and headed for the closet the moment Zair had uttered the word *supplies*. As the spacer neared the door, Zair uttered the command, "Open" as loudly as he could; the seal popped, allowing Han access. Inside, he found that the man's simple description grossly understated the true nature of the contents. He hadn't really expected his grim humored thought about the musician having a home medcenter to be accurate, but from what he saw, it was indeed true.

The starpilot sighed expansively, dazzled by the array of equipment and supplies arrayed before him: a compact autodoc, capable of carrying out full scale examinations and recommending treatment, down to synthesizing and administering any needed medications; a comprehensive assortment of portable scanners and therapy equipment, including a bonefuser and a miniature regen unit, good for speeding the healing of cuts and contusions; and any sort

of bandage, suture, antiseptic, or other first aid supply one could imagine. If they were only able to afford a setup like this on the *Falcon*, Han mused, he and Chewie would have been spared considerable pain and many dangerous trips to government run medical facilities, over the years.

As Han collected the autodoc and an assortment of items he felt sure its pathological report would recommend be used, a wry half smile tugged at a corner of his mouth. "What's with the private medcenter?" he asked his battered host as he returned to attend him. "Too paranoid to trust the local 'centers or doctors? And here I thought you said yours were top notch, would give me the best medical care in the galaxy to fix my leg...."

"They are," Zair replied softly. "And under most circumstances, I wouldn't—" He paused to cough, then continued, weakly, with periodic breaks to catch his breath, or allow a spasm of pain to pass. "—hesitate to go to them. But sometimes, seeing to my own care is more..." He virtually gasped out the word. "...expedient."

Han grinned and chuckled in spite of himself; helping to repair injured friends was *not* his favorite pastime, and a sober demeanor seemed more fitting. "*You?*" he scoffed, half because he didn't believe it, and half to keep his semi-conscious friend awake until the autodoc said it was okay for him to sleep. "Now, if it was *me* saying that, I'd buy it, no problem. But unless this 'family' you keep talking about is some sort of underworld syndicate, and the 'business' they tossed you out here to take care of involves getting even with deadbeats or cheating the customers, I'll have a hard time swallowing that *you* need this kind of 'expedience.'" His gesture took in the sophisticated equipment he was setting up to scan Zair and the veritable medlab in the closet.

The musician tried to smile back, but the effort was only faintly successful, and barely recognizable around the still swelling bruises. "You don't know my kin, Elthan, especially the family elders. They've tried to control and direct the lives of me and all my siblings since the cradle, and beyond our majority."

He closed his eyes for a moment, wincing at the chill touch of sensor pads against his skin as Han set them in place, then went about cleaning away the half dried blood and applying synthflesh to his wounds. "They may consider me a disgrace to our lineage and Name, but if they ever discovered just how often my hobbies leave me in need of medical attention, they'd send an armed escort to guard me — or worse, drag me back home... for 'my own good.'"

He took a deep breath in reflex as for a moment, pain threatened to take control. His voice was breathy and unsteady as he continued. "That's why we're locked in here. This is my... *zhaiana'siu*, my private place. The servant my parents insisted I bring with me won't trouble us whenever that door is locked. And I have everything I need here...."

That answered Han's puzzlement about the automatic locks on this inside door, and left him free to puzzle about other points Zair had brought up. He had heard of that degree of parental meddling, but he didn't even begin to understand the logic behind it. He had been without a blood family for much of his life, half raised by Wookiees who believed in allowing their children to make their own mistakes and choices unless they were unconscionably dangerous, and brought up the rest of the way by overworked orphanage employees who didn't have the time to smother their charges with over-protectiveness and selfish control. He was more intrigued by Zair's prior comment.

"Being a musician leaves you in need of medical attention on a regular basis? What do you guys do, have clubbing matches with the brass section, or hold competitive strangulations with the strings?"

Zair again tried to smile, but even the faint pinprick sensation of the autodoc sensors at work was an agony to him. He waited for the pain to pass as much as it would, then whispered a response. "Not music. Playing detective. You may have noticed how I enjoy it...."

Han snorted amiably. "No kidding. If I hadn't seen with my own eyes how decent you can be, I'd think you were a candidate for the nearest psyche ward. I've read about heroes in mystery novels who were less convinced that they're the Greatest Detective in the Galaxy than you."

Zair coughed slightly — from congestion or embarrassment, Han couldn't tell. "Be that as it may.... It's led me to more tight scrapes and perilous places than I care to count. I never *intend* to walk into danger, but...." His pause to catch his breath was as good as a shrug. "I can't seem to help myself. If I see a mystery or a puzzle, I *have* to try to solve it."

The spacer harrumphed softly. "Yeah, well, this time, your curiosity may have gotten you a little more scraped than usual."

A subdued bleep and twinkle of lights from the autodoc signaled its opinion of Zair's condition, and what it planned to do about it. "Seems your little expert here agrees," Han told the musician; Zair grimaced as one of the sensor pads pinched his skin, indicating a release of medications. "No internal injuries, no major traumas, but three cracked ribs, a mild concussion, and a hell of a lot of deep cuts and extensive bruises. You'd better stick with your black wardrobe for a few weeks, friend, 'cause you'll be a walking rainbow for a while. The 'doc's gonna have you take a little nap while it fixes you up, so why don't you just relax an' close your eyes?"

Zair managed an amusingly derisive snort. "As if I had any choice...." By the time he breathed out the last word, his eyelids slipped shut, and he was asleep.

Solo felt a ripple of relief as the sedative took hold and the autodoc showed Zair's vital signs as stable. For himself, he had little use for mind numbing medicaments, but he had even less use for watching a friend in pain. The autodoc appeared quite efficient, so, when he was finished attending to Zair's minor external injuries, he let it do its work and leaned back for a moment to catch his breath.

Utar was going to pay for this, he decided grimly, as was every last one of the thugs who had done this to the innocent musician. At that moment, Han realized that he really *didn't* care that Zair was a Motherworlder, nor that he retained some of the habits and manners and traditions of their homeworld. Zair had refused from the start to make Solo feel the least bit inferior because of his lineage or the disgraces of his past; for all that he had made him an employee, it was clear that he had done so as a gesture of generosity, not pity. They were equals in Zair's mind, and, moreover, had very quickly become friends. Han felt as outraged at the musician's mutilation as he would have felt had it been inflicted on Chewie or Wyn Silverthorn or any of the other few persons he called both family and friend.

It startled Han when he realized that he felt that way, especially to the point of regarding Zair, however mildly, as family. He couldn't explain it, but almost from the first he'd laid eyes on the man, there was something familiar about him — not just that initial uncomfortable familiarity, like the disguised face of a mortal enemy, but something closer to his own kind, the crying out of a sort of race memory that spoke to his unconsciousness rather than his to conscious mind.

That rapport and this brutal abuse made it even more imperative that they help Lenduvar and his crew win the race, bring Utar to justice, and find out exactly what had prompted the crimelord's *zvind'wats* to beat out of Zair some secret he was supposed to — but did not — hold.

Han leaned back even more deeply into the chair, rubbing his forehead with one hand as he massaged away the anger- and adrenaline-fed headache building behind his eyes. When he had coaxed most of the pain away, he opened his eyes again, and for the first time took a real look at the entire room.

What he saw stole his breath away. From what he had peripherally absorbed since his entrance, he expected the place to look like a typical rich man's study: plush, well appointed, with top-of-the-line conveniences, comfortable furniture, and, in Zair's case, a few musical instruments. It had all those, and much more.

The chamber was a full two stories high, the upper half of it being occupied by a balcony library, an extensive collection of hardcopy bound books, booktapes, holovid disks, music manuscripts, and an alcove of state-of-the-art research equipment. Access was gained via a small but artistically crafted spiral staircase. The wooden balustrade that ran all around the balcony — which, like most of the room, had been fashioned from top quality materials imported from the Motherworld — had been carved so that the hand rail of it represented the sequence of events in an ancient Corellian legend that Han recognized but couldn't quite recall. The windows in the one outside wall depicted the tale's hero and the mythical creatures he had fought in the course of his epic adventure. As he studied it, the spacer remembered that this particular legend had been recorded in a long and famous ballad. He had been forced to memorize it during his schooldays, like most Corellian children, and, like most Corellian children, had promptly forgotten it, since it represented an unpleasant reminder of adult authority. Now, he wished he could remember more than a few images of the tale; when Zair was recovered, he would have to ask him to sing it.

When his examination of the upper room was as finished as it could be without closer inspection, Han stood up to stretch his back and take a better look at the lower room. It held all the things Zair had mentioned and he had

expected: a compact but highly sophisticated autoprocessor, exquisitely crafted furniture, at least half a dozen large instruments and over a dozen small ones, peripheral equipment required to play them, another small door that Han suspected led to a privvy, a quaintly antique fireplace, an elaborate desk with a complete computer setup, and hundreds of additional books. There were no paintings on the walls, no incidental decorative knickknacks or statuary — none of the static, useless art pieces beloved of galactic high society, but culturally disdained by Corellians of even the highest castes. Their people's artistic expressions were always somehow useful — like the intricate balustrade, the sun filtering and privacy enhancing effect of stained glass windows, the pleasing design of chairs and tables and woven cloth, the beautiful sculpting of needed masonry and woodwork.

After a few moments' study, Han realized the carving on the thick wooden hearth mantle was even more than merely functionally attractive. It had been fashioned using one of the most ancient Corellian forms of writing, a complex system of curved and twisted lines that, to uninformed eyes, appeared sometimes quite regular and sometimes quite haphazard, but bizarrely pleasing to the eye in any respect. From the time he had spent as the supposed love of a young woman of the upper castes, Theanna Marikis, Han had learned to recognize and read this intricate script. It had originally been created to act as a form of code, and was now used by certain castes as an aesthetic form of displaying family lineage. She had showed Han what his own would look like (at least as much as they were able to trace back, given that he was both orphaned and *elkucha*), and he now studied the longer and more intricate display on the mantle's edge with curiosity. If he could remember enough of what Theanna had taught him, he might be able to translate it, and understand just who this unprecedented benefactor was.

The memories were dusty and a tad creaky from years of disuse, but Han's natural facility for languages was at last able to shake loose the cobwebs and draw forth the knowledge. *Zair, son of Timaza, he finally interpreted, daughter of Iltim, son of Nairil, son of Kilanai, daughter of Anki, daughter of Shan, son of Alisha, daughter of—*

Han had been so pleased with his ability to remember the antiquated text, it took a few moments before he suddenly realized what he had first read. Jarred, he went back to reread it, saw that he had made no mistake, then abruptly felt as unsteady as a man under whom the entire planet has just trembled. He staggered back two steps, came up against one of the chairs facing the hearth, and gladly let himself fall into it.

It was all there, right in front of him, Zair's lineage for some forty generations — and among several of the most recent were names Han knew only too well: Nairil, the name of a man who had allowed himself to be bought by Imperial conspirators, resulting in the destruction of Han's career and any acceptable standing he might have had in Corellian society; Iltim, his son and Zair's grandfather, who now held that same position. Han now knew why Zair had seemed so familiar, why his features so strongly echoed others he could not forget. The names were too coincidental and the subscript of the carved lineage damning proof of the truth:

Zair's unspoken surname was Astred, and he was the great-grandson of the head of the Corellian Social Council who had declared Han an Outcaste in order to protect Imperial interests on the Homeworld. These were his Family Honors: Head of the Social Council, the position his grandfather Iltim and his mother Timaza wanted him to accept.

In the spinning vortex that was his thrown-for-a-loop mind, Han didn't know whether he felt Zair had a good excuse for keeping this information to himself, or if he should be furious with the musician for maintaining the secret, even though Zair knew what his own nearrelations had done to the starpilot's life, had admitted such right from the start.

His raw initial impulse — born solely of a loathing long nurtured in the heart and soul of a young man too often cheated, too frequently betrayed — was to rip away the autodoc connections, grab this Astred-spawn by the throat and throttle him awake, to demand answers:

*Why didn't you say something? You knew what had happened, how I was double-crossed, framed, hung out to dry by your own kin... Why did you hide it from me? Were you getting a good laugh out of it, being kind to the poor zhak'rut, only so you could pull the floor out from under me when the joke was over? Was I just another hobby to you, an amusement to hold off boredom? Was I?*

Even as the malicious whims railed through his thoughts like a rampage of sharp-clawed Kashyyykian scavenger *shurrii*, driving emotions to riot and shredding reason to less than dust, Han's basic, unshakable decency stilled the berserk mind-voice. Zair — whether he was a pure-Blood Astred lordling or simply the frustrated musician

he claimed he wanted to be — would not have done that. Han willed himself to believe it for the moment, even though he didn't honestly know *what* he believed at all.

For a very long while, he sat motionless, staring at the mantle and trying to sort out his reactions to this disagreeable revelation. Eventually, after a wild ride through the heights of anger, the depths of betrayal, the peaks of righteous wrath, and the valleys of revulsion, the spacer came to the calmer plains of common sense, and arrived at several logical, if hard reached, conclusions:

Although Zair had admitted within their first ten minutes of acquaintance that he knew all about Han's expulsion from Corellian society in his career ending "disgrace," he had also expressed unequivocal support of Han himself rather than those who had brought trumped up charges against him. He had also stated in those early moments that he wanted nothing to do with his family's main business as social judges, and had flatly refused to accept the position as that Council's leader out of plain contempt for the system. He had even called his own relations all manner of unflattering things for their mindless support of that outmoded system, and had displayed nothing but a sincere and deep rooted abhorrence toward them, with the exception of his mother.

Furthermore, Zair had demonstrated his disdain for the Council and his kin by eschewing the use of his family name as much as he could, thereby avoiding both the obsequious attentions and pampered privileges he would have otherwise received at every turn. Granted, he was well aware that his status and the power it gave him with other Motherworlders and ACS supporters could be used to his advantage whenever he wished, but it was clearly not the sort of life he wanted to live on a regular basis. He had accepted this "exile" specifically to avoid it, and to pursue the career in music he genuinely desired.

And he had happily accepted Han's expertise in matters concerning speeders, sabotage, subterfuge, and Surial Utar, had hired his services without so much as a second thought or a moment's doubt simply because Solo was a *zhak'rut*. He had a large ego, to be sure, but he had an even larger sense of fair play and generosity and a kind heart, of which Han had seen ample proof since their first meeting.

Lastly, everything about Zair contradicted the image of Motherworlders that Han had painted in his own mind ever since the day Ankhachirra had brought him to the Khaiyan Juvenile Placement Authorities and left him to be raised by his own kind. Even as a four-year-old child, Han defiantly refused to accept that he was anything like these Motherworlders, who had ultimately given birth to the father who had abandoned him; as a youth, he spurned the very thought that he had anything important in common with the other Corellian youth who taunted him because of his less than distinguished background; and as a young man, he came to despise that culture for its wanton betrayal of his honor and its choice to abandon him rather than stand behind the truth. Even Theanna, who professed to love him, had turned her back on him for the sake of maintaining her social status.

But not Zair. Zair had been just, gracious, compassionate, unselfish, unprejudiced — all the things Han had long felt were unattainable virtues for *t'tchazikren*. And as he sat, staring at but not really seeing the lineage displayed on the mantle's edge, he began to realize how he wasn't really at all shaken by the discovery that Zair was an Astred. Rather, he was jolted by the unexpected discovery that in all his years of self-righteous anger, he had grown as guilty of irrational prejudice as the Motherworlders he so despised. To him, the Motherworld had come to represent a hellhole of pride, greed, selfishness, and a thousand other unpleasant traits; the Motherworlders had grown in his mind to a breed of self-centered, narrow-minded, poisonous creatures who, without exception, struck where they willed, with no thought for the havoc they wreaked.

With a shudder, Han knew that he hated even the possibility that he could have become as bigoted as the elitists he so despised — but he also knew that in all too many ways, it was true. When he was angry or too long under stress, feeling cheated, ill-treated, and just plain like the Galaxy's doormat, he was susceptible to displays of prejudice just as bad and unfounded as the worst high-principled, caste-conscious snob the Motherworld had ever spewed from the sludgy backwash of its gene pool. He recalled things he'd said, accusations he'd hurled, epithets he'd spat like venom in retaliation for sometimes-prompted, too often unprompted, stings and slurs.

He hadn't been without his own share of blame — but in his case, he knew, there was a big difference: He was honest enough to acknowledge this cancer's presence within himself, and was smart enough to know that he could stop it from spreading — *had* to stop it — and could whittle away at it until most of the disease was excised. If he could learn to accept, without prejudgment, any number of non-humans and humans of less than sterling roots, he could do it with his own people — and he could start here, now, this moment.

Han took a deep breath, letting it loose slowly, to purge as much of the bitterness and outrage as he could. So, his benefactor and new friend was Zair Timaza Zahinar Astred of the Caste Khasir, the Ranking Family in what was now the highest Clan in the highest Caste of the convoluted Corellian social/political system. He and his relations were the Astred family line whose honor and privilege (*and curse*, Han mused wryly) was to lead the antiquated and increasingly more despised Social Council. Zair was the one of his generation chosen (willingly or not) to be next in line for the Family Honors — a fact of which Utar and his minions were obviously in possession. They had even mentioned it to one another before torturing him, referring to the performer as "Iltim's brat"; they had clearly understood the dangers entailed by doing him physical harm, and had hesitated to question him in the "usual manner" — yet they'd still gone through with it.

Why?

Surely, not because of the speeder competition. Han knew Surial Utar well enough to know that even *he* didn't have an arrogant ego big enough to chance serious retribution from a wealthy and powerful Motherworld Family for something as paltry as this particular race. Utar had no use for the design contract from S'Luas, the winner's purse wasn't that big, and the Shilisian government fiercely controlled and monitored all betting.

Then again, Han recalled something Utar had mentioned before entering the supply shed to interrogate Zair, something about a third party laundering his own money in a way that required him to bet on his own team to win the race. That could be a powerful inducement to take just about any chance, if the amount was large enough.

But that still didn't explain why Utar was so certain Zair had some part in this above and beyond the defense of his own team. After listening to their "questioning," Han knew there was something specific the *zvind'wats* were after — but being a much better starpilot and combat strategist than an amateur detective, he was completely at a loss as to what that something might be. Pieces of this puzzle were missing, and though he was sorely tempted to wake Zair and ask if he might have them, the autodoc was still at work. His earlier wave of anger had passed completely — well, more or less completely; he'd see how he felt after he'd had a chance to ask Zair about his secretiveness — and he had no intention of interrupting the treatment until it was complete.

Instead, he went to check the door to see if he could open it. Without Zair's presence within the sensor field or his voice command to activate it, the latchless doors remained firmly locked. Just as Han had expected, since this was the musician's *zhaiana'siu*, and though he'd never been privileged to live in the lap of upper class luxury, Han suspected it would take something like this lock system to keep out bothersome servants and housekeeping droids.

Undisturbed by this anticipated discovery (he intended to stick around until he was certain Zair was out of danger, anyway), he went to the autoprocessor, ordered some food and the strongest *shivval* it could brew. While the machine worked on his request, the pilot moved to the study's comsystem and called Chewbacca.

After the Wookiee had left the track yards earlier in the evening, he had gone straight back to the *Falcon* to run the analysis of the possibly drugged food which might have been Utar's ticket into Lenduvar's hangar. It had taken him some time to run the tests on the samples he'd brought, and even more time to clean up afterwards; Han's call caught him in the middle of an especially welcome nap. He was growlingly grumpy when he first answered the comm, but after the Corellian explained the current situation, his crankiness over losing a bit of rest vanished quickly.

\*It sounds to me as if our "colleague" Utar has raised the stakes in this puzzling game,\* the furry spacer reflected when Han had finished his update. \*My chemical analysis has also confirmed our earlier suspicions: There was indeed cinadin in the food. *That* I understand, since his ulterior motives were obvious, but by the lives of all my ancestors, I can't imagine why he would choose to assault Zair. Does our friend himself have any inkling?\*

Han shook his head. "He didn't before the autodoc put him out, but there were a few things he didn't know, then, either. Since I don't have a whole lot of choice about getting out of here until he comes around again, I figure I may as well sit tight, enjoy the arms of luxury, and ask him when he wakes up."

As if in demonstration, the autoprocessor chimed its completion of Han's meal; the spacer leaned back from the system desk, stretched a bit, and snagged the cup of *shivval* from the dispenser slot. Not surprisingly, it arrived in a cup of fine Cendarian porcelain, glazed a deep translucent violet, its upper third colored with glossy black, and the rim gleaming with a narrow band of silver. As Solo looked at the cup, he suddenly realized what a fool he'd been, not recognizing the recurring patterns of black and violet and silver about Zair and his associates for what it was: the colors

of his Caste and Clan. He took a sip of the strong herbal brew — the best he'd ever tasted — then turned back to the comscreen.

"Chewie," he began slowly, "you haven't heard any gossip about Utar or the underworld here while you've been working for Astadar, have you?"

The blue eyes studied the human for a moment before the maned head shook. \*No more than you might hear anywhere. There are always persons who dislike the legal operations because they represent obstacles to illegitimate businesses, and some people will complain endlessly how they are being cheated by their employers and could make more if they did things to help the "competition." But as far as I'm aware, there's no connection between Utar and Astadar. Industrial metalwork, after all, is not his usual line of merchandise.\* He cocked his head to one side, puzzled. \*What makes you think there *would* be a connection?\*

Han hedged, watching the swirls of liquid in his cup, tiny whirlpools of deep emerald green contrasting artfully with the purple and black. "Not exactly a connection with Astadar — more like a connection with the Astred Family. I was wondering if you might've heard about a problem between him and them, some kind of huge grudge he or Rintoul might be holding against 'em."

Chewie's bark of laughter was brief. \*Han, my brother, I don't believe it is possible for anyone in the galaxy to carry a grudge against the Astreds larger than yours. Even if Utar did, how could that have anything to do with the attacks on Zair and his team?\*

Solo swallowed his mouthful of *shivval* and said it. "'Cause Zair's an Astred."

The Wookiee's humor washed away like a scattering of dried leaves on an Alderaani blue-sand shoreline at the onrush of high tide. \**What? Are you sure?*\*

"As sure as I know bantha's can't fly. F'r cryin' out loud, Chewie, I'm sitting smack in the middle of his *zhaina'siu*, his Holy of Holies, an' there ain't much to doubt about it. *Zhasta*, I don't need to check his bookplates or break into his computer to be sure. He's Nairil's great-grandson, and he's out here in the cosmic sticks 'cause he was picked to be next to run the Family Business, and he doesn't want the job."

His partner remained confused. \*I admit I don't understand. Wouldn't his refusal make him *less* of a target for Utar's attentions, not more?\*

"That depends on why his Family sent him here. The way everyone talks, he still carries a *lot* of clout all the way back to the Motherworld — and even if he's only here to stay out of his relations' hair, he's still what he is: Iltim's hand-picked successor. Utar has *got* to have some major reason to want info from him, and until we figure out what it is, him and us and those kids he's sponsoring'll all be in danger."

That, Chewbacca understood completely. \*I will return to the compound at once and make certain the youngsters are adequately guarded. But will *you* be safe, Han?\*

The Corellian snorted, gesturing broadly to indicate his surroundings. "Here? I think I'd be safe from a full scale Imperial attack as long as those doors stay closed."

\*Quite possibly, but that's not what I meant. I know your feelings toward the Astreds, and to call your hatred thoroughly catholic would be an understatement, I think. Perhaps I should ask, is Zair safe from *you*?\*

Solo's features became hard as flint for less than a nanosecond, in part a flicker of his too-long ingrained reaction to the word "Astred," and part a slight twinge of hurt over his Clanbrother's doubt, which he knew was well founded. "No," he said at last, "he's not in any danger. If he was, I wouldn't be calling you; I'd've broken out of here and we'd be heading off planet by now. I'm not saying I've *forgiven* that horde of *tchagrans*, but Zair's done nothing to hurt me and a lot to help me. Even old biases can't argue with that."

The Wookiee was surprised by this abbreviated confession, but pleased nonetheless. \*This is a significant change of heart, my friend, even if it *does* apply only to one man. I'm gratified to see that you are finally maturing.\*

Han's half laugh was a grunt. "Yeah, next thing you know, you an' half of Kashyyyk'll be throwing me a coming-out party. Don't worry about me, buddy; just make sure those kids are safe."

\*I will guard them as I would my own cubs,\* Chewie vowed. A moment later, the com-channel was closed and he was on his way.

## X

Han had no idea exactly how much time had passed before the autodoc ended its "repair cycle" and engaged the regen field to speed its patient's recovery, but he was certain it was well after midnight. Having no notion of just how long the mechanized medic intended to keep Zair swathed in the iridescent healing field that was the next best thing to full bacta immersion, he wandered up to his host's library, found something to read, settled down in a magnificently comfortable chair, and quickly fell asleep.

It was the first rays of dawn spilling through the tinted glass window beside him that finally roused Han, at first surprising him, but swiftly reminding him that he felt much better for at least a few hours of quiet, undisturbed sleep. He rubbed his eyes, set aside the book, and glanced down at the couch where Zair should have been. It was empty. A second glance located the musician at the medical cabinet, replacing the equipment that had done its best to repair him. He moved stiffly, still sore from the beating, and there were traces of swelling and bruises on his face, but much, much less than there had been the night before. Han debated remaining "asleep" to see what his host would do next, but impatient curiosity would not let him maintain the masquerade.

"Good morning, Detective Astred," he called down innocuously, reluctant to give up the comfort of his current position, but unwilling to let the subject wait. "Or should I say *Ansir* Astred?"

Even at this distance, Han could see the man wince, possibly because of the thin frosting of bitterness he could not keep from his utterance of the musician's surname — though Solo was certain there was a deeper, more subtle cause. "*Zair* will do just fine," the taller man said bluntly, even a little brusquely, but the irritation did not last. Momentarily, he sighed and looked up toward his guest. "I should have known I wouldn't be able to keep it from you forever. How did you figure it out?"

Han shrugged. "To be honest with you, I *should* have figured it out the day after I met you. I suspect I *did*, and just wasn't ready to accept that you could be one of those narrow-minded *t'tchazikren*. But what made me admit it was your *inia'sul*." He gestured to the complex family tree carved around the hearth. "Pretty much laid all the cards right on the table, as an old partner of mine was fond of saying."

Zair closed the cabinet doors with thoughtful slowness before limping back to the couch to look up at his guest. As he plopped himself down, he sighed once again, more deeply. "That *wasn't* my idea," he insisted, gesturing broadly. "Half this place wasn't. Mother and Grandfather had it all set up before I even arrived. Some of it I like — the balustrade up there, for instance — but a lot of it is almost as gaudily ostentatious as a wealthy Hut's harem. The *inia'sul* *definitely* wasn't my idea, which is why I had this room made into my private place. I truly *don't* want to go about trumpeting my family name and background if I can avoid it, and if anyone and everyone could get in here...." His strong features eloquently expressed his distaste, especially in their current less-than-typically-perfect condition.

Solo was surprisingly willing to accept his explanations. "I figured that out a long time ago. Just Zair, nothing else. Given your status on a Motherhole like this, you *had* to be trying to get away from the Family Name pretty bad."

The musician considered Han's words and his apparently unaffected attitude with a quizzically arched brow. "And it doesn't matter to you? Stars, the second I heard you say the name *Astred*, I expected you to leap down from the balcony and strangle me with one of my own harpstrings. I wondered how I had managed to survive this long, with both of us locked in the same room all night."

Han snorted amiably, hazel eyes rolling heavenward in humor. "I wondered the same thing half the night. And believe me, I really *did* want to, at first — but I couldn't rip your throat out while you were unconscious. With the way your 'doc kept fussing over you, I had plenty of time to chew on it. I guess somewhere between then and dawn, reason got the better of me, 'cause I decided I don't *want* to rip your throat out, even if you *are* an *a'kaich'n* Astred."

Zair politely ignored the mild (and warranted, he felt) insult to his relations, and was instead pleased with the smuggler's unexpected reaction. "That was undeservedly gracious of you, given your unique dealings with my Family. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Han reluctantly pulled himself from the hedonistic chair, stretched lithely, and began to move toward the staircase to the main level. "But you're not getting off that easy. I figure you owe me a few explanations,

seeing how you've been deliberately keeping me in the dark all this time, even though you knew how I felt about your kin."

He paused to lean against the balustrade and favor his host with a penetrating half frown. "Why didn't you just *tell* me, Zair? In spite of my reputation and the kind of first impression I can make on people, I'm *not* a completely unreasonable hothead...."

"Perhaps not," Astred agreed, "but on this specific subject, I had good reason to suspect you might be less than thrilled with the news, especially when you knew nothing of me, personally. Besides, it's not as if I treated you any differently than any other stranger I meet. I don't volunteer my Family Name easily, and the people who *are* privy to the information are strongly encouraged to keep the information to themselves."

Han harrumphed polite skepticism. "Really? Then how come *Utar* and his toadies knew exactly who you are, even were up on your ancestry?"

Zair shrugged, but speculated. "Because they've been here longer than you, no doubt, and operate in an enterprise in which the knowledge of who is involved with what is extremely valuable. You of all people should know that. And admit it: You *would* have hated me without reason and not given me any chance to prove myself different from my kin had I given you the information on the night we met."

The spacer hesitated, coughing and clearing his throat for what seemed an unusually long time; at length, he capitulated to the musician's logic. "Yeah, you're right, I would've been a thickheaded gundark about it— and screwed both of us in the deal, too. Okay, that's one explanation. Now tell me what the hell you're doing on a nowhere planet like Phan Shilis. I can't believe you picked it, or that your Family would've shoved you out here just because you told 'em you don't want to run the Council when Nairil bites it. I can't translate all the finer points of ancient Corellese script—"

"You can read it?" Zair interrupted, briefly astonished before grimacing in realization. "Well, of course you can, or you wouldn't have said the *inia'sul* gave away my secret. Forgive me, but it *is* a bit surprising. Hardly anyone outside the most snobbish high caste circles bothers studying it, any more, unless they happen to have a passion for minutiae, like me."

Han laughed as he started down the stairs. "I know, an' I was almost engaged to one of the most stuck-up snobs on Corellia, for a while. She taught me, but I've forgotten the really picky stuff."

He moved to the front of the hearth and stepped up on to the cold stone to trace his fingers over a specific part of the elaborate design. "From some of what I *can* read, you've got plenty of brothers and sisters to take the job instead — not to mention your aunts and uncles and your mother and her father. Any one of 'em probably *should* be the next in line, since you're the baby of the family. And I just don't buy the bit about them sending you out here because they're upset over your choice in careers. Hell, Nairil himself rode runners in competition before he got tagged for the Council Seat, and everyone on Corellia knew he did a lot of side betting, too. Being a musician is considerably more respectable, especially when you've got a real talent. So why the hell *are* you out here?"

The oddest of small smiles touched the darker man's now only slightly cracked and swollen lips. "Officially," he said in a most offhand manner, "I'm here to oversee my family's business concerns, make sure the persons running their companies are honest and efficient. Three or four times a year, I do inspections of the management and the books, and if they aren't what they should be, I report back, and my uncles and aunts see to it that measures are taken to reprimand or replace the persons indicted, and correct any financial problems."

Han shook his head in vague amazement. "A damn cushy job, if you ask me. And for that, they pay you... what? A million credits a year? Two?"

It was Zair's turn to cough in discomfort. "Ten," he admitted sheepishly. "But not entirely for that reason."

"Then what? I can't imagine what they'd consider that big of a disgrace to pay you every year more'n I'll probably see in my entire life so you'd take a job this far from home. It's obvious they want you away so you'll stay out of their hair — and out of their social circles."

Astred nodded. "Your deductive reasoning is astute. It's true, they wanted me on a now here planet, as you put it, because they're afraid I might expose a secret the Family *never* wants brought to light — a secret I never should have known, but accidentally uncovered in my fascination with detective work."

Han's surprise expressed itself in an abrupt widening of hazel eyes and a broad grin. "You mean, you *knew* too much? I didn't think anyone outside of old holovids played that game anymore, 'cept the Imps, and they give new meanings to the word 'paranoid'...."

Zair grunted, half an editorial comment, half a sound of discomfort as he rose from the couch. "So do some of my relatives. I think Grandfather or Great-Grandfather insisted on this thing—" He touched the carving. "—to remind me just who I am and what I risk by not letting them make me forget what they wish I'd never known in the first place." He cocked his head to study both the *inia'sul* and his own words. "Probably Grandfather," he concluded.

Solo glanced at his host. "Sounds pretty damn serious, if they were thinking of pulling a forced memory-erase on you. What'd you do, find out the family's been embezzling Council operating funds for generations? Or that Great-Grandpa's been taking payoffs from the Imps, or maybe even sleeping with the Emperor's illegitimate daughter?"

"Oh, much worse than that." The musician's tone was both derisive and flippant. "I had the audacity to discover that my siblings and I aren't Astred Council Line at all — we're really Elethin Blood Line."

For a moment, Han absently nodded his understanding — then true understanding hit him like a supernova. "You're *what?!?*"

Zair apprehended his reaction, and indicated a spot near the end of design that was the current generation. He traced an almost incomprehensible bit of the subtext to show Han visual proof while he explained. "Until the generation before mine, my Family was exactly as they claim to be: an unbroken line of the Astred Council branch, reaching back so many thousands of years, there was no longer expectation that the Line would ever end. What was, was as it had been, and always would be. The heirs to the Family Honors were very careful to insure the continuance.

"Then my Grandfather, Iltim, did something no one had ever dreamed possible: He gave my mother his wholehearted permission and blessing to marry a man by the name of Karvyaz Mansor. The Mansors were of a lower but still respectable caste, and Karvyaz came from a particularly strong and honorable family line, so the entire family approved, even old Nairil and a few of the heads of Astred cadet branches who thought we'd been weakening the Blood by too much inbreeding."

Han couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, sure, right, like the bunch who does more to keep tabs on every *Corell'avi's* breeding would mess up their own genetics by being egregiously stupid."

"My thoughts exactly, but you don't know my more distant Blood Cousins. At any rate, Mother and Father were fruitful and multiplied ten times over, much to my Grandparents' delight, since there had been very few children to carry on the Line for several generations. Everything was as splendid as could be, until, when I was five, my Father died, killed while he was traveling home from business on Cendar and the Imperials had the notion the shuttle he was on was carrying a group of rebel infiltrators headed for the Corellian underground."

"And your family held you responsible for *that?*" Han couldn't believe it, but he couldn't see any other way in which this story could lead up to Zair's exile on Phan Shilis.

He was relieved when his host's reply negated any need for him to buy it. "No, of course not — I was only five, after all. In the process of doing whatever legal work was needed to record Father's death and determine its impact on his heirs and other relations, Iltim discovered that this particular family Mansor was actually a part of the Elethin Bloodline. Some time in the past, they'd adopted the Mansor name so that they could continue to live and work on the Motherworld without anyone knowing they were supposed to be *elkuchai*, and thus not recognized or allowed voting privileges in any Motherworld concerns, political or mercantile. Father had died as an honestly and honorably adopted member of the Astred family; he had been in good standing within the Family at the time of his death, so the Family heads couldn't legally disown or disavow his children or their descendants. As eldest, my mother was already the recognized heir to the Family Honors. When her siblings declined to accept her birthright, Iltim and Nairil brought terrible pressure to bear on Mother, encouraging her to remarry and produce at least one more acceptable heir. She couldn't bring herself to do it, so Grandfather and Great-Grandfather chose instead to bury the information. Mother and her

siblings agreed to follow his wishes, and so reality became the great yet horrible Family Secret. None of us children were ever told — but I found out on my own."

"Just by digging into the family tree?" Han doubted that any such skeleton would have been left in plain view in any record, as the Elethin thread had been obscured in the *inia'sul*.

Zair shook his head, stepping back to the couch. "Not that easily. I noticed there were indications of something being hidden in the *inia'sul* at home, and I looked into it — *dug* would be a far more appropriate term, perhaps even *excavated*. I certainly felt like an archaeologist on an expedition to uncover the tomb of the First Emperor. My relatives thought nothing of it; they considered this avocation of mine nothing more than an eccentric and harmless hobby. When I disinterred the truth, they changed their opinions *very* quickly."

Having seen just how tenacious and sharp this man could be when in pursuit of a mystery, Han had no reason to disbelieve his claim. He himself suddenly saw how this reflected on other matters. "I'll bet that's why they offered you the Council Chair, isn't it? As a bribe to keep your mouth shut?"

"I've often suspected so," Astred sighed, gingerly and gratefully letting the sofa's plush cushions caress his still aching body. "In all honesty, I don't see why they're worried — what call would I have to make this tidbit public, after all? What would it get me? But I *have* been troubled by the ease with which they all choose to engage in deception rather than own up to the truth. People on the Motherworld have had an *elkuchai* parent before, and it's perfectly legal to surrender any rights to another rank — even a higher one — if you want."

Han smiled crookedly as he gave the carving a final close look. "Yeah, but none of 'em were ever born to the Family who runs the friggin' Social Council, before. Given the way a lot of the Zahinar and Chansai couldn't wait to claw their way up the social ladder when the Vansherra's left, I imagine there'd be more'n a few status crazy people in your own Clan who'd be more than happy to use this as an excuse to uproot the Astreds and plant themselves in your place, renounced ties or not."

Zair closed his eyes and let his head droop back. "Sadly, I don't doubt it one bit. And some of those who would be happiest to tear apart my family are other branches of the Astred lines. But when I agreed to come out here, I promised to tell no one the Secret — and to keep my Oath intact, I must ask you to make the same promise, Elthan. Despite our opinions of Corellia and her government and how we both know it all needs to change, it doesn't need the sort of *violent* change that could come about as a result of this revelation."

Han took the seat near the couch that he had used the night before, nodding heavily. "Civil war. Yeah, I could see it. With the Imps hanging over the Motherplanet like a flock of scavengers, waiting for something to happen that'll give 'em an excuse to depose the government and take control of the whole ACS..." He shuddered at the image. "I know I wouldn't want to be around to see it — or be the one who started it."

"Precisely." Zair opened his eyes to look straight at his guest. "And we are both somehow undeserved outcasts of that system, you due to the dishonesty and treachery of others, I because others fear I would dare speak out in a manner that would threaten its continued existence. I would change the injustices in Corellia's society in a moment if I could, but *not* in that way. Never."

The pilot empathized. "Neither would I. I hate to admit it — and don't you *dare* repeat this to anyone — but there *are* a few things about that planet and our people I wouldn't want to see blown off the face of the galaxy forever."

"I'll give you my Oath on it, if you will give me yours. Will you keep my Family's secret to yourself?"

Han looked up, contemplating his benefactor and weighing the request. As he had shown his trust in Zair by accepting him in spite of all the horrors and injustices his Family represented in the spacer's past, Zair in turn had demonstrated his trust of the Outcaste starpilot by revealing a truth he was Honor bound to keep silent. It was an expression worthy of the most solemn of BloodOaths.

"*V'kydat tsai'dist*," Solo said without another second's hesitation, performing the full ritual gesture to go with the appropriate ritual phrase.

Zair did the same in return, a wan smile crossing his battered face. “I suppose that as long as I’m baring my soul and all its secrets, I ought to tell you the entire truth. I know you’ve wondered why I was so willing to extend you respect and friendship since we first met — and I dare say you spent a good deal of the night giving the matter even more thought, now that you know who and what I am.”

More than a hint of wryness limned the spacer’s expression. “You might say that. It’s not typical Motherworlder behavior, that’s for sure, and you knew who I was from the beginning.”

The musician nodded, carefully, so as not to irritate his half healed injuries. “More than you know. Tell me, Elthan, do you know your parents’ names?”

It was such an abrupt change of topic, Han was rendered speechless for a moment. When the brief shock had passed, a shadow of distaste crossed his features, one that was pure reflex whenever the subject of his parents came up. “Yeah, I do,” he admitted, without much liking. “The Wookiee Elder who raised me until I was four made sure I knew that, just in case I ever needed to know, and he told the officials at the JPA he took me to when he couldn’t care for me anymore. Ardel and Kalysa Khaiven. My mother died when I was only a few months old, and before you ask, I don’t know where the hell my bastard father is — and I don’t *want* to know.” The firmness with which he made that last statement clearly told his companion that if whatever else he had to say in any way involved his delinquent father, he didn’t want to hear it.

Fortunately, Zair didn’t even mention him. “Do you know anything at all about your mother — where she came from, what her unmarried name was?”

The hazel eyes narrowed with thought; then, Han shook his head. “No. *Elkuchai* are hard to keep track of under the best of circumstances, and when my old man disappeared, he obviously wanted to get lost. If my mother was a dirtsider, there might be a record of her marrying him somewhere, but I never bothered to look. It’s a big galaxy, after all. But I know she was Corellian, and of some high clan; my blood tests are pure *Khasir Corelli’avi*, for all that’s worth.” He obviously was not impressed by his own lofty lineage.

Zair smiled more broadly, laughing softly. “You can’t imagine how refreshing I find your attitude. I know dozens of other Motherworlders who can’t say the same of their own Blood, yet who use their position and breeding as an excuse for the most pompous and outrageous behavior. They’d kill to have your heritage — though they’d never admit it, what with the popular attitude toward the *elkuchai* — yet you would be more than happy to be rid of it, without a second thought. Quite astonishing — and also beside the point.”

He stood with some difficulty and moved toward a computer console, gesturing for Han to follow. When he had carefully seated himself before it and activated it, he brought up an encrypted file that showed his family tree in exhaustive detail, including sub-branches, in-laws, and other relations reaching back for at least three thousand years. With deft keystrokes, he focused on the most recent generations of the family, his in particular. As he did so, he spoke. “My father was the eldest child in his family, but he was not the *only* child. He had a younger sister who was often away from the Motherworld after she’d trained at the Republic Academy in Entarris in starship navigation. While she was working for one of the mercantile fleets, she met a man, fell in love, married him, and never returned. She kept in touch with my father for a time, but after a while, that stopped, and he never discovered why. I think perhaps you’ve just given me the answer.” The flickering images on the screen finally stopped, displaying the branches of Zair’s own family — his mother and father, his siblings, his maternal aunts and uncles, and one paternal aunt: a Kalysa Mansor, her husband, one Ardel Khaiven, and their son, Elthan.

Han’s mouth literally fell open as he stared at what the computer displayed. He tried to say something, but found he could scarcely move his jaw, much less make a sound. When the full implications of what he was seeing finally sank in, all he could breathe was, “*Zhasta!*”

Zair smiled softly. “Perhaps now you can understand why I’ve been so willing to give you the benefit of any doubt. I don’t believe my grandfather knew what he was doing when he sat in judgment over you, or perhaps he might have been somewhat less inclined to take the Imperial position. Or perhaps he did. I’m afraid he’s never approved of the *elkuchai*, and given an opportunity to declare a Khaiven, no less, *zhak’rut* might have been too tempting for him to pass by, family or not. But I’ve examined the records myself, many times, just to be certain I hadn’t made a mistake. You and I are first cousins, Elthan — and I must say that thus far, I’ve found you to be far more likeable than any of my cousins on my mother’s side.”

Hearing the actual relationship spoken aloud broke the last remnants of the stasis in which the spacer had been caught. "I'll be damned," he breathed, looking from the computer to the musician. "And you're absolutely sure about this?"

"Quite. You can just imagine the sort of stir *that* created among my narrow-minded relations, discovering that a bond sister of our family had married a Khaiven."

Han could indeed, and chuckled wickedly at the delightful thought. "Good. I hope it gave a few of them a nice big coronary."

"Almost. So you do understand, now, that my generosity toward you hasn't been a simple act of charity, don't you? I knew of our kinship from the start, and while I sympathized with what had been done to you, I never wanted you to think that I was just another wealthy Motherworlder showing snobbish pity toward the less fortunate. But I also knew I couldn't come right out and tell you what I knew; you would never have accepted it, even if you *had* believed it. And I *wanted* you to believe it, because I wanted to have a chance to know you, without the barriers of family names and past history between us. It was no lie when I said I felt you were treated unjustly, but if you'd known who I was, would you have accepted that at face value, or would you have thought I was merely being an apologist for my family's atrocious behavior?"

"I wouldn't've taken it kindly," Solo admitted, now able to see how Zair's actions had been the cautious moves not of one who harbored suspicions, but of one who did not want to risk alienating a person whom he desperately wanted to know better. "I understand what you were trying to do — and I also understand why you decided to live out here rather than stay at home. Bad enough that you knew about your family being Elethin, but finding out you had a Khaiven first cousin...!" He shook his head and laughed. "I'll bet your grandfathers went apoplectic when they heard *that* one!"

"To say the least," Zair confirmed, also laughing. "After that, they tried to bury it so deep in the records, no one would ever find it, but it was just one more thing they couldn't stop me from already knowing, and all the more reason to send me out here and pay me to keep my mouth shut." He turned serious, his silver eyes focusing on his cousin. "It's no hardship for me to do so, Elthan, since as I've said, I've nothing to gain by telling others things that would only make trouble for a great many people. But I could understand if you might want to, given how badly you've been treated by the Motherworld, and my family in particular."

Han held up his hands to still the musician. "Hey, I understand, and that's why I gave you my Oath. But if you'd told me first that we're actually cousins, we wouldn't've needed the Oath. Family protects family. I may not have learned it from my father, but I learned it from the Wookiees. I think I'm still getting used to the idea of actually having a close blood relative I don't hate — best I've had up 'til now is another *elkuchai* who's something like a third or fourth cousin — but I think I like it. And I won't mention it to anyone — 'cept maybe Chewie — 'cause I don't think either of us need the headaches it'd cause. Your secret is my secret until you say otherwise, and I'll keep it. But are you sure it still *is* a secret?"

A puzzled frown furrowed Zair's face. "What do you mean?"

Han then told him what he could recall of the conversation between Utar and his lackeys, before they had entered the shed to interrogate their prisoner. He explained to him the matter of money laundering, and finally recalled the name *Memris* connected with it.

But even after hearing the story, Zair was still at a loss. "I'm afraid I can't quite see a connection," he confessed. "I've heard the name before, but in no context so important that I can remember who he is or how he might be connected to both myself and that insufferable ruffian. There are so many people on this world affiliated with my family's business concerns, it could be anything from a worker at one of the mines to a secretary in some front office, or even a janitor. It's possible Utar *believes* there's some more important link between us, or that my dealings with this person might affect his illegal activities, but I can't imagine where he got the idea."

"Maybe from this Memris guy," Han speculated, more familiar with the criminal and semi-criminal mind. "He could've fed Utar a line just to puff up his own importance and give him enough leverage to increase his percentage of the profits. Utar's the kind who'd swallow it, 'specially if Memris is a good liar. And if he knows about your Mother and the family scandal, Memris could use it to force your cooperation, if he needed 'proof'."

"Or he could know nothing at all, and is simply an employee of some Astred concern invoking my name in an attempt to protect himself from anticipated retaliation by the underworld," Zair added thoughtfully, then snorted with mild impatience. "None of which explains what it is our unsavory friends think I know that I *don't*. This bears further investigation, and we should be about it as soon as possible."

Green gold eyes widened once again. "In your condition? If Utar or any of his heavies sees you snooping around again, their kind of 'second reminder' will kill you."

Zair was adamant. "Nonetheless, we must try. The race is coming up quickly, and I'm inclined to think there's much more going here than a mere display of poor sportsmanship — or even an example of unparalleled greed."

Han was equally stubborn, and was on his feet for emphasis. "Maybe, but it ain't worth *dying* for. Nobody wants to see Utar take the fall more'n me and Chewie. He's done wrongs to us that make what he did to you last night look as horrible as a weekly holovid kids' show. Even if it means not seeing him get what he deserves this time around, I *won't* let you get mixed up with those *zvindwats* again, Zair. I may be itching for revenge, but it's just *not* worth a life — mine *or* yours!"

The musician was touched, and his expression freely showed it. For all the things he had heard from others concerning the character of this man and the folly of his choice in not only hiring but befriending him, Zair knew that they were totally wrong. "I appreciate your concern, Elthan," he began, "but—"

"There're no buts about it," Solo insisted. "I've already got Chewie at the track yards, keeping both eyes on the kids, so you don't have to worry about their safety. You can do all the investigating you want out here and in Lenduvar's compound and on the track, but if you take one step in the direction of Utar and his people, I'll haul you out to the starport and lock you into the *Falcon's* hold until the race is over."

Zair smiled wryly, silver eyes bright with confidence. "You wouldn't dare."

Han's return smile was bare toothed, feral. "Why not? Rank doesn't impress me, *astieris*, and even if it did, we Khaivens are still two steps up on you Elethins, three on the Astreds. Besides, I've got more'n two meters of walking fur to back me up, and I *know* he'll agree with me."

The musician's twinkle became a pout. "But what if the answers we need can't be found out here or in Mrik's hangar? What if it becomes imperative that we search Utar's compound?"

"Then I'll go after 'em, not you."

"And if you get caught?"

Han shrugged easily. "Then I get caught. I've gotten away from Utar and his boss and worse than both of 'em, dozens of times. Besides, I know what that scumbag thinks of me, and he *knows* I won't have the kind of info he thinks is important. I'm just a lowlife small change know-nothing smuggler to him, remember?"

Zair contemplated his guest's statements and his rationale for the better part of a minute; at last, he conceded. "All right, we'll do it your way — for now. But that won't alter the fact that we have less than two days to the race, and a vicious competitor acting against us, whatever his motivations. We need to do *something* before his mayhem turns to murder."

## XI

The wisdom of Han's exhortations became quite clear to Zair long before the day was out. Knowing that Chewbacca had been up all night guarding Lenduvar's compound, the spacer was eager to provide him relief, since tired eyes missed much, and he *had* interrupted the Wookiee's sleep with his call the night before. Astred insisted on coming along to go over the place with a fine tooth comb, and nothing Han said could convince him to stay home for the day, to get back as much of his strength as he could. The musician responded with a blithe comment on how a good breakfast could cure almost anything. After allowing his single non-droid household servant to provide them with just about the best breakfast Han had ever eaten, they were on their way to the track.

Mrik and his team were in much better spirits this morning, as Chewbacca had informed them of Utar's treachery in tainting the food with cinadin — a welcome improvement, as they didn't need to be hampered by infighting and suspicion with the race now so imminent. Chewie gladly surrendered the watch upon their arrival; he informed his partner that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred during the night, then was on his way back to the *Falcon* and his overdue rest period.

Settling down to their respective businesses, Han and Zair each did his own minute examination of the facilities, Solo investigating the buildings and grounds for potential security trouble spots and Astred looking for the tiniest clues which might provide the much needed direct links to Utar and/or his minions.

They both found their most important data in the same place: the hangar's roof. As this region of Phan Shilis had a warm climate year round and only rain for precipitation, most of the structures outside the quaint environs of the Near Cityside District had roofs which were either totally flat or only very slightly slanted. The hangars, without exception, were the former, and had easily reached access ladders for the maintenance of the huge ventilation ducts that kept the air within clean and cool.

Han was concerned about the security risk the ladder presented, since it was not monitored by the compound's security fields. Thus, it could allow most anyone access to the ducts and the large openable skylight installed for the convenience of vertical take-off vehicles.

Zair's interest and worry was piqued not by the ladder nor by any feature of the roof itself, but by what they found when they went up to have a look around: hundreds of glittering multicolored foil candy wrappers, each precisely folded into tiny squares, triangles, or semicircles. The heaviest accumulation was near a vent through which one could hear echoes of conversation rising from below. There was no evidence to indicate that either vent or skylight had been used as a means of entering the hangar, but it was clear proof that Utar's T'Shaaimites Listener, Tszhiu, had spent considerable time on this roof.

"He's been up here quite often," Zair concluded after he'd squatted to collect and examine a discriminating selection of wrappers. "From the varying degrees of deterioration in the paper and foil overlay, I'd say he's been visiting for several weeks." He held up two wrappers, one of which was brilliant and still-shiny blue, the other of which had lost its luster and was beginning to fall apart. "This one—" He motioned with the former. "—couldn't have been here for more than a few days, while this other one had to have been dropped over half a month ago. See the signs of water damage? It was obviously exposed to rain, and we haven't had so much as a sprinkle since a storm almost three weeks back."

Han bent to squint at the papers; he nodded, both acknowledging his comprehension of the differences and his appreciation of the musician's deductive talents. "And we've both found these things around the grounds before. I spotted a good half dozen of 'em outside your speeder after they kidnaped you last night."

Zair concurred. "I've noticed them since the first time I came to see how Mrik and his team were doing. And they've been in every single compound where I went to ask questions concerning the 'accident.' They *mean* something, and not merely that our T'Shaaimites friend is at serious risk for excessive and early tooth decay."

Solo grunted brief laughter at the joke. "I wouldn't be surprised if you found 'em on every single roof, too." The comment was frosted with the sort of cynicism only a smuggler with ethics could have. "Looks like Utar's had his Listener flunking checking out the competition since the day it began, seeing who's not worth his while, and who needs to be eliminated — whatever way it takes."

He stood straight, shading his eyes to study the other hangar rooftops, not really expecting to be able to spot incriminating wrappers at this distance, but taking the shot, just in case. "Y'know, though," he reflected, "if they all have as much litter on 'em as this one, that won't help point the finger for the sabotage where we want it. We'll be just another competitor who's had Utar's eaves dropper come visiting. It won't provide proof that Lenduvar was deliberately singled out."

"Then we'll just have to check as many of them as we can," Zair said simply. He also stood straight and went immediately for the access ladder.

Han darted ahead of him, hoping that a physical presence before him would slow down the performer, whom he felt shouldn't be doing this in the first place. "And risk tipping off that pond scum? If they see you going from roof to roof, nosing around, they'll eventually put two and two together and realize you're on to one of their tricks."

Astred tried to slip past the spacer, but Han was on the ladder and headed down before he could quite make it. "Then I'll just have to make sure I'm not seen," he replied, losing a brief snort of frustration. "I've had practice at it before."

The pilot's return snort was pure skepticism, born of long and painful experience. "Not in the condition you're in now, I'll bet."

"This?" Zair shrugged it off with an airy gesture as he started down the ladder. "A few minor aches, nothing more. I've done more than this in worse shape. My condition won't even be a factor, I assure yo—"

The word choked off in a yelp. Two steps from the top, Zair's left foot slipped from the rung; his right was already in midair, descending toward the next step down. He tried to hang on with his arms alone, but his abused abdomen and ribs replied to his reflex with a firm, "No way!" His own weight pulled his hands loose, and he fell.

About two-thirds of the way down the almost ten meter drop, Han heard the yelp, looked up, saw Astred headed for him like a doomed meteor, and acted without thinking. He put both feet on the outer uprights of the ladder, slid down the rest of the way, and was just beginning to feel solid ground beneath him when Zair hit him. The timing could not have been more perfect; the spacer's feet were in just the right position to form a base, and his legs in a flexing position rather than braced for impact. When the weight struck, they continued to flex, acting like piston shafts to absorb most of the shock without injury to either man. He did, however, finish the maneuver by falling backwards, but with only a sore behind to show for the collision rather than a concussion or broken bones.

Though he was glad they were both unharmed, Han was definitely annoyed. "'Won't be a factor, huh?!" he scolded as a shaky Zair rolled off him to lay, panting and shivering, on the sandy dirt. "I may not be a doctor, Astred, or even your fancy little med droid, but I know what I'm talking about! Money can pay for the equipment to make you more comfortable, and even speed up healing some of the more serious things those muscle-bound bastards did to you last night, but they ain't no magic wand to cure it all! If you want to see Utar and his crowd brought to justice, you're *not* gonna do it by pushing yourself too fast, falling off roofs, and breaking your *k'shassen* neck!"

He hauled himself from his half prone position to a fully seated posture, rubbing his aching posterior and favoring Zair with a glare of purest indignation. "*Zhasta!*" he continued at the same full head of steam. "That's one thing I really *really* hate about you *t'tchazikren* — an' *don't* tell me you aren't one, because sometimes, you sure as hell *act* like one. You people make a lot of noise about hating titles and royalty and all that Outblood crap to offworlders, but you still behave like your goddamn almighty rank makes you omnipotent *and* invulnerable. Well, it *doesn't* Zair, and if you insist on being so bloody arrogant that you have to do everything yourself even when it's both stupid *and* dangerous, then leave me out of this!"

His righteous lecture had vented the worst of his aggravated annoyance; temper cooling, he then noticed that the target of his chastisement was still lying where he had rolled, eyes closed, arms wrapped around himself, shaking. Solo rolled his own eyes heavenward, thinking the man had taken the scolding too much to heart; he was about to speak when Zair beat him to it.

"You're right, you're right," he whispered, undoubtedly aching in some place he was afraid would break or explode if he spoke any louder. "I'm afraid I inherited a full measure and more of my family's arrogance, believing that

opportunities for exceptional education automatically includes exceptional physical ability. Thank you for reminding me that I'm not superhuman, Han."

The spacer's attitude gentled in the musician's favor. Not Elthan, this time, just Han. It was a step in the right direction, away from the ingrained affectations of Motherworld upbringing toward a fuller degree of enlightenment. He smiled wryly, and quipped, "I didn't do that; your little slip did."

Zair shivered again. "Too true. It certainly knocked me off my high seat, both literally and figuratively." His eyes opened, their silver color reflecting the greenish blue of the cloud-flecked sky above him. "But there's no way we can prove Mrik's team was singled out for observation if we can't get a look at the other compounds. How will we manage that if anyone we send to investigate is likely to arouse suspicion?"

Han pondered the problem, also glancing up at the sky. But unlike his planet bound benefactor, his thoughts saw beyond the clouds and the blue to the not-so-empty orbital space beyond. Inspiration struck; he grinned broadly. "Don't worry — I've got an idea."

\*\*\*\*\*

"How did you know that my family had holdings in the local communications industry?" Zair asked half an hour later, when he and Han arrived at the headquarters of Syslink, the company which held an Imperial mandated monopoly of all planetary and intrasystem communications. Being full daylight, even under a clouding sky, both men had felt safe in leaving Lenduvar's compound under the watchful eye of two team members whose work on the speeder was done. Jynari in particular had been eager to leap at the chance to clean his sullied reputation, and had sworn grimly not to touch a bite or a single drop of food until the adults returned.

Han's expression glowed with devious amusement, the simple sidekick turning the tables on the great detective. "Simple. It's obvious the Astreds have their fingers in just about every important business on this rock, and communications is right up at the top of the list. When the speeder's navsystem pointed us to your private parking place, I knew I was right. You guys are holding as much of the corporate stock as the Empire'll allow, aren't you?"

"Controlling interest," the musician affirmed. "Around here, our Imperial guests are more interested in writing the rules that govern the system than in making a relative pittance of a profit off it. But I can't even guess what you have in mind."

He still couldn't even after they'd entered the building and were enthusiastically greeted by the guard/receptionist on duty. He continued clueless when Han requested access to certain equipment, the general nature of which he understood, but which he hadn't a whisper of fathoming how it might be used to aid their current business.

When they first stepped through the doors, the guard (who recognized Zair at once and plainly interpreted his visit as a surprise inspection) was thoroughly obsequious to both Astred and his guest — until the guest opened his mouth first and started issuing the orders. The man balked at Solo's cheekiness, a clear violation of protocol when there was one of higher rank and far greater importance present. He might have refused to allow the spacer to accompany Zair into the restricted areas, had not the performer insisted by simply saying that the spacer was a member of his family. The guard's attitude did an instant turnabout. Failure to show a relative of the highest Clan courtesy would be interpreted as an insult to the entire Astred Family — which would undoubtedly end with this mere employee in a much less desirable position, or completely jobless. After that, the guard couldn't apologize for his bad manners quickly enough and graciously waved them on.

Rather than take offense at the hireling's snobishness, Han was actually amused by the incident. "A member of your *family*?" he queried of the musician as they headed through a set of high security doors and down a deserted corridor toward their goal. "I don't know that I shouldn't be insulted," he reflected puckishly. "Telling a toady like him that I'm an Astred-spawn..."

"Not Astred, cousin," his companion corrected amiably. "Elethin. Is it my fault if that bootlicker made a mistake and presumed otherwise?"

"Which you knew he would," the spacer laughed. "I'm glad we're both on the same side, or one of us would be in *major* trouble."

Zair accepted that diagnosis as they arrived at their perplexing destination. The place was little more than a cubicle jammed with control boards and vid screens and other equipment, a monitoring station for one of the company's many orbital observation satellites. This particular system controlled those keeping their electronic eyes on Port Qaid itself, providing information for the local police, traffic officials, utilities, and such. Han immediately sat himself down before the controls and started to work them like a pro. His employer was startled by this somewhat unexpected display of expertise, but was even more thoroughly astonished by the amount of detail the satellites were capable of providing.

"If we were looking at this from a side angle rather than from directly above, we could probably see into people's houses well enough to know if that's a desert fly or merely a speck of dust on their parlor wall," Astred noted wryly, winning full agreement from his partner-in-solving-crime.

"That's the idea with these things," Han confirmed. "And it's not so much the police as it is the Imps, wanting to be able to see any tiny little thing that might peg someone as a rebel, or just a potential troublemaker. I've been on planets where you *could* poke a spy system's nose right into the resident's socks, but the Imps usually have a almost killing stranglehold on places like that. I'm not really surprised to see they got these junior versions put up here, but I would've thought with all you Motherworlders around, you would've kept 'em out. They never let the Imps put these spy-eyes over Corellia, y'know."

Zair nodded vaguely, trying to memorize what Solo's nimble finger were doing with the controls, but he moved too quickly for the musician to follow. He gave it up and replied more thoroughly instead. "I know. But Corellia was spared only because someone influential in the ACS Senate had the wit to tell the our Imperial overlords that powerful sensor satellites would seriously interfere with the primary functions of the orbiting starship yards. She was even bright enough to assemble a team of noted engineers to back her up with very convincing 'proof.' That's what the Empire *really* wants from the Motherworld, after all — a fleet of the best starships in the galaxy — and I'm sure they were terrified of risking even a partial shutdown of the yards."

Han snorted. "Your Grandfather tell you that?" From his dubious inflections, he was prepared to disbelieve anything that had spouted from Iltim's mouth.

Zair shook his head, brushing a lock of black hair from his forehead. "Not at all," he said with the specie of blandness that could only be a facade over wicked satisfaction. "I actually heard it from the Senator herself — Father's cousin Arrali, who, being another Elethin-in-disguise, had significant interest in protecting the shipyards and Corellia itself from as much Imperial control as possible. You're planning to focus this thing on the S'Luas track, aren't you?"

His abrupt change of topic would have broken a lesser man's neck; but Solo had long since grown accustomed to abrupt and unpredictable change. "Give the man a prize," Han chuckled as his fingers nimbly played over the command console. "A vidsystem sensitive enough to tell the sex of a moving marsh-fly from orbit ought to be able to spot those nice reflective candy wrappers against bare white fomex rooftops. Let's just hope the sun stays out and the clouds hold off until we've zeroed in, or we may have to find another way to check 'em out."

"Agreed."

The weather wasn't as cooperative as Han would have liked. For the better part of two hours, the clouds between the geosynchronous orbiter and their desired target wavered between impenetrably thick and almost-but-not-quite thin enough to see through. Still, the situation forced Zair to remain inactive for a while, and of that, Han approved. Especially after that fall from the ladder, he would have tried to force the musician to go back home and rest if he hadn't needed him to gain access to these systems. This not only saved him the argument, it also achieved the goal for which the argument would have been intended. Zair took a seat after only five minutes of hanging over Han's shoulder; fifteen minutes after that, he nodded off. The smuggler was pleased, both because his new friend was getting the sleep his battered body required, and because this proved he'd been right from the start in assessing Zair's condition.

After a particularly frustrating hour of just barely failing to focus on the S'Luas hangar tops, the clouds went from widely variable to steadily thickening. A near hour of waiting without a hint of let up followed; Han was beginning to feel himself fade from sheer boredom and was about to wake Zair and suggest they give it up for a while when a crack in the cloud deck gave them the break they needed. Han hit the control to activate the system's recorders; he simultaneously sharpened the focus for a closer view and kicked a leg of Astred's chair to rouse him.

"I think we've got it!" he crowed as the startled Zair sat bolt upright and darted his glance around the cubicle.

"What?! Who?" Astred exclaimed with the panic of one suddenly awakened at a particularly bad moment in an especially horrible nightmare. He clutched at his chest in an attempt to still his pounding heart and near choking breath while he watched Han's fingers play over the system controls, uncomprehending. "Got it?" he repeated in a slightly more normal voice. "Got what?"

"Clear sky and just the pictures we want," Solo replied, his pleasure spiced with a healthy pinch of malice. As he adjusted the focus to zero in on the now visible track grounds, Zair saw precisely what he'd implied.

And more.

"Now, would you look at that?" the spacer reflected aloud, the flavoring in his tone now one of surprised wonder. The satellite image showed what they had both expected: scatterings of reflective candy wrappers heavily concentrated on the Lenduvar hangar roof, lesser fallout on the other competitors', none whatsoever on the roof of Utar's team.

And a similar lack on another rooftop, some distance away from both the Utar and Lenduvar teams.

"That *is* odd," Zair agreed, equally startled by this discovery. "Is that hangar being used for the competition?"

Han harrumphed softly, flicking a couple of controls to sharpen the image. "Every building on the whole damned grounds is being used for this competition, one way or another."

"Then why have *they* managed to avoid the attentions of our disreputable adversaries?"

"That's the billion credit question, isn't it? Give me a couple seconds and maybe I can shed a little light on the subject."

Zair leaned closer to the viewscreen while Han deftly input several commands at the station keyboard. The musician squinted at the image of the second clean rooftop, assuring himself that there was not the slightest hint of foil reflection being obscured by some thin cloud. The picture remained sharp and clear, beyond question. "We should be recording this as evidence," he noted.

"Already ahead of you," Han said with a motion of his head, indicating the glowing *RECORDING* indicator amid the controls beneath the monitor. He finished his typing, then paused while the system computers considered his requests. Presently, he contemplated askance the computer's tiny screen and the information it presented. "Now, *that's* even odder," he said at last, drawing Zair's attention away from the satellite picture, which was beginning to re-fog with clouds. "According to police surveillance and basic occupancy info, that hangar's being used by a team backed by Astadar Metals." His hazel eyes looked up to his companion's now very startled expression. "I didn't know Astadar had a team in the competition."

"Neither did I," the darker man admitted. "And even if I had, I can't see how this all fits together. Utar has some inexplicable grudge against me and anyone or anything involved with me — yet a team sponsored by one of my family's strongest holdings is spared from even the minimal observation he's inflicted on everyone else. And I haven't the slightest idea why."

Han studied the report for a moment more, then turned his attention back to the observation monitor. He increased focus on the presumed Astadar compound, wanting a last and closer look at it before the clouds again obscured the image. This confirmed his initial assertion that the place had been suspiciously free of Utar's T'Shaaimite attentions: not a single hint of foiled litter appeared anywhere in the compound, not on the roof nor near any doors or windows, nor even on the surrounding grounds. Even Utar's own compound couldn't boast the last, which made the total absence around the Astadar facilities all the more suspicious.

As the thickening clouds once again blotted the track grounds from view, Han rubbed his chin and popped the data disk from the recorder. "When was the last time you did an audit at Astadar, or even paid them a casual visit?" he inquired of Zair, who had been studying the visual evidence of this oddity with a thoughtful frown.

He backed out of his detective mode far enough to respond. "At least six months. One of my brothers is CEO of Astadar back on Corellia, and when he and his lackeys stopped by for an inspection tour last winter, his sycophants

made it quite clear that they had everything at Astadar in perfect order, and I wouldn't need to make spot inspections more than once or twice a year, and then just to make sure the employees weren't lying down on the job."

He snorted softly. "I remember thinking at the time that this sounded like the perfect recipe for abuse, but Zath is such a perfectionist and control obsessive, this is exactly the sort of thing he would do, bring in his own people and try to keep me out of the loop as much as possible without angering the family Elders. I *am* still the Astred family representative on Phan Shilis, and CEO or not, he has no power to close Astadar's doors to me."

"What about its books?" Han asked still scratching his chin while he gazed at the computer files.

Zair considered him with a quizzical look. "Are you implying he might be attempting to embezzle Astadar funds, and shooed me away by bringing his own people?"

Solo shrugged. "It sure looks possible...."

But the sable head shook. "I don't believe it. Zath and I were never terribly close, I'll admit. He's the eldest, I'm the youngest, there's twenty-three years between us, and he never did approve of my choice of careers, or my lifestyle. But he's so much an Astred, if you pricked him, he'd bleed purple and black. He'd never do anything to defraud a family business."

The spacer sighed. "You may be educated an' sophisticated an' the best musician in the sector, Zair, but when it comes to dishonesty, you're still a babe in the cradle. You may not know your brother as well as you think."

The performer harrumphed. "Are you calling me a poor judge of character, now?"

"No, just a little naive in some areas."

"Not this one." Astred was adamant.

Han let him win the point. "Okay, then, let's assume you're right and your brother's intentions are completely unimpeachable. What about those sycophants he hauled in so he could pull their strings from back home and have 'em dance to his tune? Are they all such sterling characters?"

Zair blinked. "I have no idea," he confessed after a moment. "When I met them, they all seemed little more than eager bootlickers, ready to do whatever it took to win their employer's approval and climb more quickly up the corporate ladder. But given Zath's astronomical standards and his overweening family pride, it's very unlikely they're a group of slackers. They would have had to pass his submolecular microscope of scrutiny in order to be hired by him in the first place."

As Han had done, he stared at the computer screen for several long moments, scratching his chin as he thought. At length, he spoke again. "I believe I see what you've been driving at, Elthan...."

Han raised his hands in denial of any guilt. "Driving at? As in a conclusion? Don't look at me for any answers, *Ansir* Detective. You're the master investigator, here. I'm just the lowlife spacer giving you the benefit of his experience in the backwash of society. Even family loyalists like your brother can have personal agendas, an' stiffs like him don't always make the best character judgments. Does backing a team for a landspeeder competition sound like the kind of thing your brother would've approved in the budget?"

"Frankly, no," the musician easily agreed. "Which makes me wonder if Zath accidentally let a fly into his ointment. Can that thing pull up data on the teams at the competition?"

"It can pull up data on anything in the system you want. I've got it plugged into all the police nets *and* the unclassified Imp networks."

Briefly, Zair winced, a pang of worry that they might be doing thing to ruffle the wrong feathers, but then he remembered who he was, and that nothing they were about could be deemed outside his rights on this planet. He inclined his head at the computer. "Find out just who's on the Astadar team. There may be something there to shed some light on things."

Han complied, but the inquiry provided nothing of use. Zair then had him access Astadar's data net, curious to see if the name of the person who had authorized the expenditure might be somehow suspicious, but again, they drew a blank. Zair knew the fellow responsible — one of Zath's hand-picked stiff — and found that the venture was completely explainable as a part of Astadar's community outreach programs, donated to the winners of a design program at a local technical school.

As the musician pouted over this frustration, Han idly paged through the screens of managerial staff listings at Astadar, stopping abruptly and backing up when something caught his eye.

"Whoa, what's this?" he said in surprise, nudging Zair to pay attention. "Looks like we have some sort of match, here."

Astred leaned forward to see what he meant. On a screen listing the names of persons in the supply and distribution department of Astadar shone the names *Isar Memris* and *Liam Myddre*.

"Memris!" Zair exclaimed, touching the screen where the name appeared. "Didn't you say Utar mentioned him as a...what did you call? Laundry?"

Han nodded. "Utar said a guy named Memris was laundering money for him on this race. Could be the same guy, could be a relative. Either way, it's a place to start looking. But what hacks me is seein' Liam Myddre in the same outfit!"

Silver eyes blinked curiously. "Do you know him?"

The spacer grunted sarcastically. "You might say that, yeah. When you get right down to it, he's the reason I'm working for you in the first place." He then explained to Zair how Myddre had been involved in precipitating the incident that had ended with Han in pieces at the medcenter. "He told me he worked as a gemologist for one of the mines — and here he shows up on Astadar's payroll as an executive for Supply and Distribution. Either he's been moonlighting on you, or he was working with Utar's choir boys to set me up. Either way, I don't think I like the look of it."

"Neither do I," Zair concurred. "And I think the situation warrants closer inspection."

"You want me to call up their work logs, see if they've been up to more'n meets the eye?"

Surprisingly, Astred shook his head. "No, not here. Pulling too much from the outside might attract unwanted attention. I have an office at Astadar's corporate facilities; I can find what we need more quietly, there."

Han folded his arms across his chest, leaned back in his chair, and viewed his employer/friend askance. "Don't you think you're pushing this a little too hard? I should've hauled your ass back home hours ago, an' had your butler tie you down to make sure you stay in bed for a few hours. Now you want me to take you halfway across town so you can do something we can just as easily do from here?" He smiled charmingly, mischievously. "I don't think so."

"Neither do I. Actually, I want you to go back to the hangar, and get whatever help you need to make sure it stays safe."

Solo snorted. "No speeder's worth risking your health — maybe your life...."

"Not just the speeder," Zair contradicted. "The kids. After last night, I'm afraid Utar might try anything to keep Mrik and his team out of the race. They're good youngsters, Elthan, but they've all lived sheltered and pampered lives, I'm afraid. They don't have your instincts for danger, and I fear they wouldn't know what to do about it even if they had. After what happened to me last night and without knowing exactly what it is Utar believes of me, we can't afford to gamble with their safety. On my Oath, I won't push myself — but you can't do what needs to be done at Astadar, and I can't do what needs to be done at the track. I promise, the moment I'm done, I'll go straight home or come join you." His exhortation came just shy of begging. "Please?"

It was impossible to remain unaffected by his arguments, though Han was inclined to believe a good portion of that was due to man's exquisite vocal training. But, he allowed to himself, he was also convinced that Zair had

avoided the political motivations that might have made his oration at least half a distortion of truth. He wondered as how much his attitudes had changed in a few short days, from complete hatred of the mere mention of the name Astred to actually liking one of its bearers. Hazel eyes locked with silver for a long, measuring moment before Han nodded. "All right. I don't like it, but I'll go along it — on one condition."

Zair was unused to having people demand conditions of him, but under the circumstances, he obliged the request without hesitation. "Name it."

"First, that let me take you to Astadar before I head for the tracks; second, that we arrange transportation and a driver for you before I move one centim off the Astadar grounds; and third, that we call the kids and tell them to lock the doors and stay put inside that hangar until Chewie or I can get there."

Astred crossed his arms and eyed the spacer in a mildly skeptical manner. "That's more than one condition," he pointed out.

Solo shrugged. "I changed my mind. So sue me."

Zair accepted the jest, especially since he was otherwise surprised. "You aren't going to demand that I head straight home when I'm finished?"

Han leaned back in his chair and smiled wryly. "Would it do any good?"

After a second or two, Zair smiled back. "Probably not. And I think you're right, wanting to call Chewbacca for assistance, even if we have cheated him of the full day's rest we promised this morning. None of us can afford to assume that we're safe from Utar's attentions. I'm certain you'll be all right until your partner arrives...."

"I'm certain, too," Han agreed. "But what about you? You know as much about self defense as I know about Sibilithi needlepoint — and even if you did, you're not in any shape to defend yourself against Utar's heavies. You got any security people at Astadar that you'd trust well enough to guard your back?"

The darker head shook. "Not in security. But the employee who oversees the droids and workers in the shipping department also happens to be my bounce r at *The Hole*, as well as a trustworthy old friend. He could give your Clanbrother pause in a fight, and I have no doubt he'd agree to be my chaperon and bodyguard for the evening. He's also had considerably more practice than you in forcing me to look after my own health and wellbeing. If I have him take your place once you've taken me to Astadar, will that put your mind at ease?"