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Freedom Flight  
by Annette Stickles

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Prolog:

The skinny, dark-haired boy sat in the darkened holothater, watching the latest offering from one of Corellia's tiniest production companies. The holo, Freedom Flight, had been touted as "The Adventure of a Lifetime!" and viewers were invited to "share the magic." Young Han agreed whole-heartedly with the advertising. From the first scene of an incredibly large spaceship pursuing a much smaller ship, to the last scene (which ended with the heroes being presented medals), Han sat enthralled. He had never seen a more wonderful holo in his entire life! After it had ended, Han left the theater thinking about all he had seen. He had been especially impressed with the holo's hero, a fearless pilot by the name of Captain Mykah Merras. He was everything Han hoped to be one day: tall, strong, brave and, most of all, a pilot who had the freedom to go where ever, and do whatever he pleased. Freedom. That seemed like the best thing in the world.

Han hurried back to the spaceport, hoping he wouldn't be late. He had spent the morning begging and had reached his quota early. Captain Shrike's rule was that if you got done early, you had to report back and turn in the credits, and then you might be allowed to spend the rest of day playing. He had known he should go turn the credits in, but couldn't resist seeing the holo that afternoon. After all, he reasoned, I can still see Freedom Flight and get back to the shuttle in plenty of time. No one will ever know.

He made it to the Trader's Luck shuttle with time to spare, turned in his earnings to Captain Shrike, and boarded without a problem, pleased that he had indeed gotten away with it. As he sat on the floor in the passenger area and waited for the other children to return with the day's take, he thought, I wish I was Captain Mykah. I'd get out of here and never come back! And I'd beat up Captain Shrike, too, 'cause I'd be bigger than him. The thought brought a smile to his face.

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Two years later...

Han walked down the streets of Koraalt, one of Corellia's many big cities. He was being cautious, and with good reason.

Running away from Shrike will pay off this time, he thought, or, rather, hoped. Hoped desperately. He cringed inwardly when he thought of what happened last time he ran away. The hours of freedom and happiness, of the realization that he, Han, was in charge of his own life from now on. That newfound feeling was cut short far too soon. Captain Shrike had tracked him down and dragged him back to the Trader's Luck, back to a life of sniveling, stealing, serving others. But not before teaching him a lesson he didn't soon forget. He hadn't forgotten it yet, and that awful memory kept him tense, alert.

He didn't know exactly how old he was. Normally it didn't trouble him, but sometimes that tiny piece of information, which most people take for granted, seemed to tantalize him, taunt him. He knew that he was about nine years old. That would have to do until he convinced Shrike to tell him about his family. Han's family.

Well, now that I've run away, he thought, I'll never know. He hadn't been formally schooled, but one phrase leapt to his mind, from where he did not know: What price freedom. He wasn't sure who had said it, or wrote it, or under what circumstances, but it seemed to fit this situation as well as any. He was trading his family, or any knowledge that might lead to his family, for his freedom. For my life.

That morning, Shrike had taken him and several other youngsters in the Trader's Luck shuttle, landed at the Corellian city Koraalt's port, double-checked that they all had their

assignments, and sent them off to 'work.' The littlest children went off to beg, the older ones to thief. All knew they had better do their best; that they had better meet the quota. Han went off with the group, looking no different than any other day, at least outside, or so he thought. If anyone in the group had taken any notice of him, they would have seen something in his eyes, a difference in his walk, the way he held his head that morning. But no one noticed, and he moved off toward town, wearing the usual clothes allotted to him by his captain: the drab, hand-me-down coveralls with the frayed seams, the dull, battered boots.

He knew how he looked; he felt it keenly. It hurt terribly to feel the normal citizens look him over with distaste. It hurt because he could plainly see they judged him solely on his looks, on how he dressed. At times he would keep his eyes downcast, ashamed. If they knew me, if they knew what I was like, he would think, they might like me. Other times, he would meet their eyes defiantly. I'm as good as you, he would think then. This morning as he left the port and walked toward his assignment, his eyes were neither downcast nor challenging. His mind was hopeful, full of his plans, distracted with what might be.

A few days ago, when he had learned through ship's gossip that their next stop would be Corellia, he knew he had to take advantage of it. The last time he had fled his captor—his captain—it was on a mostly non-human planet. He hadn't really planned his actions; he just ran, and in doing so, left a trail as clear as day for Shrike to follow. Han hadn't been able to speak the language, didn't know the layout of the city; and as a human, and a child at that, he wasn't able to blend in with a crowd. He had been just plain stupid, and he knew it. He had been acting like a kid, not thinking clearly. Now he was nine, and he wasn't going to make the same mistake. He had to think and act like an adult.

This time would be different. Corellia was his home planet, Koraalt was a big city; he could speak the language like a native (he smirked to himself at this lame joke) and he could blend in, if need be. And this time, he would seek help. He wouldn't rely on only himself. So it came to pass that he walked down the city streets with a purpose. He was going to trust someone else.

When he was sure he was well out of sight of the port, he started to step into a call-booth, but quickly forced himself to pass on by that and several other booths. He continued on, traveling

deeper into the city, not wanting to risk being found out by anybody from the Trader's Luck. When he was positive he was alone and not being followed, he looked for another booth. He came across one, stepped in and closed the privacy door, located the calling directory, and thumbed through the screens. He kept searching until he came across AHC, "Adults Helping Children." The directory helpfully displayed AHC's address, contact number, logo, and motto. AHC looked like a privately-own business, and the advertising confirmed that suspicion. The logo was a graphic of a human male with a colorfully-painted face (looking curiously, Han thought, like a spokesbeing from the intergalactic Mirth League) whose two gloved hands encompassed two small hands belonging to a similarly-adorned child. Han was unsure if the child was a boy or girl. The motto, much to Han's dismay, was, "Wee Care." The contact number was no better: 1-800-WEE-LUV-U. He grimaced.

"I certainly ain't going into a nest of clowns like some little kid. There's gotta be another way," he said firmly, and continued turning the electronic pages. Finally he came to a listing that seemed like it could really help: District Woodlet Children's Services. That one looked like, not a private company, but a state-run program. Its sober screen was devoid of anything remotely cute. This one seems better, more serious. Koraalt was divided into about fifteen large districts. He was in District Flintene, as a placard in the call-booth showed. By cross-referencing a city map, he found he was about a three-hour walk away from Woodlet. He memorized the address and headed in the appropriate direction. He didn't notice the scenery of the city streets, the vendors, the greenery of blooming trees and flowers, or even the sentients sharing the walkway. The sun rose higher and higher in the clear sky as he approached his destination. Lost in thought, he missed a turn and traveled halfway through the wrong district before realizing his mistake and turning back. The three-hour walk ended up being four-and-a-half hours long. He decided he'd better keep his mind on what he was doing or he'd never get there.

He entered the business area of District Woodlet, or, to be more precise, the business area of a generation ago. Some of the buildings were closed up; others looked open for business but had few or no customers. The feel of the street was emptiness, but not dangerous. The wave of hot business properties had long ago swept in, washed the area in prosperity, and then receded, moving quickly off to more popular parts of town. So while he walked down the street, haunted by the past that lay behind him, wishing

bright things for the future, he spared no thoughts for the present.

Finally he reached the correct address; he walked up to the door almost before he knew he was there. He started to hesitate, but before he could think about it, he went in. His legs made the decision for him.

The door gave a sing-song chime, alerting the office personnel that they had a visitor. The cheerful door chime was at odds with what met Han's eyes. Inside the sliding door was a small waiting area, not sleazy, but not exactly brand new. More like old, rundown, and outdated. Like it had been built eighty years ago and re-decorated thirty years back. And hadn't been touched since, but for maybe getting cleaned and swept occasionally. The barren walls were all a dull orange, except the back wall, which for some inexplicable reason was a dark yellow, almost mustard, color. The back wall, aside from the unfortunate color, also differed from the other three walls in that it contained a window with glazed transpara-plexi, and a sliding door. The door (also mustard-colored) looked manual; it had a recessed horizontal handle in it. The two matching yellow fabric chairs look urine-stained, and the potted plant had seen better days. Han could just imagine some terrified kid accidentally wetting the chair while waiting to see the agency director. Heck, he was kind of scared himself. Well, he would never admit to being scared. On the Trader's Luck that would be an open invitation to a mocking humiliation and worse. He was just feeling a bit...apprehensive.

As bad as the place looked, it didn't really throw him off; he was used to much worse. Besides, he reasoned, it's a state-run agency; they don't have money to burn. But they do take in lost kids. And that's me...a lost kid.

His musings were interrupted by a voice behind the plexi. "Yes?"

"Oh, uh, I-" he stopped himself sharply. He dropped his eyes briefly, then continued quietly, not wanting to say the words he knew he must, "I need help."

The plexi slid open, propelled by a human hand. Attached to the hand was a fairly nice-looking woman with light brown eyes and brown hair with a hint of auburn. She appeared to be in her mid-to late-twenties, and, more importantly, she appeared to be sympathetic. Han would have been on his way to his first crush if he hadn't been so wrapped up in anxiety. "What's your name?" she

asked gently, reaching for some unseen object. Han was immediately worried; he could only see her face and shoulders through the window, he could not see what item she seemed to be eager to find. What, you think she's got a blaster back there, stupid? he questioned silently, calming himself. Get a grip.

The receptionist grasped the illusive datapad and then seemed to be looking for a stylus. She looked at him and smiled. "Why don't you sit down and I'll come out and talk to you. Oh—don't!" she then cried as Han took a step to one of the chairs. "I forgot," she continued hastily, "the chairs are...aren't in the best condition. Why don't you come into the reception area." Han was relieved because for a second he, too, had forgotten about the stained chairs. She disappeared suddenly from the window and the sliding door opened. Sure enough, it was manual, and evidently off-track. It was only with effort that she was able to let Han through. He turned sideways and slipped through (he was so skinny it wasn't too much of a squeeze) and sat on the seat he was offered. He surreptitiously glanced at it first to make sure it was untainted. He reddened slightly as he saw that the quick-eyed lady hadn't missed his look at the chair, but she smiled and gave him a look that said, 'I don't blame you.'

She, with some effort, closed the door again and took her seat. "Now, let's see..." she said, looking over the datapad. Han could see that it contained seemingly endless questions, starting with name, date of birth, ID number, etc. "I have to ask you some questions first. Uh, are you by yourself?"

"Yeah," he answered warily.

"Do you have a parent or a guardian? Anyone who takes care of you?"

"No. I take care of myself. I ain't got any parents."

"Okay. Why don't you tell me your name, and we can go from there."

"My name is Mykah," he said readily. He had thought earlier about using a false name, and had picked the name of the hero from his favorite adventure holo. "I don't know my last name."

"That's a nice name," she smiled, writing down the name on the pad. "Just like Captain Mykah Merras from Freedom Flight. I loved that holo! Did you see it?"

"Yeah, I liked it too." Han was glad she liked to chatter; it made him feel more at ease. What he didn't know was that she was trying to calm him a little. She could see from his body language that he was nervous and uncomfortable.

"Do you know your birthdate, Mykah?" He shook his head. "ID number?" Another negative. "You know," she said, lightly tossing the datapad onto her desk, "why don't we forget the form. You look hungry and I could use some coffee. That okay? You can tell me about yourself and we'll figure out the best way to help you."

"Okay," he agreed. He was hungry. It was way past lunch time. The shipboard ration bar he'd had this morning had been a nutritious meal, but he was a growing boy, and therefore was always had a healthy appetite. Besides, the prospect of real food instead of bland rations sounded like a real treat. Not to mention the fact that he didn't want to have to answer the rest of the long list of Children's Services questions. He got to his feet and followed her down the hall a short way to the lunch room.

"I have to stay here to man the vid, otherwise we could go to Ven's Diner. The food there is really good. But everyone is out today, so there's no one to cover the desk if I leave, but we'll be able to hear if anyone comes in." She entered the lunch room and Han, much to his surprise, saw expensive food processors on the wall. If they can afford food processors, you think they could afford to have those two chairs replaced. "Aren't these great?" she asked, seeing him eye the processors. "They were a donation from a citizen. He donates regularly to Ack, but occasionally we get a hand-me-down."

"What's Ack?" Han wondered aloud.

"Oh, that's what we call Adults Helping Children--AHC--we call it Ack because it's so sickening sweet. There's a rich man in town who gives them loads of credits. They get lots of publicity and media coverage. Every time they help one child, they practically hold a press conference. I mean, it's great they can help kids in trouble, but we toil here day after day, trying to make due with the limited funds the agency has to work with. Three months ago, the citizen donated brand new processors to the Ack building. We got their old ones, and, boy, were we ever excited!"

Han thought that the Children's Services kind of sounded like him. Hoping for the best, but having to make due with what he had.

"So, what would you like?" she asked, pointing to the display on the processor.

"Will it make breakfast? You know, a real Corellian breakfast?" It was after lunch time, but he didn't care; the thought of a full Corellian breakfast made his mouth water.

She smiled and nodded proudly, as if the processor were a favorite pet who was about to perform a difficult and clever trick. She tapped the viewscreen and punched in Han's order, then removed the laden serving tray. Han stared, almost awestruck, at the feast: spicy sausages (which looked a little on the greasy side, Han thought happily), seasoned eggs, fluffy graincakes, fresh kava fruit, two sweetberry muffins, and a large glass of juice.

"Here you go, Mykah. The utensils are in the drawer; I'll get them for you."

She placed the food on the lunchroom table and directed Han to sit. "Now," she said, handing him a knife and fork, "try that and tell me how it is."

He wasted no time in following her suggestion. "Mmmmm. It's good!" he exclaimed around a mouthful of eggs.

"I knew you'd like it; we've never had a disappointed customer yet," she joked as she ordered a cup of coffee with extra sweetener and milk. The processor complied quickly. She then took a seat across from him, holding the steaming mug, studying him briefly while he ate. She could see he was thin, dressed in a coverall that had seen a lot of wear, and his hair was badly in need of a trim. But he seemed intelligent and resourceful, and she could sense that he was a decent boy. A cute kid, she decided. She had long ago learned to look past a person's appearance; she had learned not to judge on clothing or looks. And I'm sure he's been through his share of scrapes.

"What's your name?"

She had been deep in thought and was surprised by his question. She smiled. "I guess I never introduced myself, did I? My name is

Anet Noam, and I'm very pleased to meet you, Mykah," she finished formally, and held out her hand over the table. He smiled and shook her hand.

"Pleased to meet'cha," he returned, giving her a lopsided grin.

Add charming to intelligent and resourceful, she thought at seeing his winning smile. He's going to be a lady-killer when he gets a little older. She was glad to see that he looked more relaxed. "Mykah, I want to help you. I think you came to the right place. But in order to help you I need to know your situation. Can you tell me about yourself? You can take your time; there's no hurry."

He was nearly finished with his meal, and he took a sip of juice before he began. He had thought out beforehand what story he would give when questioned, and he had decided to try to stick as close to the truth as possible. "I don't know who my parents were. I don't remember anything about 'em. I grew up on the street. I--I had to steal to get by," he said, dropping his eyes from hers.

"Are you aware of any relatives? Any friends who may want to help?"

"I don't know my last name, so I don't know if I got any relatives. And I don't got any friends." He thought of the female Wookiee who had come to live on Trader's Luck a few months ago with her mate. She was nice to Han, but he couldn't understand her strange language at all. She seemed nicer than anyone on the ship, but she wasn't his friend by any means, at least, not yet anyway. And since I'm never going back, we'll never become friends, either.

Anet spend a few more minutes asking about his place of birth, where he grew up, and whether he'd ever received any public assistance before. He, of course, didn't know where he'd been born, but he did tell her he'd lived a long time near the slums and alleys near the docking bays in Corellia's capital city. He was unclear as to what she meant by public assistance.

"What I mean is, have you ever lived in a foster home, or an orphanage or any state- or private-run childcare facility?" she clarified.

"Nope."

"Well, in a case like this, since you have no next-of-kin that you know of, and no guardians, the first thing we'll do is fingerprint you and take a holo ID. Are you done eating, Mykah?"

He was, not only because there wasn't much left on his plate, but also because he was suddenly sickened by the mention of fingerprinting and ID. He tried to calm himself, but was too worried about any such information being located by Captain Shrike, thus bringing to an end his freedom. "Do I have to?" he asked, unable to keep his eyebrows from furrowing.

"Well, yes, Mykah, I'm afraid so. It's standard procedure; we do it to all the kids who come here. It's also a safety precaution in case you're ever lost or in an accident and don't have any identification on you. The holo and prints are kept on a system-wide database and can be accessed by any planetary agency."

Oh, no! That meant Shrike could ask around at any agency and track him down! He knew he had to run, to get out quick. He jumped up quickly, knocking his chair over backwards, his eyes wide with fear. He tried to bolt through the door, but Anet caught him by the wrist. He tried to push her away but she grabbed his other wrist, and her grip was surprisingly tight. Han was tall for his nine years, and Anet was a rather short woman, being only an inch over five feet, so there wasn't a whole lot of difference in their heights, and Han was sure he could get away from her if he kicked her. But he didn't want to hurt her—she'd been so nice to him—and he knew, despite being raised among amoral (and immoral) people aboard the Luck, that it was wrong to hit women. So instead of kicking out, he tried to twist his wrists free from her grasp.

"Wait!" she cried, "wait! I'll let you go. You can go if you want, okay?"

Han immediately stopped struggling, but was suspicious. "You will?"

"Yes, but first listen to this: you said you don't have any parents or guardians. But the idea of being fingerprinted and holo'd scared you to death. It seems to me you're running from somebody or something, and you don't want to be found. Now, I'm going to let you go, but I want you to know that if you need help, any kind of help, you can ask me and I'll try to do what I

can. If you tell me your real story, maybe I can do something for you—besides dance with you," she finished with a wry smile.

She released his wrists, and was honestly surprised when he didn't run. He stood there, looking at her in confusion. She could see his thoughts clearly in his face and eyes. His face showed his expressions better than he would ever be able to verbalize, at least when he wasn't aware that he was baring himself. If he thought about it, he was able to make his face a blank page, unable to be read or decoded by even the most astute observer. But now, he was trying to figure out what to do, and so let his eyes be the proverbial window to his soul. Anet looked inside him and saw a scared little boy, confused and lonely; a tiny flame in an enormous universe, a tiny flame being blown about by oppression and suffering, nearly extinguished.

"I don't know what to do," he finally whined, instantly hating himself for the weakness he showed, but so close to tears that he couldn't stop himself. He really didn't know what to do. These people, even if well-meaning, couldn't help him. Anet probably wouldn't be able to help him. He could still, if he hurried, run to his 'assignment' and make it back to the shuttle in time; maybe Shrike would never know what he'd been up to.

Anet slowly stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder, then gently pulled him toward her into a comforting embrace. She wanted to tell him that everything would be okay, that all would be well, but she didn't. She really couldn't make such a promise. All she could promise was what she had already said: she would do all she could to help. She hoped it would be enough.

Han stood stiffly, with his arms by his sides, not sure of what to do. No one on the Trader's Luck had ever hugged him before. Not even when he was a small child, or when he was sick or hurt. No one seemed to ever care about what he needed. This was a new experience for him, and he was unsure of how to deal with it. He hesitantly raised his arms and returned the embrace. After a few seconds, he laid his head on her shoulder, imagining that this is how it would feel if he had had a mother.

After a short while, Anet asked softly, "Would you like to talk?"

He sniffled once—although he hadn't cried, his eyes were a little teary—and drew back. He nodded, deciding all at once that he should tell her everything. After all, he thought as he sniffled

again then cleared his throat, I said I was gonna trust someone else. I was gonna be smart and act like a grown-up. Adults trust others. So I will too.

He took a deep breath, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and said, "It's a kinda long story—" He was interrupted by the door chime.

"I'm sorry, Mykah," she said, "just wait right here and I'll see who it is." She gave him an encouraging smile, picked up the chair he had tipped over, and had him sit down. "It's probably just Rod. He's our PPS guy."

When she left the lunchroom, she didn't close the door, and the reception area was in hearing distance. So, when she said, "Hey, Rod. What have you got for us—oh, I'm sorry, I thought you were the Planetary Package Service man. May I help you, sir?"

"I sure hope so, ma'am. I'm looking for my son. He ran away this morning and I was hoping you could help me."

The man sounded sincerely worried about his missing offspring, but the instant Han heard the voice his body went numb and his breath caught in his throat. Captain Shrike! He must have followed me! He leapt to his feet again, once again pushing the chair back too quickly and knocking it backwards. This time, however, he made a grab for it so it wouldn't crash noisily to the floor. He caught it, placed it upright, and crept closer to the door.

"Of course, sir," Anet was saying, "we'll do all we can to locate him. Now, have you filed a missing persons report with the local authorities? That will probably be our first step."

Garris Shrike played the concerned father very well. "No, I, I just came to the first place I thought of. But you just have to help me—I'm desperate! His mother and I are so worried about him." He paused to take a breath, pretending to reign in his emotions. "He's about this tall," he said, holding his hand mid-chest, "and he has brown hair and hazel eyes. Here, I have a holo of him, plus any ID information you may need." He held up the holo; the boy displayed was smiling, but to someone trained and observant, the smile looked forced or strained. The small image of Han gazed at Anet with sad eyes, begging for help.

Han was really worried now. Shrike knows I'm here. He saw me come in and knows I haven't left. He's gonna kill me! And that was no mere idle thought. He'd heard kids on the street say that before; 'I'm late, Mom's gonna kill me,' or 'I forgot my homework, my teacher's gonna kill me.' But he knew they didn't really harbor the fear that they would be murdered. With Shrike, either being killed or very nearly killed were very real possibilities. And after the beating he'd gotten last time he'd been caught running away, he knew that this time Shrike would be nearly blind with rage.

Captain Shrike had indeed followed Han. That morning, even before the shuttle took off, Han had unwittingly given himself away by his body language. He looked like he was in anticipation of something. Shrike, ever cunning and observant, had picked up on it immediately; he knew Han was up to something sneaky, but he just wasn't sure of what. So he trailed him to find out. He had followed him to the Children's Services (after nearly being found out when Han backtracked after missing his turn) and had been waiting to see if Han would emerge. He didn't think Han would say too much about his life aboard Trader's Luck; at least not at first. Shrike knew that the key to his (and his ship's) career was keeping the kid quiet about the operation he and his brother Larrad were running. He knew he had to get the ungrateful punk back, and pretty quick, so he had called the Luck and told Larrad to send Han's identification packet and holo (all falsified information, of course) to his receiver. He'd also told him to send Tye, a kid about 17 years old, to scope out the building and keep an eye out for anything unusual. Tye wasn't a street urchin; he was the son of one of the ship's members, and was shaping up to be a good 'officer.' Shrike relayed the Children's Services address to Larrad and said he wanted Tye there immediately. When Han's ID information was transmitted and stored on the disk, he tucked the data receiver into a pocket and waited for Tye to arrive. The kid had made good time, and Shrike quickly filled him in on the situation, stressing the fact that "the little punk had better not get away." Leaving Tye to work as backup, Garris Shrike squared his shoulders and went into the Children's Services building, determined to play the dutiful and loving father. So far, the charade seemed to be working...

"Oh, that's him!" Anet said, taking the holo and holding it up for a closer look. "He came in some time ago. You don't have anything to worry about. He's safe and sound."

When Han heard that he nearly had a fit. He felt betrayed, confused, terrified, and angry. How could she? She didn't even listen to me, she believes him!

He knew he had to save himself; Anet was an unknowing pawn, playing right into Shrike's hands. She would turn Han over to Shrike, thinking that she'd saved him, helped him out. He peeked out the door and looked down the hall. He could see the edge of Anet's desk and the sliding door. Shrike was in the waiting area, speaking through the window, and therefore could not see the lunchroom door. Han slipped out the door and headed the opposite direction from the danger zone. He knew the office was empty, so at least he didn't worry about being collared by any of Anet's co-workers. If I can find a back door or a window I'm outta here.

He could still hear enough of the conversation to make out Anet telling Shrike, "Your son is just down the hall; I'll go get him for you." Shrike thanked her and sat, too concerned about getting his 'property' back to notice the state of the chair. Anet absentmindedly placed the holo on her desk when she stood up.

Moving quickly, Han checked rooms for any sign of exit; after the third disappointment, he found what he needed in the smoker's break room. He dove through the door and closed it behind him. He climbed onto a chair, thankful that the room, which had been provided for any beings who smoked t'bac, contained an old-fashioned window that unlocked and opened easily. He could see that at one time the window had been armed with a security alarm, but had been disconnected; probably so the smokers could let in fresh air occasionally. The smell of the t'bac was still strong in the air, and he was glad when the window opened so he could take a quick breath of clean air before pulling himself through the opening and dropping lightly to the ground in a narrow alley. He wasted no time congratulating himself on his clever escape; he turned to run.

Before he could take a step a strong hand grabbed his wrist, for the second time that day. He jumped and jerked away so quickly, his captor's grip failed and Han fell onto his back. He looked up in fear, which flashed into anger, as he saw that it was not Shrike, but Anet half hanging out the window.

"Leave me alone!" he said, the hurt and anger evident in his voice. He sprang nimbly to his feet, ready to flee, but she was

holding a card in her hand, so he paused for a second to see what it was.

"Here Mykah, take this," she said, holding out the card. "Go to the address on the card; it's where I live. The access code is jotted on the back. Stay there until I get off work, and then you can tell me what's going on."

He stepped forward suspiciously, ready to evade should she try to grab him again. He took the small, white card quickly, snapping it from her fingers flippantly, and asked, "Why should I?"

"Because I can see you're trying to run from that man in there. Is he your father? Legal guardian?"

"No, I told you before, I ain't got any parents or guardians. There's nobody-"

"Listen, mister, I want you to go to that address and stay there, okay?" she said with sternness softened by a smile. "No arguments. You don't have to be afraid of me; when I told him I was going to get you I was just buying time. Believe me, it would have been easier on both of us if you'd have let me sneak you out the back door instead of going through all these gymnastics." She was standing on the smoking room chair, still partially hanging out of the window, in a rather uncomfortable position.

He felt a surge of elation—she hadn't betrayed him; she was covering for him! He was by no means out trouble yet, but he took a few seconds to smile at the thought of Shrike sitting on the stained chair. Ha! Just what he deserves!

"Okay," he began uncertainly, elation giving way to doubt. After all, she was an official of the Corellian government. How could she break the rules and regulations so easily? This had to be some kind of trick since it seemed too good to be true. He questioned, "So how come you're doing it this way? I mean, how come you're blowin' off the rules like that? And what are you gonna tell Captain Shrike?"

"That's his name, huh? Don't worry about him, I'll think of something. And normally if there's a case like this we can set up a safe, neutral meeting place for both parties. But there's something fishy about this Shrike fellow and I want to find out what. Now, Mykah, we've wasted enough time. Get going."

"Yes ma'am!" he said, good humor restored, as he jauntily threw her a salute and lost no time running down the alley toward the back of the building, eager to put some distance between himself and Garris Shrike. At the end of the alley, he glanced down at the card, looking at the address. 607-A Tontog Way. Hmmm, no idea where that is. Unfamiliar as he was with the area, he decided he should find a call booth and locate his destination on the city map. He saw a call booth a block away and headed toward it.

He was on the terracrete walkway, sticking close to the buildings, when someone casually leaned out of a recessed doorway and took a firm hold on his arm. Not again, for cryin' out loud, he thought wearily, looking toward the individual. His eyes widened as he recognized Tye. The older kid smiled lazily and drawled arrogantly, "Hey, boy, where you think you're goin'?"

"I ain't goin' with you, that's for sure," Han returned.

"Oh, no? We'll see about that." Tye pulled a small transmitter from his pocket and activated it. "Captain Shrike, I've got him. We're out back of the building. Yes, sir, I'll hold him till you get here."

As Tye re-pocketed the communicator, Han took advantage of Tye's distraction, punching Tye in the stomach as hard as he could with his free hand. The older kid was barely affected; he was almost as tall as Shrike and weighed twice as much as Han. His grip never wavered from Han's upper arm as he muttered a Corellian curse and, more angry than hurt, threw Han hard up against the building. The back of Han's head cracked soundly, and he went limp, seeing swirls of whiteness in front of his eyes, unable to stand on his feet. Tye had spent years witnessing and learning the Garris Shrike method: he let Han drop to the walkway, then kicked the younger boy savagely in the gut. A wave of nausea enveloped Han, and he lost his lunch, too sick to notice how Tye jumped back quickly.

"Yuck! You little wuss," he said to the prone figure as he checked to make sure his boots weren't spattered. "You're just about useless. I don't even know what the Captain wants you back for. C'mon, get up, loser."

Just as Tye jerked Han to his feet, an angry voice behind them demanded, "What in the Sith is going on here?" The voice was so loud both of the boys jumped. Tye spun to face the newcomer, and,

in doing so, let go of Han, who fell to the ground, and, hitting his head again, passed out.

Tye thought fast. "My brother is sick and I'm tryin' to get him home to mom. She's real worried."

The stranger didn't look convinced. He was of average height, in his mid-thirties, and was dressed casually in a loose shirt and the latest fad to sweep the system, denim-weave pants. "I don't think so," he answered angrily. "I saw what you did to him. You should be ashamed, picking on a little kid like this." As he spoke, he reached down to see if Han was seriously injured.

Tye took the opportunity and ran like the blazes. Ain't no way to salvage this one, he thought as he flew over the terracrete.

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The first thing he realized was that he was floating on a cloud. It was dark, and he was surrounded by softness and cleanness. How nice, he thought groggily. When he was a small child, Han had looked up at the clouds and thought they looked so solid, so substantial. They looked like you could walk on them. But when he had been a passenger in the Luck's shuttle to and from Corellia and other planets enough times, he saw that wasn't true. You could fly through them; many times they disappeared as you approached them. He had been disappointed, as a youngster, to learn that he would never be able to walk on the clouds.

Now he had the happy realization that he had been wrong all the time. Clouds were solid. You could walk on them—you could even float on them, as he was doing now. Nice, he thought again. "Nice clouds," he murmured aloud.

Distantly he was aware of someone sitting on the cloud beside him, and presently the darkness was penetrated by a faint yellow light. Must be the sun...

A cool washcloth was pressed gently to his forehead, and the feel of the damp fabric brought him a little closer to wakefulness. Little by little, he grew aware of his surroundings. He noticed first that he was definitely not on a cloud (much to his disappointment), but on a full-size bed, tucked under a fluffy, feather-filled blanket. The mattress was soft and comfortable, as were the pillows. And the yellow light certainly wasn't the sun; it was a small table lamp. He was nestled entirely in warmth and

softness. The feeling was as wonderful as it was foreign, since from his earliest memory he had slept on a firm sleeping pallet, covered only by a thin, rough blanket.

The thought of the familiar sleeping surface made his mind wander to visions of the interior of the Trader's Luck, which in turn brought pictures of a furious Captain Shrike. When his mind formed the words Captain Shrike, he was almost overcome with panic as he remembered his disastrous confrontation with Tye.

His body jerked into an upright position as he batted away the washcloth.

A male voice, speaking just above a whisper, said, "Sshhh, hey son, it's okay. Relax."

Han thought the voice sounded familiar, but when he looked at the speaker, he didn't recognize him. The voice, however, he finally did place; the man was the one who had come up during his altercation with Tye.

"Here, kid, lay back down—you hit your head pretty bad. Yeah, I know, you're wondering who I am. My name is Tallus," he said as he helped Han retake his position on the pillow. "After that big kid ran off, I tried to wake you up, but you were out cold. I didn't know what to do with you except take you home. I live just a couple of blocks away from where we were. Oh, and don't try to get up or move suddenly again; you took quite a knock to your noggin."

"This is your house?" Han croaked.

"Yeah, well, apartment, really. Here, drink some of this water; hey—not too fast, just sip it. There you go. Better?"

Han nodded weakly. "Thanks."

"No problem. And I'll bet your belly hurts, too, doesn't it? Yeah, well don't worry, that little thug just bruised your ribs, he didn't cause any real damage. I checked you over to make sure nothing was broken. Besides a bruised tummy and bumped head, you're fine."

"Are you a doctor?" Han wanted to know.

"Well, not exactly. I work at the Free Clinic across town, and I help the doctors patch up sick kids like you all the time. That's how I know you're going to be all right."

Well, that explained why Tallus had such a good bedside manner; he seemed fluent in the language adults always seemed to use to young children when they were trying to soothe them. Normally, Han would have been irritated. After all, he was nine, not a little baby. But he felt so miserable, he was glad the man wanted to make him feel better. He considered it incredible good luck that he had been rescued by Tallus, a man with the disposition to want to help him. Most of the males (and females) he knew from the Luck were either like Shrike and Tye, or if not outright abusive and cruel, were unsympathetic and uncaring. What a surprise, he thought, to meet two nice people in one day. First Anet and now him. Just wish my head would stop pounding.

"Now, son, can you tell me your name?"

"Mykah." He decided to use the same alias he'd given Anet.

"Nice to meet you, Captain Mykah," Tallus said, smiling. "Freedom Flight is one of my favorite holos. You ever see it?"

"Yeah, it's my favorite, too," he responded as he rubbed a hand across this forehead. He was trying to pay attention, to stay alert, but the pain in his head was distracting.

"Hey, you look like you could use some more sleep, Mykah. I can give you a painkiller to help you sleep better. First, though, maybe you can tell me your mom or dad's name and number. I'll bet there's someone out there who's really worried about you. I can call them for you and let them know where you are."

Han wondered how much he should tell Tallus. He decided to give the truth. "I don't have a family, but a lady at Woodlet District Children's Services was helpin' me. She gave me a card with her address and number on it. I don't remember what I did with it. It might be in my pocket." He reached beneath the cover to fish in his pocket, but noticed for the first time he wasn't wearing his coverall, only his undershorts.

His face registered surprise, but Tallus spoke up. "I had to clean your clothes. They were pretty messed up. I checked the

pockets for any ID, but they were empty. Are you sure you had the card with you?"

Han thought a moment, (first remembering that his coverall was messed up from when he threw up) then recalling that when Tye had grabbed him he had been holding Anet's card in his hand. "I must have dropped it."

"Well, that's okay. We can get the contact number from the directory. What's the lady's name?"

"Anet...uh, I can't remember her last name. Sorry..." Han said, trying to keep his eyes open a little longer.

"Hey, sport, that's no problem. I'm sure I can get hold of her. Now, what I want you to do is close your eyes and sleep. Okay?"

Han tried to mumble an agreement, but was unable. He drifted off, barely feeling the painkiller Tallus injected into his arm.

While Han slept, Tallus went to task: He found the Children's Services number and called the office, but as it was after closing time, he wasn't able to speak with a human. The answering droid took his message and promised to deliver it to Anet when she arrived the next morning. The droid disconnected before Tallus could ask what Anet's last name was. He dialed again, reached the droid, and asked the question. When he was told her surname was, "Noam," he asked for her home number. The droid informed him curtly that home contact numbers were not given out, and then ended the call abruptly.

Tallus looked in the Koraalt Citizens Directory, searching for Anet, then realized he didn't know how her last name was spelled. He toyed with the idea of calling the droid again, but then decided against it. That droid ought to have its protocol program overhauled, he thought. Talk about being snippy...

After searching various possible spellings (including Gnome and Nome) he finally located 'Noam, Anet.' He copied her number into his calling list, then punched in the number sequence. After a few seconds, Anet answered the call, her face replacing the Please Wait message on the vid screen. Tallus was pleasantly surprised to see a young, attractive woman. He was immediately struck by her eyes, which he noticed were a light brown, almost greenish hazel. And, at the moment, troubled and anxious.

"Hello, Ms. Noam?"

"Yes, that's me. Can I help you?"

"I hope so. I...well, this may sound strange, but I was wondering if you've...misplaced one of your charges? A boy by the name of Mykah?"

"Mykah?! You know where he is?" Her eyes lightened considerably, relief evident in them.

"Yes, he's right here. He's sleeping now; he's had a busy day," he said with a smile. "He said you were working with him, that you gave him your card."

"That's right, I did. How did he end up with you?—and who are you, by the way."

Tallus introduced himself and explained what had happened. Anet was grateful for his help and agreed to go to Tallus' apartment to see the boy. She took down his address and headed out quickly, glad to hear that Mykah was safe. When she had gotten off work that afternoon, she had hurried to her apartment. When she found it empty, she just knew something was wrong. When the call from Tallus came, her relief was palpable. She thought how strange it was that she had grown so attached to the boy after only knowing him for such a short time.

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Han lay sprawled on his stomach on the bed, wrapped in the thick, soft blanket. His breathing was deep and slow, and to Anet, he looked at total peace with the galaxy. After she had checked on Han, she thanked Tallus several times for his gallant effort. Tallus had modestly denied doing anything that the "average humanitarian with a heart of gold" wouldn't have done. She laughed at his humor.

Tallus had made some dinner for them while they waited for Han to awaken. They sat at the kitchen table and talked during dinner while discussing Han's plight. Anet told him about Captain Shrike turning up to reclaim "his son."

Meanwhile, Han had gradually awakened, the pain in his head and stomach totally gone now. He remained still and listened to the conversation in the next room; they had left the bedroom door

open so it was easy for him to hear. He recognized Anet's voice and was pleased that Tallus had located her. But he was still nervous enough to lie still and try to hear their conversation.

"So, what did you tell Shrike after Mykah left via the window?" Tallus asked.

"That's the strange part. When I got back to the reception area, he was just leaving, and in a big hurry, too. I called after him, but he didn't even look back. I didn't know what to make of it."

Han, listening from the bedroom, knew why Shrike had hurried out; that would have been just about the time he had gotten the message that Tye had caught Han out behind the building.

"Well, I wonder," Tallus was saying, "if the little thug who beat him up was with Shrike. I was coming down the walkway and saw the older kid grab Mykah, then say something into a transmitter. Maybe he was calling to tell Shrike that he'd found him."

"That sounds plausible. I guess we'll have to wait for Mykah to wake up, then we can ask him about it. Whatever happened, I know I want to hear the whole story. Mykah was just about to tell me when we were interrupted by that slimeball Shrike."

She had used the rest of her work day to check up on Shrike. She cross-referenced and searched every avenue she could think of, and contacted all agencies who may have had information on a "Captain Shrike." Nothing turned up. The jerk probably has a dozen aliases. She had abandoned her search as fruitless.

She was telling Tallus of her failure when Han walked unsteadily out of the bedroom door, hair sticking up, with a sheet wrapped around him and trailing out behind. He was rather embarrassed at being clad only in undershorts in front of Anet, and so had brought the sheet to protect his adolescent modesty.

Anet looked up with a start, a huge smile spreading across her face. "Hello, sleepyhead," she teased, rising and walking over to give Han a warm hug. Han could see the acceptance and affection in her face and was happy to return the hug without hesitation this time. He soon regretted it when his covering dropped to the ground. He turned red with mortification, and quickly snatched up the sheet again.

Anet laughed, "Don't worry about that, Mykah. One day when you're rich and famous, I'll be able to tell people I saw you in your underwear."

Tallus laughed too, and told Han that Anet had brought some clothes for him if he wanted them.

"Do I? Where are they?" Han blurted, still embarrassed.

The Children's Services had a small stock of clothing for the needy children that came through their doors. It wasn't flashy or the latest style, but it was clean and presentable. Han was happy to get the simple gray shirt and pants that Anet brought for him. At least they fit him and didn't look worn out and threadbare like his coveralls. He had retreated back to the bedroom to dress, and emerged feeling more confident. He didn't imagine anyone could feel confident or comfortable in their undershorts, at least, not in front of others.

It was in the evening, and Han was starving. Tallus made him up a plate of food, and, while Han ate, he told them an edited version of his life story. The first thing he did was admit his real name was Han, not Mykah. "I just used that name 'cause I liked Freedom Flight so much. Plus I wanna be a pilot when I grow up."

Neither Anet nor Tallus seemed taken aback at the revelation of his real name, and neither one laughed at his dream of becoming a pilot. That put him more at his ease, and he continued by telling them that he didn't have any parents or guardians, that he didn't remember his parents, and that he had lived on the streets (for how long he didn't know) until Captain Shrike had picked him up. That was a long time ago, and he had worked for Shrike ever since, begging and stealing. He was so ashamed he couldn't meet their eyes; he was afraid to see the condemnation or disgust in their expressions.

He was used to being close-mouthed when it came to himself, and the habit was not easy to break. Besides, much of what happened to him aboard the Luck was so unpleasant that he didn't want to even think about it, let alone tell others; nor did he want to share with them the humiliation he suffered almost daily. It had taken a lot for him to tell them what little he did. He wasn't ready to share any more with them. He sat with his eyes glued to

his plate of half-eaten food, waiting for one of them to say something.

"Han," Anet said gently, "you don't have to feel bad about anything that man made you do. You didn't have a choice. You know that, don't you?" While Han hadn't mentioned the abuse he had been subjected to, Anet could see that he had been badly scarred in more ways than one.

Han slowly raised his head and his eyes darted up toward hers briefly, then dropped again to his plate. "I know," he mumbled, but it didn't sound like he really believed it, not deep down inside.

"Anyway," Han continued, "you were right about that other guy workin' with Captain Shrike, Tallus. His name is Tye, and he called Captain Shrike and tell him he found me. He was gonna hold me till the captain got there. That's why I hit him, to try to get away. I don't wanna go back with Captain Shrike. I don't wanna work for him anymore." The desperation was evident in his wavering voice.

Anet was just about to promise him that he would never have to go back with Shrike, when the door chimed. Tallus moved to the door, tapped the intercom button, and asked who it was. A pleasant female voice answered that she was collecting donations for Koraalt's Children's Hospital. Before Han could react, Tallus had opened the door and was fishing a credit from his pocket. Almost immediately, four individuals surged through the opening and shoved Tallus back into the room.

"Hey! What the—"

"Shut up!" someone yelled. That someone, Han noted with horror, was Captain Shrike. "Just shut up," he said, this time in a normal speaking voice, "and get back! I've had one lousy day, and if one more person ticks me off, he's gonna be real sorry. Real sorry." The menace in his voice was more evident when he was talking than when he was shouting.

Tallus stepped back until he was next to Anet, who had risen in alarm at the intrusion, as had Han. The boy recognized the other three persons as Shrike's brother Larrad, Tye, and one of Shrike's female officers. All four had blasters their blasters drawn.

"Now, kid," Shrike said, advancing slowly, holding Han in his steely gaze, "you made a big mistake today. I hope you realize that. I hope you realize you're in trouble. Big, big trouble..."

Han gulped. When he decided to run, he knew he was taking a huge risk. Now that he was facing Shrike's wrath, he regretted it bitterly.

Tallus knew better than to try anything. He knew that he'd never have a chance against four armed assailants, and would just be endangering Anet and Han. His mind raced as he strove to think of a plan of action. Anet was doing the same; she knew they could never overpower the intruders. But she had to try something...

"How did you know he was here?" she asked, stalling for time.

"That was easy. I followed you to your place, then over here. You ain't a very smart lady. You led me right to him."

"You can't take him. It's—" she began, but got no further, as Shrike cut her off sharply.

"I can and I will. Han, c'mere. Now!"

Han thought of what he could do. Could he run into the bedroom and lock the door, then escape through the window? Maybe, but Shrike was very, very fast on the trigger. And, even if he made it, what would happen to Anet and Tallus? Would Shrike be so angry he'd kill them? Han didn't want to take that chance. They were innocent; they didn't deserve to get hurt or killed because of him. He wished it were like in the holos, and that someone would save the day, or somehow they could overpower them. But he wasn't Mykah Merras, and this was no holo flick. This was his life. This was his problem, his fault. He would take whatever punishment Shrike meted out.

"I said move, you little vrelt," Shrike breathed. His voice had dropped low, and Han knew from painful experience that it meant that Shrike was barely able to reign in his explosive temper.

Han stepped around Anet and Tallus, evading Anet's hand as she reached for him, still trying somehow to protect him. As soon as Han was within arm's reach, Shrike grabbed him roughly by the shoulder and, finally releasing his fury, slammed him blaster into the right side of Han's head. Han's cry of pain was brief as

he crumpled to the carpeted floor at Shrike's feet. The captain glared down at the still form and gestured to Larrad. "Pick'im up."

He looked at Anet and Tallus, who were standing looking shocked and angry. "Now, folks, I've gone through a lot of trouble to get this little snot back. I don't want no trouble from you. Sit down at the table. Good. Now, put your heads down." When they had reluctantly complied, Shrike shot both of them with a low-power stun bolt. He used the stun setting because he didn't want to worry about a murder charge; the law would investigate a double murder much more thoroughly than a kidnapping. And he knew that by the time they awoke, even if they tried to track him down, his group and the Luck would be long gone. They left quietly, closing the door behind them.

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Han lay on the hard sleeping pallet, covered by a rough blanket. He knew his face and body must be a mass of bruises. His head was throbbing, his ears were ringing, and every single part of his body ached tremendously. Part of him was amazed that he was still alive. He could still see Shrike's contorted face, so furious that he was beyond reason, as he struck him over and over again with the animal-hide strap. Han looked at the ceiling of his tiny quarters and tried to clear his head of those bad memories.

He heard a light tap on the door, and looked over in alarm as the door opened. He half expected to see Shrike standing there, ready to finish him off. Of course, he realized belatedly, if it was Captain Shrike, he wouldn't have knocked; he would have barged right in. Instead, filling the door frame, was Dewlanna.

The Wookiee approached him carefully, carrying a bowl of broth. Han couldn't understand her words yet, but he could interpret the meaning behind them. The same kindness that had been so foreign to him until he met Anet and Tallus was brimming in the old Wookiee's eyes. She kneeled next to his pallet and asked him something. Han couldn't be sure, but he thought he caught the word 'hungry.'

He nodded; he was extremely hungry. After Shrike had finished with him, Han had lain on the floor of the Luck's landing bay for a long time, not totally unconscious, but drifting in and out of awareness, quite unable to walk or even move. No one came to help him; either no one cared (which was probably closest to the

truth) or no one wanted to face Shrike's ire by helping him. Finally Dewlanna, having through ship's gossip heard the whole story of Han's flight and recapture, came to get him. She picked him up carefully, took him to his quarters, and cleaned him up as best she could. She applied salve from her small medicine chest to his abraded and swollen skin, and sat with him, holding him and stroking his hair until he fell asleep.

When Han awoke later, she was gone. He hoped she would return, and sure enough, she did, bringing him food. She knelt beside the bed and spooned him the warm broth slowly. When he had finished with the bowl, she placed it on the floor.

"Thank you, Dewlanna...for everything," he said awkwardly.

She said something he couldn't make out, tucked the blanket about his shoulders, then patted his head before she left, taking the empty soup bowl with her.

He lay there feeling drowsy, thankful for Dewlanna's friendship, and thinking about Anet and Tallus. They were so nice to me. I hope they're okay. He wondered if he would ever see them again. He doubted it; he figured Shrike would never to back to that section of Corellia again. As he lay there feeling more and more sleepy, he thought about how close he had come to freedom. Maybe next time. And I wish I knew my last name.

If he could just learn his last name, he could find his family, or maybe some relatives. Then he could get away and get help from them. Then he would finally find freedom. Next time would be different...

He drifted off to sleep.

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Thirty-three years later...

Han Solo sat in the auditorium, listening to a narrated holo-documentary. He had, at his wife's urging, agreed to attend a three-day conference on abused and homeless children. The war against the Empire had left (and still continued to leave) many children without parents or support, and the newly-established "Children's Foundation" was determined to not let these little lives slip through the cracks of bureaucracy. The founding

members of this new agency had put together an awareness conference, entitled Children in Crisis, to alert the New Republic to ways in which these children could be aided and cared for by the new government.

Leia Organa-Solo, as a prime member of the New Republic, had eagerly looked forward to attending. Luke Skywalker had also taken time out of his schedule to be there. Han, however, did not share their enthusiasm, and had to be coaxed, then threatened, into accompanying them. Leia thought he didn't want to sit through what he probably would consider "boring" lectures and speeches. But the real reason was that he didn't care to be reminded of his youth, at least, not the darker aspects of it. He had come to grips with how he had grown up (at least, he thought he had), but he didn't want to hear of experiences which may dredge up painful memories and emotions. He finally agreed to go with his wife, but listened with only half an ear to the tragic stories and heart-wrenching tales that were presented by the speakers. Han surreptitiously glanced at the printed program and then his wrist chrono; much to his relief he found that the end of the first day's session was near. He was also glad that, while the first day dealt primarily with discussion the problem, the next two days promised to share solutions to the crisis.

He attempted to mentally block out the droning human voice, tried to ignore the trauma that threatened to overcome him. He pushed it firmly back down. I'm fine. That was a long time ago, and Shrike's long dead. In fact, it had been years since he had had any nightmares about what he had gone through as a youth. It was with great relief that Han noted that the current speaker was finishing up and inviting the next person to the lectern. Good, he thought cynically, that guy's done. He could'a just skipped the sob stories and told us, "Life Stinks." That would'a saved an hour right there.

The first day of the conference came to a close amid thundering applause. Han joined in, more happy that it was over than appreciative of the information imparted. Unfortunately, he also had to accompany Leia to the reception afterwards, which was held in a large, ornately decorated ballroom. All of the New Republic's top officials would be there to meet each of the Children's Foundation staff members. Instead of a receiving line, the attendees mingled, which was a nice change from the usual (and constraining) formalities, Han thought. He had politely met several of the CF people, had chatted obligingly, and then moved off as quickly as he reasonably could.

He stood beside the incredibly tall glass and wood doors, leaning against the doorjamb, and looked into the sky, wishing he were in the Falcon. Now that's freedom. In the reflection of the glass, he could see Leia coming up behind him, ready to shepherd him back into the fold. He sighed a deep sigh of resignation, and turned to meet her. She was a few paces from him when a third person stepped between them and took his hand. The newcomer was rather short (although he'd grown to like that in a woman) and he had to look down at her.

The woman spoke first, wearing a warm, genuine smile. "Hello, Captain, I'm happy to see you again." She clasped his hand between hers, holding them much longer than necessary.

Han looked at her closely, taking in the somewhat familiar features, trying to remember where they had met before. Suddenly, the murmur of the crowd seemed to dim, and he forgot that there was anyone else in the room when the puzzle piece slammed into place. Of course! "Anet!" he exclaimed, shocked, eyes wide.

She, like him, had aged thirty-three years since they had last seen one another, and her hair and face showed the years. She had age wrinkles about her eyes, and her formerly dark hair was streaked with generous amounts of silver.

Her smile widened. "You remember me? I hoped you might, Captain." She reached up and touched the right side of his face, as if recalling the place where Shrike had savagely struck him with the blaster. "I remember you, of course. You haven't changed a bit, except you've grown so tall. And maybe a little more handsome."

Han gave her a shy smile, alarmed at the emotions that were welling up in him. "I never thought I'd see you again," he said softly. He covered her hand with his own, gently drawing it away from his face, and then it was his turn to enclose her small hand within his larger ones.

He had a thousand questions he wanted to ask her: What had happened to them that night after Shrike had taken him? Did Shrike hurt them? Was Tallus okay? But there was an unexpected lump in his throat, and he was afraid to say anything else or he knew he'd start crying. Like a little kid.

Leia didn't know what was going on, but could see that it had obviously affected her husband greatly. She decided not to

intrude, but the older woman turned to her and drew her into their tiny group. Anet introduced herself to Leia and suggested they retire to a more private place to talk. Leia, after returning the proper introductions, volunteered the use of their apartment.

Anet agreed, but said she had to pick up something before she left. She gave Han's arm a gentle squeeze before moving off.

Leia looked to Han to say something, but he had turned to face the doors again. Full realization that there was a roomful of people had come to back him, and he certainly didn't want anyone to see the tears in his eyes. Already, a few had noticed that something unusual was happening, they had heard his rather loud exclamation, and seen the emotions run across his face. One of those was Luke, and he caught Leia's eye. He raised an eyebrow and sent the question, Is everything all right? Do you need me to come over? His sister sent back, No, but thanks, Luke. She knew Han would be fine; she didn't know why he was upset, but she knew he was one of the strongest individuals she'd ever met. She said nothing, but she stood beside him and wrapped an arm around his waist. He didn't look at her, but he responded with an arm around her shoulder and a quick hug. He took a deep breath and firmly shoved his swirling emotions back from whence they came. I'm an adult; I will not stand around blubbing like a kid. To prove to himself that he felt much better now that he'd batted away his feelings, he smirked down at Leia and said, "Hey, lady, how'd you like to come back to my place tonight?"

Leia smiled, knowing from experience what he was doing, and pretended to look him up and down. "I don't know," she said, assessing him, "do you think it'd be worth my while?"

A voice piped up from behind them, "I'm sure it would be, Your Highness. I should know; I've seen him in his underwear." The startled (and somewhat embarrassed) couple turned to see Anet.

Anet had returned with the "something" she'd said she had to pick up. It was none other than Tallus. Embarrassment forgotten, Han moved to take Tallus' hand, but the older man drew him into a crushing hug. "Hey, son," Tallus whispered.

The rest of the evening was spent talking. On the way back to the apartment, Anet and Tallus revealed that they had gotten married years ago, shortly after Han's recapture. Tallus explained, "We

got to know each other pretty well after that; we worked together for a long time, trying to find you, trying to track down Shrike. I'm sorry we couldn't."

Han said he understood, and that he wasn't surprised; Shrike had had alias upon alias, for both himself and for his ship. "I want you both to know, it meant a lot," Han said slowly. "That you actually cared. That you went out of your way for me. Even though it didn't turn out so well, still, it meant—" he broke off, unable to continue.

Once at their apartments, Leia got everyone settled in the living room and, discretely giving Han time to talk over the past with his friends, went to check on their sleeping children.

Han opened a bottle of Han's best Corellian brandy. Han offered a toast to his friends, their continued health, and (with a wink) their marriage, for which Han laughingly took credit. "Maybe I should open a match-maker service," he joked, "since I practically fixed you guys up."

At their insistence, Han sat on the couch between Anet and Tallus. Han learned what had happened after he'd been taken away by Shrike; he was relieved to know they hadn't been hurt (although stun headaches were temporarily painful).

Han had the satisfaction of telling them that he had escaped from Shrike years later, and that his former captain was long dead and his operation closed down. He neglected to tell them of the years of abuse and cruelty he had suffered before his escape at nineteen years of age. He didn't want them to feel any guilt over not being able to rescue him, but they knew that there were volumes that he was not telling.

"Han," Anet said, "I have to tell you how proud I am of the way you turned out. I just wish...well, I wish we could have—"

"I know," Han said quietly.

They had searched for Han for years, and from that had sprung the Children's Foundation. They were its founding members, they told him, and they had dedicated their lives to trying to make sure other children didn't have to go through what he had to. "It's an uphill struggle, though," Anet said sadly. Then, brightening, she continued, "But a about ten years back, I was extremely happy to see a holo of a certain young man on the Imperial HoloNet. A

certain pilot who was wanted for aiding the Rebellion on numerous occasions. They listed your name as 'Han Solo' and gave all the crimes you supposedly committed against the Empire. I recognized you immediately. That was the happiest, well," (with a glance at her husband) "one of the happiest days of my life. That was the day I realized you were still alive, and that you had become exactly what you wanted to be."

"A pilot?" Han suggested.

"No." She smiled again before answering. "Free."

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Epilog:

Two weeks later, the receptionist at the Children's Foundation, was sorting through a mound of mail. Junk mail was deleted; correspondence was placed in the "To Do" desktop folder. One unusual letter caught her eye. She tapped the screen to open the document, and was shocked to see that it contained an access code for a bank account worth a few million credits. Under the access code was a short handwritten message. She downloaded a copy onto her datapad, lurched to her feet and walked quickly, almost running, down the hall to the Director's office. The door slid open at her approach, and she thrust the datapad at Anet.

"Look! It's from an anonymous donor; it's worth millions!" the shocked, but pleased, receptionist blurted.

Anet gazed appreciatively at the amount, envisioning what it could do for the foundation. Then, with a start, she realized the donor wasn't so anonymous after all: the handwritten message read, "Thanks for all you did." She smiled, and when the receptionist had left, picked up from the corner of her desk a framed holo of a young boy with sad eyes. Anet still had that holo Shrike had left all those years ago.

She contemplated the holo, still wishing that somehow, some way, she could have spared him from the pain of his childhood. "Clear skies, Captain Solo," she murmured.

End

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