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FLYBOYS  
by Z.P. Florian

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Han woke to the deafening noise of an explosion. The sky lit up with a white light, and shortly after, the reddish hue of a spreading fire tinted the night.

"What the..." Han muttered, pulling on his pants and boots. He grabbed his gunbelt and went out. Most of his neighbors were already on the street.

"What's going on?" Han asked.

Nobody knew. Han grabbed the edge of the low roof and pulled himself up on the top of the house. He saw the fire.

"What do you see?" someone yelled.

"The Waterhouse is burning," Han said. He jumped down. "I'll go see."

He'd gotten as far as the end of the street when a decrepit speeder stopped beside him.

"Get in. I guess we are going to the same place."

Han grinned at the driver. It was typical of Herlivon Xalnodest, his best, his only friend, to appear whenever he was needed. Han occasionally accused him of being a mind-reader, but others usually used less flattering adjectives to describe Xal, the only Corellian running around in a screaming-red glittersilk flightsuit, topped with a multi-pocketed longcoat, in the Tatooine heat.

Han climbed into the speeder. "What's happening?"

"Jabba. This is his answer to the latest attempt to tax him. And, I guess, the same time he's letting the farmers know who's the boss."

"How?"

Xal shrugged, maneuvering the speeder through narrow alleys. "He destroyed the entire moisture harvest before it was sold. Remember how he said just last week, that the farmers are charging too much for the water he is using. Two birds with the same stone. I bet from now on he'll get the water half price, and the Tatooine tax office will steer clear of his business."

"But Xal, the city will be left without water."

"I think that's obvious."

Han was already thirsty. "We'd be better off leaving the planet."

"And soon, because it won't take long for the authorities to figure out that spaceships have a lot of good water stored. In a day or so, all spacers would be required to donate." Xal grimaced. "They won't let you take showers in the Falcon, you bet."

As they drove closer to the Waterhouse, the smell of smoke got stronger, and the sky vibrated with red and orange lights.

"One would think all that water'd put the fire out," Han mused.

"Give Jabba some credit. He hired Fett to do the job. There's nothing that man doesn't know about explosives and arson." Xal sounded disgusted. "Gods, I hate his face."

"Look!" Han exclaimed.

The ground was dark with running water, something that had never been seen on Tatooine. Screaming Jawas tried to outrun the flow, but some of the Humans took off their boots and walked into the stream, enjoying the rare treat. Children rolled on the streets, getting themselves wet all over.

Xal stopped the speeder and got out. "Let's walk from here. It's impossible to drive with so many people going crazy on the streets."

Han jumped out, then remembered that he forgot to put on his shirt. "Lend me your coat, will ya? I'm not exactly dressed for going to town."

"Here," Xal said generously. "Just watch the stuff in my pockets. There's Kessel spice brandy in there."

Han, who normally wore one of his plain shirts and a flak jacket, felt strange in the heavy coat that smelled of brandy and spice. Han stepped aside, to let a group of frightened Jawas go by.

"Wait! " Xal yelled after the Jawas. "Hang on, Han, I have to talk to Mugga. " He took off with amazingly long strides. Han saw him getting hold of a Jawa and wondered how could Xal tell them apart.

The whispered conversation between Xal and the Jawa lasted a long time, and Han was getting very warm in the coat. The heat of the fire spread rapidly as some of the buildings near the water tower began to burn. At the far end of the alley, Han saw a familiar figure. Red-hot anger flared inside him.

"Fett! Hey, Fett!" he yelled.

The armored man turned and waved to Han. "Hi, Solo, why don't you get lost?"

Han started to walk closer. "Did you set this fire?"

"Listen, child," Boba Fett said, his voice resonating in the helmet. "I don't abide newcomers in this port, especially green Corelli with cards up their sleeves, especially green Corelli needing money so badly they're willing to ruin the market with their cheap work, and especially green Corelli who think they're the gift of the Goddess to every wench in town."

Han knew this was the time to back off, but as so many times before, he felt the rush of excitement. Fett wanted a fight and would any Corellian do anything else but give him one.

"What, have you heard the girls say, that I'm four times the man where it counts than you are?"

Fett's entire body froze at the insult. For a second, Han thought the man would get a stroke then and there.

"All right, you snotty Corelli bastard," Fett grated. "Kiss your ass goodbye. I'm going to beat you, 'til you beg for mercy. Then I'm going to geld you!"

Han didn't blink an eyelid. "Thanks for letting me know your schedule, but I am otherwise engaged, so I think I'll just kick your ass from here to Kessel and we'll leave it at that."

Fett lunged at him, nearly knocking Han off his feet with the added weight of his armor. Han felt the Kessel gourd crack in the pocket of the coat. There was not much use to hit Fett with all the plating on: all he could do was push and try to trip the man at the same time. Han was barely more than twenty, quick and agile, and utterly fearless when it came to fighting, but sober enough to know how much chance he got against the armor. Fett's gloved fist caught him in the jaw and he saw stars. Where was Xal? He got hold of Fett's right hand and twisted it hard, kneeling him in the groin at the same time: his kneecap nearly shattered on the codpiece. Fett's steel-tipped boots contacted with his shin, mercifully shielded by his boots, but the impact was still painful. He barely avoided the next blow, twisting away, all the while holding Fett's right hand. Neither of them made a sound. Fett tried to free his right arm, delivering a sharp blow to Han's forearm, but Han hung on doggedly.

By this time, a small group of beings gathered at the mouth of the alley, watching the fight. Fett was well known in Mos Eisley port, but few could name the young Corellian about to be slaughtered.

Han turned suddenly, bringing the captured arm behind Fett's back, and threw his entire weight into pushing Fett face down on the ground. Fett went down to his knees, but his left hand came up with a knife, slashing backward: the blade caught Han on the side, cutting through the coat, but merely scratching skin.

Blessing Xal's thick coat, Han rolled away, scrambling to get up, when the next kick caught him in the stomach. He fell heavily, gasping. Fett was on him like lightning. Han grabbed the helmet this time, pulling it down, bending Fett's neck forward; the heavy gloves battered his sides, but Han didn't let go. He hooked his fingers under the sides of the helmet and tugged. The plates gave way and Fett's long yellow mane spilled out for Han to grab. Fett yelled in outrage, his sight obstructed by the loosened helmet, and Han began to think there was a chance to win. The knife was nowhere to be seen. I'm not gonna let his hair go, Han swore to himself, I'd die first. He was almost right: Fett got hold of the front of the coat, tearing it apart, and got a clear hit at Han's stomach. The breath stopped

in Han's throat with a choked sound and before he could draw air, he got a second punch. Mother of Corell, he thought, I'm goin' to get killed here. But he still didn't think of his blaster; this was a fight, not a shootout, and he wouldn't dishonor himself by using a gun. Fett, his hair still in Han's fist, wasn't that proud. His free hand went for Han's blaster, drawing it from the holster.

"Oh NO you don't!" Han howled. "Not with my own gun, you hwimat!" He let Fett's hair go and tore at the blaster, grabbed it away from Fett, and turned it on him.

The street was silent, the only sound Han heard was the crackling of the fire. Fett, his helmet askew, yellow hair blazing orange in the firelight, actually growled.

"Get lost," Han gasped. His stomach hurt with stabbing pains, his battered face was covered with blood. "Get lost before I shame all Corell and shoot you."

"You'll be sorry one day, Corelli," Fett said. "Your kind don't last long."

Han wasn't inclined to argue - after all, Fett was about right on that point - but that wasn't important. Fett was leaving and he was still standing tall. He waited till Fett turned the corner and went back to see what had happened to Xal.

Xal wasn't there, but the speeder was still parked in the alley with a Jawa sitting on the hood.

"Red Top he gone. Messenger me tell you he gone his house. Me guard speeder."

Han dug into the pocket of the coat and came up with a steel coin. "Here."

The Jawa grabbed the money and scrambled off the hood.

Han climbed into the speeder, biting back an oath. He was hurting all over now. Well, he thought, the son of a hwimat at least left the speeder here.

He drove home to the small room he rented by the cantina, to wash and change. His medikit was fairly depleted --gotten into a few scrapes lately, eh, Solo?-- but there was enough disinfectant left, and two doses of painkillers which put him into a much better mood. He surveyed Xal's coat

with dismay. It was torn, muddy and stained with the spilled spice brandy from the broken gourd. There was not much he could do about that.

Now that nothing hurt anymore, he wanted to take the coat and the speeder back to Xal and give him all kinds of hell for taking off. He drove down narrow, dark alleys; the fire still burned in the distance, and on quite a few streets, ominous dark streaks showed how much water had been wasted. By the time he reached Xal's gate, Han worked himself into a fine, angry state. He was ready to shake Xal out of his skin. He palmed the lock and burst into the house, tearing the inner door open. Xal was on the bed. An open box of stickspice beside him.

"You bloody idiot!" Han screamed. "I beat Boba Fett on the street and you weren't even there! What was... ah, why am I even asking! You'd leave your mother in the mouth of the Sarlacc for a box of stickspice! "

Xal looked at him and smiled. "Good to see you here. Sit down. Do you have my coat?"

"Your coat? You want your coat? Here!" Han threw the coat at Xal as hard as he could.

"What have you done with it?" Xal asked, hugging the coat affectionately. "It's cut, my coat is cut!"

"And I was in it! My side is cut, you crazy bastard, a fat lot you care! All you see is your damn coat..."

"I love this coat, Han, this coat has been in all kinds of trouble with me, I live in this coat, you know."

"Screw - your - coat." Han said.

Han sighed and sat down on the bed. "'s no use to talk to you when you're spiced."

"That's true..." Xal nodded. "Han, your side hurts."

"I think I said it's cut. "

Xal rose to his knees, looking very worried. "Someone knifed you?"

"I think I said I got into a fight with Fett and he almost killed me, I think I said I was in your coat when it was sliced up. I think I said all this."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have left you there. Do you need a bandage?"

"I took care of it already, I don't need a nurse. "

"I'm sorry. " And he was sorry, Han could see it on his face, in his eyes. "Mother of Corell, Han, I am so sorry."

Whatever got into him, getting all worked up for nothing? Han asked himself. He didn't need a bodyguard in Mos Eisley, or anywhere else. Xal can come and go as he pleases. He might be nuts but still the best friend.

The next morning as Han and Chewie were walking through the streets, he could see that the situation was indeed dangerous, he had to admit that Chewie was right this time, warning him to be careful. In the port, among the docking bays, frantic spacers were getting ready to take off; outside, the beings of Mos Eisley were already searching for water. Jabba's thugs were quite visible among them, reminding everybody who ruled the city now. Han avoided the gates, walking straight to Xal's dock.

Herlivon's ship, the Beast Of Burden, was there. It was smaller than the Falcon and perhaps just as patched-up, a little converted scout. Han saw four Jawas coming down the ramp very fast, leaving in a hurry.

Then Xal came out, his gray longcoat flapping around him. He grinned at Han and Chewie. "Kind of you to drop by, what's new?"

"We're going to Ord Mantell, Chewie thinks Mos Eisley will get very rough soon. Want to come?" Han asked.

"I... actually, no. You should go, it's a good idea. But I have things to do here... I'd rather stay."

Han frowned. "I don't have a nose like Chewie's, but hell, Herlivon, you are lying into my face."

Xal groaned. "Now why would I lie?"

"Don't know. Someone promised a dozen packs of discounted stickspice for tomorrow? You got a hot date with a green pig?" Han felt his blood pressure rise, as another idea formed in his mind. "Xal... Xal, did you, by any chance, sell your water, all the water in your ship, maybe even the water in the cooling system, to a bunch of beggars and Jawas?"

"Why would I do such a thing?" Xal asked.

"Yeah, why? Did you?"

"Han, I swear takh anid graal, I did not sell my water."

Han's eyebrows shoot up.

"Don't...even...look at me. You gave it away?"

Xal bowed deeply. "Bullseye."

Chewie growled something in Wookan, then added, for Xal's benefit: "For that, nine of your sins will be forgiven in the afterworld."

"Only nine?" Xal laughed. "That won't make a major difference. "

Han went up the ramp and grabbed Xal by his coat. "You know, they are right about you, you are a moron. What did you want, stay here and share the misery with all of them?"

" Han, see, I don't really drink all that much water, you know I drink brandy. And ale. There is no shortage of booze yet. But do you know how fast a Jawa dies without water? And some of the humans here, they have babies."

"At least you should've asked for good money," Han snarled. "You don't have enough brains to survive in this world."

Xal slid out of Han's grasp gracefully. "Credits aren't that important. You think everything is credits."

Han exploded. "Everything is credits! Do you know what money is? Money is freedom! Money is security, money is fuel to let you fly wherever you want, money is a bribe you need to buy justice in a crooked system, money buys health, when you need a medic, money is repair and parts for your ship, money is port fees and food, money is a place to sleep in a real bed, money is your right to get married and settle down, money is the right to walk anywhere and not get arrested. Money is everything, you feeble-minded bum! May I ask, how would you get all the damned spice you're eating, without money?"

"Barter?" Xal asked, trying not to laugh.

Han shoot him a murderous look, then his mouth twisted and a wide grin spread on his face. "You are hopeless, Herlivon."

Xal shook his head. "Not at all. I bet you will offer me a ride to Ord Mantell or some other jolly good place to weather out the bad times."

"Sort of," Han admitted.

"See'I'll get to use your water."

Damn him, Han thought, I've never seen anyone half as disarming, I've seen the son of a hwimat making friends with a rancor, now who else can do that?Why am I not surprised that he had given away his water?Now, Boba Fett wouldn't do such thing, but do I want to associate with the likes of him?

"All right, Saint Xalnodest, get your gear and let's go before things get nasty around here."

Chewie growled his assent. Xal disappeared inside his ship, and Han walked to the gate, peering out.

"Look, pal, the whole town is out there," Han commented.

Chewie risked a look.

There was a long line forming down the street. "Somebody must be selling water up at the square." Han said.

"That must be Jabba. I bet he had every container filled up before the fire. He's going to make a mint." Chewie showed his fangs in disgust.

"I could take a look," Han offered.

"Stay."

For once, Han obeyed. As more people came, he saw a couple of farmers gathering. They looked angry and bitter. A large, graying man cursed the entire collection of local gods, complaining that he's not going to be able to pay for some equipment he had bought. "And you with a wife and kid, Lars," another farmer nodded in understanding. "These damned gangsters will be the death of us. This used to be a half-decent place."

"They steal the water and sell it back to us at outrageous prices," a man said. "I don't know if we should just stand by and let it happen. We have weapons. Couldn't we clean up this place if we get organized? Maybe the local police wouldn't mind to help us set up a citizens' militia."

His idea was greeted with bitter laughter. "The local police, eh?They are as bad as the Hutt, just maybe not as green."

Han sighed. The men were right, and there was nothing to do about it. Jabba was the only power on the planet, and if he decided to demonstrate it once in a while, that was too bad. There was a slight temptation... to help these men organize a really good fight, a fine little local war... exercise the military skills he had learned at the Imperial Academy. Yeah, and then end up with a price on his head, or worse, being accused to be a Rebel. No way, not Han Solo.

Xal came out with a motley collection of bags. "I am ready. What are you looking at?"

"Somebody's up there selling water."

Xal thrust his bags at Chewie. "Take those to the Falcon, I go take a look. "

"Why?" Chewie asked.

"Why not?" Xal asked back. Han was almost sure his friend was itching for a fight at least as bad as he was. The Wookiee took the bags, sniffed at them and shook his shaggy head.

"Spice and booze," he grunted.

"And socks," Herlivon grinned. "Clean socks."

"Aww, get lost," Chewie flashed friendly fangs at him.

"I love you, too," Xal answered.

The Wookiee shuffled back to the Falcon. Cubs will get into a fight, he thought. No matter what Han said, he's just as outraged about the water situation as anyone else. He'll have to get it out of his system. He won't get himself killed, Xal's with him, Chewie reassured himself, but then, they might get all banged up. Better get the medikit ready.

Up at the square, surrounded by half a dozen green pigs, one of Jabba's Twileks was indeed selling water, in plastic bags. People were buying. It all looked very orderly; nobody did more than curse under their breath.

"They're not going to fight," Xal said.

"Nice, quiet people, " Han nodded. "Anyone can walk all over them. "

"Yeah, they're not like the Corelli."

Han's eyes darkened with anger. "Screw the Corelli. The entire planet is one giant shipyard, turning out starships for the Imperials. Corell is a whore, Xal, sold herself to the Imps."

"Don't say that. Corell never sold herself, she was raped. There's darkness spreading all over the Galaxy, Han. "

Han stared. He hated it when Xal was serious. "You are too sober, Herlivon."

"True. I get like this when I am sober. I feel things. All this bitter anger here, in these people, the anger they don't even dare to show. " Xal dug into his pockets and came up with a gourd. "Nothing Kessel brandy won't cure. "

"Let's go," Han said. "Chewie is waiting."

They turned to go and saw Fett and another enforcer of Jabba's, a wide-shouldered man called Isfan blocking their way.

"We have a little unfinished business here," Fett said.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" Xal answered in greeting. "And how is your lady mother still running a successful house in the red light district?"

"Get out of the way, you clown," Fett snarled. "I want Solo."

"I don't think the feeling is mutual: as far as I know, he feels no desire for you whatsoever. " Xal couldn't miss a good tease.

Han laughed, but not for long; Fett, quite predictably, exploded into action, flying at Herlivon with amazing speed. Han didn't wait to get clobbered, he attacked Isfan immediately. The fight was vicious and dirty, attracting the attention of the people waiting in line. A ring formed around them, and soon someone started to take bets. Isfan was the first one to pull a knife, and Han felt well justified to grab his own. From the corner of his eye he saw Xal and Fett dancing around each other; they, too, advanced to the blade. The onlookers cheered. In Mos Eisley, a good knife fight was free entertainment.

Han's work was ridiculously easy. Isfan turned tail and fled as soon as the Corellian's blade slit his shirt and scratched his chest. Han spread

his arms apologetically and smiled at the onlookers. "Sorry," he said. "Couldn't give you a better fight."

They cheered him anyways.

He turned to see how Xal was faring and his smile faded. His friend was down, pinned to the ground, with Fett's knife sunk into his right arm to the hilt. For an endless second, Han had the toughest fight of his life -- with himself. No man could, in honor, interfere with another's fight, yet how could he allow Xal to be killed or maimed. But he made his decision soon enough, stepping beside Fett and softly touching his shoulder.

"I'm free now, if you still want me," he said. "Your friend went home to groom his feathers."

Fett came to his feet and faced Han. "You're very funny, Solo, you should try telling jokes in the Cantina for money."

"Get your blade." Han's eyes were threatening. "I am sick of you. And I want everybody to note " he turned to the crowd, " that he's wearing armor. Whoever is betting on me, should get odds accordingly."

"Shut up!" Fett growled, leaning down to get his knife. Xal gritted his teeth and kept silent as Fett yanked the blade out of his arm. One of the farmers offered to bind the wound with an almost clean rag. Xal accepted it with a grateful smile.

Han was angry now, angry and eager to see to it that Fett wouldn't bother him or Xal for a long time. He scanned the armor, noting the places where it was joined, made his plan. He had to make the first move count. Fett waited. Han waited. They watched each other. The crowd fell silent.

Fett lunged, his blade going straight for Han's stomach. Han made a fast half-turn, he knew the knife would bite him, but at the same time, he found his mark: the narrow space between Fett's chestplate and the belt. Fett howled; Han pulled back and felled the man with a kick.

"Short but sweet," Xal announced to all who would listen. "Come on, Han, let's go."

Han pressed his hand to his side: the cut bled copiously, barely an inch below the other one he had gotten the day before. This one was deeper.

Fett didn't move.

"He's not dead. The Twilek will get a medic for him," Xal said. "Come on, let's go, you're bleeding. And if you think I'm not bleeding, you're wrong. Chewie will kill us, you know."

Han didn't care.

"Move, you asshole! " Xal commanded. "It'll hurt like hell, but we have a rather important meeting with a medikit. Get going."

Han did. Every step seemed to pull on the wound, blood soaking his side, seeping into his pants. "You're right," he managed to say through gritted teeth. "It hurts."

"Fett hurts more," Xal said cheerfully. "That was a fine bit of strategic move you've made. You knew he'll cut you, huh? You knew you'll have to take a cut if you wanted to get close enough to get through his armor. I'm proud of you."

By the time they got to the Falcon, Han was white as a day-old nerf and the world was spinning around him. Chewie was waiting for them on the ramp, sitting there cross-legged, chewing on a bantha bone. The medikit was right beside him.

He rose, frowning.

"Nothing serious," Xal yelled from the bay door. "A cut on his side, same as yesterday. It's getting to be a habit."

"Fett... needs a medic," Han grinned with pale lips. "Got him."

Chewie shook his head. "He'll not rest 'til he gets you. " But he didn't waste time talking. Peeling off Han's blood-soaked shirt, he sprayed the wound with disinfectant, making Han hiss with pain, then applied a generous layer of synthflesh.

Xal let his coat drop and untied the rag. "Here, too. "

Chewie inspected the wound. "This is a deep puncture. I give you Folin and synthflesh."

"No fair," Han groaned. "He doesn't get the spray..."

"Go, lie down," Chewie told him.

Han chose the acceleration couch to rest. Xal and Chewie went to the cockpit to lift off. As soon as the Falcon was in space, Xal sat down beside Han.

"Let's go to Alderaan," he said.

"Why Alderaan?"

"Nice planet. Been there?"

"Yeah, and I can't go back. The Falcon owes two thousand in docking fees there. "

"I pay."

"You have two thousand credits to throw away?"

Xal produced one of his modest smiles. "I skimmed a bit off the top of the last spice run I made for Jabba." Seeing Han's horrified expression, he continued. "I always do. What do you think, I can afford spice and booze on the money he pays me? He got my contract when I was a green kid with a fresh pilot license. Signed ten years for peanuts, four to go. I make him hundreds of thousands, why can't I lift a few thousand once in a while?"

"Why?" Han gasped. "Because he'll nail your sorry carcass to the wall of his throne room some day, that's why. "

Xal shrugged off the image. "Forget it. Let's go to Alderaan. "

"Chewie? Do you want to go to Alderaan?" Han asked, loud enough for the Wookiee to hear it in the cockpit.

"Hauww!" came the answer.

"Ok, you got yourself an Alderaan vacation. Where on Alderaan? Comtara has good food around the port," Han suggested.

"No, I want Aliat. Really snazzy. Have you ever been in the Palace gardens? It's open to the public."

Han had no particular fondness for flowers, but he didn't mind humoring Xal. "All the same to me. You pay, you pick the place."

Xal sighed with satisfaction.

Aliat was more beautiful than anything Han had ever seen. The entire city was a museum, including the spaceport. Han had been in all kinds of ports before; most of them were a haphazard collection of more or less well-equipped bays and dingy eateries. Port Aliat had pearlstone statues along the walkways and shimmerlights even in the sani. Water was free, something Han had almost forgotten to take for granted. After paying the docking fees, Xal still had money left to burn.

Han stared at the statues: nearly all of them were images of ancient Gods, with sunburst crowns, but each statue was made by a different artist in a different style.

"Amazing, huh?" Xal asked. "Every year, for three hundred years already, a contest is held here, and every sculptor carves one of these. The best twelve are displayed somewhere in the city. You'll see enough old Alderaani Gods to last a lifetime. By the way, we'll have to deposit our weapons. "

"What?" Han gasped.

"I thought you knew. You said you have been here before."

"Never left Comtara port, mind you. "

They did have to deposit their blasters and everything that was not an eating utensil. Han got to keep his small Corellian anid graal knife, because the Alderaani considered it a religious object. He felt positively strange, stepping out into a city where nobody was allowed to bear arms.

"They don't have guards or police?" he asked Xal.

"They do, but those are unarmed as well. Alderaan has no army."

"No army? So how come nobody took over the planet?"

"The Jedi protected them for centuries, and now... I don't know, maybe their reputation will keep the Imperials out for a while..."

Han had his doubts.

They walked on a wide street, among splendid palaces; all of the buildings were white, the streets paved with sand-colored stone. Flowering

trees and bushes lined every avenue. Han noticed that the people seemed calmer, happier than any crowd he had ever seen.

"I can see what you like about this place," he said to Xal. "It's unreal, this illusion of safety and beauty."

"This is no illusion, you cynic. This is the real thing. Come, let's buy us some food and have a picnic. My treat. " Xal patted his pockets.

Chewie hooted happily.

They had a feast in the famous Palace Gardens, where, to Han's surprise, anyone was free to enter. The abundance of flowers nearly intimidated him.

"This much beauty, what the hell for?This whole planet is ... "

Xal just looked at him. "To die for, Han. The only place in the entire Galaxy where they actually have what every being needs: peace, tranquility, beauty. Dignity. "

"If all this spiritual crap elevates your soul high enough, perhaps you won't need spice," Han remarked. For some unexplainable reason, the blessed beauty of Aliat angered him.

Chewie hit him on the back. "Sour grapes?I think you're angry because you don't live here. "

The Wookiee was right, and Han got even angrier. "I'd die of boredom here," he growled. But with the fresh, good food in his stomach, he couldn't stay angry too long. He walked to a lookout and stared at the city. Arches, palaces, endless, wide stairways, tall columns topped with more old gods..

"What's that large palace there?"

"That's THE palace, the Organa Palace. That, and all these gardens belong to the Alderaani Princes." Xal finished his food and dug into the pockets of his coat for stickspice. For some reason he felt uneasy. "How is your cut, does it still hurt?"

"Not at all," Han said. "And you?"

"I'm fine. You have a good medikit." He seemed to know where he was going. Down at the foot of the hill, the Gardens gave way to a dense forest, old and untouched. Seldom used paths led to a group of burned-out buildings.

"This place has been blown up," Han remarked. "Looks like T-34 Imperial explosives. I wonder why your artistic Alderaani tolerate such an eyesore."

Xal leaned against a broken wall. "This used to be the Jedi Enclave. The Alderaani keep it as a memento. They show it to their children, to keep the hatred of the Imps alive. Weird place. I can almost see the old Masters walking around. Gave me nightmares when I first came here. " He reached out to pull Han closer. "I want to sing a song here. The ghosts need cheering up. "

"I think you are nuts, Herlivon. There are no ghosts. " Han growled.

But there was no stopping Xal, he insisted on singing all the thirty four verses of the Corellian version of the creation of the universe, when Gavradeel, the Goddess made the world, and on the thirteenth day she thought it was not perfect, and decided to create Corellians to make it perfect. Han liked the song, and eventually he started to sing too. He had to admit that the burned out buildings echoed the singing, almost joyfully. Damn Xal with this spiritual crap, if it goes like this, he'll get me believe in it.

Chewie left them around the twentieth verse, to get a full treatment at the port at the Hair and Fur saloon, they agreed to meet at the hotel. Walking back to the hotel, Han was actually relaxed and pleased. He was sharing a small bottle of Corelli brandy with Xal, drawing stares from the Alderaani passersby; apparently it was not very good manners to drink on the street, or perhaps it was that they drank straight from the bottle, or that they were sharing the same bottle, Han didn't know. One can't figure out the zillion little things to do or not do on every planet, why, on many planets, everything changed if one traveled to another continent. Han started to tell a story to Xal about how he had gotten into a fight on Godu just for holding a spoon in his left hand.

Xal stopped him in mid-sentence. "What's going on there?"

Han looked. A large crowd gathered on the street, standing very quietly. Solemn and silent, the robed Alderaani stood as if attending a funeral. Curiosity got the best of Han and he started walking toward them.

"Herlivon, there's a hundred thousand people lining the street here. Who died?"

"We can ask," Xal offered, finishing the brandy. He peered into the bottle. "All gone. The level of blood in my alcohol is getting dangerously high. We need to buy booze. " He began to chew on a stickspice.

An Alderaani man, standing in the last row of the crowd, noticed them. "Forgive me, gentlebeing, " he said to Xal, "but isn't that a stickspice?"

"Why, it is, bless its little soul," Xal grinned.

"Are you aware that any clinic in this city offers free and anonymous treatment to any spice addict?All you have to do is to walk in..."

Xal seemed to study the man for a while. "A most generous and undoubtedly useful idea. Uh, would you be so kind as to direct me to the nearest place that sells Kessel brandy"

The Alderaani, a middle-aged, well-dressed man, sighed deeply. "Determined to ruin yourself, I see. I am afraid the only place to buy that is within the spaceport. I am not familiar with it. "

Han couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. "Who died?"

"What?Oh, I see," the man smiled. "We are waiting for the arrival of Moff Tarkin, soon to be Grand Moff Tarkin. He is the newly appointed liaison officer between Alderaan and the Empire. "

Xal raised his eyebrows. "Are you going to cheer as he passes?"

"I seriously doubt there would be any cheering. For the sake of good relations, the Prince Organa asked the people to appear on the streets to greet Tarkin, but he had the good taste not to require any cheering."

"I'd suggest you cheer," Xal said. "I was on Corell when he visited, some four years ago, and he was a very small moff then... he took offense because he wasn't properly greeted and made sure that Corell got the worst possible deals ever since. "

The Alderaani was curious. "How did Corell greet him?"

"Well, before his arrival, word went out that the Shipyard Clan, that's the same on Corell as the Organa family here, took an oath to cut the throat of anyone who appeared on the street the day Tarkin came. " Xal explained.

"And did they actually kill someone?" the Alderaani asked.

Han smiled, because he guessed the answer.

"Of course not, " Xal said. "Who'd dare to go out to greet an Imperial, when the Shipyard Clan takes an oath?Corellians mean those oaths, you know. There wasn't a single soul on the streets, not even foreigners. "

"You are Corellians?"

"Down to the last gene," Xal bowed. "Herlivon Xalnodest, freight transport at your service, and this is my friend, Captain Solo, also in the freight business."

The Alderaani looked at Han as if he were wondering whether Corellians get their pilot licenses in the cradle. Han tried to look back as if he were wondering whether Alderaani had to grow long white beards before getting theirs.

"Look, here he comes," Xal said, pointing at the gray floater sailing down the avenue.

There was not much to see, the floater was closed, even the windows were gray.

The crowd remained silent.

The gray floater was followed by a white one, adorned with a colorful crest.

"The Organa landship," the Alderaani commented.

"Nice model," Han nodded. "This kind needs at least two dozen lifters. "

"Come, let's go, it's getting late. We still have a way to walk. "

The Alderaani lifted a hand in greeting and added: "Remember the free treatment at the clinic."

It was almost dark when they arrived to the hotel. Chewie waited for them in the room, his fur shining with russet highlights, rich and fluffy.

"You look like a new Wookiee, " Xal said. "Impressive, what those salons can do. You don't look a day over a hundred."

"Flatterer," Chewie growled, but he was obviously pleased with the compliment.

Han threw himself on the bed, kicked off his boots, yawning. "This was a long day. Chewie, what do you say we fill up the cargo hold with water here and sell it in Mos Eisley?"

"Last time I looked," Chewie said, "smuggling water to Tatooine was illegal."

"If we land near Anchorhead, who's going to know?" Han asked.

The Wookiee scratched his head. "It would pay well and it also would be a kindness to the people. The Goddess would favor us."

Xal put on his coat. "While you two are discussing business, I'm going to buy something to drink. Don't wait up for me."

The night passed, morning came, Han had the cargo hold full of clean Alderaani water, but there was no sign of Herlivon.

"I better go look for him," Han said to Chewie. "Get the ship ready."

The Wookiee nodded. "Hankho, don't be too hard on him. "

"He'll be too drunk to notice whatever I am on him," Han grumbled. "What the hell are you protecting him for? I thought you don't approve his boozing and all that spice he eats."

"I don't approve. But he can't help it. He's like that, and you should understand. He is not what he seems. I think he should have been a haar but nobody taught him, and now he is lost."

"I love it when you explain things this clearly. " Han said.

Chewie growled something about certain people pretending to be more thickheaded than they really are, but Han wasn't listening.

He went and searched every place in the port where they advertised intoxicants -- there were remarkably few taverns -- to no avail. Han was sleepy, tired and increasingly angry. He had to give up the search.

Just as he returned to inform the pacing Wookiee that Herlivon had obviously evaporated into the clean Alderaani air, a gentle knock sounded on the door of their hotel room.

Chewie went to open the door: a gold protocol droid backed away from him, whimpering in fear of the giant Wookiee.

"Let me handle the tin can," Han said. "What is it?"

"Sir, my name is C-9PY, and I have come to inform you that a gentlebeing registered to this room is presently in the care of the Port Hospice. I am perhaps right in assuming that you might be interested in seeing him."

Han made a face at the droid. "Get to the point. Is he injured?"

"No, sir. However, he is rather intoxicated and somewhat difficult to handle."

Han laughed. "That's a new one. My friend is gentle as a nerf, unless seriously provoked."

The droid couldn't raise an eyebrow, but the metal body somehow managed to express surprise. "Sir, I doubt anyone provoked him."

"Lead me," Han sighed.

By the time Han arrived at the Hospice, the crew there had Herlivon restrained in a padded room on the first floor. He was disheveled and thoroughly wet; the droid explained to Han that the police had fished Xal out of a fountain. It was not clear whether he had fallen in or decided to take a bath in it. According to the droid, the level of spice in his blood surpassed anything they'd ever measured in this particular hospice.

"Seeing what a clean, respectable planet this is, " Han remarked, " any level of spice would count high around here. His clothes need drying."

The droid apologized. "Sir, we wanted to take off his wet garments, but he resisted."

Xal opened his eyes a little and saw Han. "Are you a sight for sore eyes, pal. Get me out of here. What have I done?"

"The gold can here says you took a bath in a fountain. "

"Is that forbidden?" Xal inquired.

"No, sir, it is not." the droid answered.

"Then what am I doing here in a padded room?" Xal demanded. "I want to go now."

"Sir, the medic is convinced that you are too intoxicated to be responsible for your own safety."

Now it was Han who felt outraged. "Is there a law on this blessed planet that every traveling Corellian has to be sober enough to be responsible for his own safety? Is there a law to forbid a free spacer to drown in any damned fountain if he so pleases? Is this a democracy here or what? I am going to be responsible for his safety, if that's what worries you. Let him go. "

The droid was actually wringing his metal hands. "It would taint the reputation of the Hospice to let a man go in his condition."

Xal winked at Han. The restraints held his upper arms, but his hands were free. As most spacers, he could do hand-signs. I distract him, you shut him off, he signaled.

"Look here, droid," Xal started. "Let's talk this over sensibly. I was intoxicated, now I am not. Your medic gave me some shot that neutralized three hundred credits worth of blessed drunkenness in my system. I intend to sue this place for this."

The astonished droid turned to Xal, leaving his back exposed. Han reached out and deftly turned the master switch on the golden neck.

"Fine job," Xal grinned when the light died in the yellow eyes. "Now find the release on the chair and walk me out of here."

Releasing Xal was easy, getting him out of the building wasn't that difficult either. The administrator at the front door wanted to see signed papers.

"I don't understand," Han said. "The droid C-9PY said I can take my friend back to the ship. We have to lift off before noon. Why don't you go ask your droid about it? He's still in the room. We'll wait here for you."

The man nodded and went upstairs.

Han grabbed Herlivon by his wet collar and headed to the street. "Walk!" he commanded. "And fast. I meant what I said about the liftoff. We got the water, we're going home."

Han expected Xal to make a major fuss about cutting short his Alderaan vacation, but Herlivon said nothing.

Xal came out of the sani, his clothes cleaned and dried. He sat down on the couch, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He looked tired. "I'm sorry, I sort of got sidetracked. Hey, this was the nicest clinic I've ever been in. Nobody as much as pushed me or threatened to hit me."

"You're nuts," Han said, but regretted it instantly, because there was something akin to agreement in Xal's eyes.

"You know, on Corell, even in the past century, if ten men of your clan swore you're nuts, they could get you committed. I think I've heard this from at least three hundred men already."

Han grinned at him. "You have no clan, remember? Outsiders don't count. Cheer up, Herlivon, this was not the first time, won't be the last. How much do you remember anyhow?"

Xal smiled. "There was a Rimworld freighter in bay nine, operating a little illegal tavern on board, and I guess I just got drunk. Next thing I know, I was standing in downtown Aliat, admiring the sky. The moon is really big here, very nice. " His smile faded. " I was just happy, you know, happy silly drunk, the way I like to be. Then I got this... feeling, like a bad trip, and I could swear that the whole planet fell to pieces around me, exploding to bits. I sort of lost my balance and fell into a fountain, and when the police came, I just yelled at them that they will all die. Never done anything like this before. I mean, I have been drunk and got into scrapes, I've passed out on a few strange places already, but nothing like this. "

Han was definitely worried. "It's the spice, Herlivon, I think you should cut back on it, really. "

Xal shook his head. "I can't live without it, and you know it. Life is too damn confusing and too damn boring without spice. I just hope this

doesn't happen again. I don't think I ever want to come back to Alderaan. I thought it's going to be tranquil, but it's not like that anymore."

Chewie shuffled his feet behind them. "Maybe you just had a vision."

"Great, now that's very reassuring," Xal said. "Herlivon Xalnodest, the prophet. Any more bright suggestions?"

"Chewie thinks you should have been a haar." Han laughed.

"What the heck is a haar?" Xal inquired.

"Something like a shaman, or a Jedi."

"No.No. Don't say that, never say that." Xal whispered, with a strange expression.

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. I didn't say it, someone said that to me. I don't know when,I think she held me in her arms, and then she put me down, and kissed me. Han I think I just remembered my mother. I think that was when she left me at the steps of the orphanage.You think she might have been a Jedi?"

"That's very likely." Chewie agreed." She probably knew that you'd be safer if no one knows your bloodline. She must have loved you very much, if she gave you up when she couldn't protect you anymore."

"So, then, where are we now? Herlivon Xalnodest, the jedi?" He laughed, but his eyes were serious."At least this whole experience gave me a memory of her. Makes me feel better to know that I had a mother who loved me."

Chewie made a mournful sound. He felt like having two orphans to take care of. "Xal, you should visit that haar who lives in the Jundland wastes, an old man, a hermit. He might be able to help you with this kind of things."

"That's all I need, more visions, like this one." Xal protested. "Now are we lifting off or not?"

"Yes, we are," Han said. "Let's go home."

"Just be careful with Fett." Xal said."He is not going to give up on his revenge.He will work on getting at you."

"Another prophecy? I believe that, when Alderaan blows up!" Han shouted. He had enough of the mysterious side of life. Soon they were heading back to Tatooine. Xal was in a better mood now. And that was all Han wanted. Hoping that he will never have to deal with this kind of things again, he looked at the vast expanse of space, with the stars sparkling in the distance. Life has to get simpler now, he thought.

End

(We know life didn't get simpler for Han ever.)

The original (slash, NC17) version of this story is posted at <http://members.tripod.com/elizstuart/>

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