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Fuzzy Cargo
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"Back already?" Han asked between yawns. He had been waiting in the Falcon for the better part of the night, dozing on and off since his annoying friend, Herlivon Xalnodest had gone out to Badrudden port to scare up something that'd qualify as a paying job. Xal was without a ship for a month now, since a group of green pigs he had been ferrying to Mos Eisley got drunk in transit and messed up his already battered vehicle. Han thought it was fair that if they shared the Falcon, Herlivon pulled his weight and tried to find work for them. If he tried at all and didn't spend the entire time trying to drink the taverns dry. Han had his suspicions, even if he was too sleepy to sound really irritated when he asked: "Did you get any work?"

"Sure. Here's our cargo," came the cheerful reply.

Han surveyed the package --- it looked right back at him. A small bundle of fur, blankets, an impossibly yellow mop that could have been hair or a strange hat, and a pair of green eyes with slitted pupils. From among the wrapping, a soft, inquiring sound issued, a cross between a meow and a whimper.

Han growled. "What are you getting me into, Herlivon?"

Herlivon Xalnodest didn't get intimidated by Han's threatening eyebrows. "This is a paying job. Considering how broke we are, I thought you'd be grateful for a chance to make four thousand."

Han nearly fall off the chair. "Four thousand?"

"Yep, it pays four thousand." Xal sat down, hugging the package. "I don't know what or who this is, save that it's a baby something."

"Who's paying?"

Xal grinned, his grey-green eyes lighting up. "Who's paid? Past tense. Up front. You should have seen the client. Tall, black, masked, helmeted, with a long black cape, breathing like this...huuuh...haaah..."

"Xal, you half-wit, you just described Darth Vader."

Xal stroked the yellow fuzz on the baby's head. "You know, now that you say so, he really looked like Darth Vader."

"Herlivon, just how drunk are you?"

"Very," came the answer, rather sheepishly. "But I didn't drop the baby, not even once. And I remember exactly where to bring it. Kalathan port, the Inn of the Green Gundark. He's going to wait for it there."

"Who?" Han was wide awake and very uneasy.

"He, who, the client, you know, huuuh, haaah, that you said is Darth Vader."

Han felt like banging his drunken friend right on the top of his curly red head. "Xal, why would anyone, let alone Darth Vader, pay you, a far-from-sober space bum, four thousand credits to deliver a baby to him, a baby that he had in his hands to begin with????"

"First of all," Xal said, sounding slightly insulted, "Drunk or sober, I'm trustworthy. Even Darth Vader should know that."

"Trustworthy!" Han gasped. "Who lost a whole dozen Urukkan pilgrims on Kashyyyk?"

"That wasn't my fault. The vorgars ate them. Besides, they didn't pay up front. I lost the money, too. And you are being difficult. Obviously, a high-ranking officer like Vader can't travel with a fuzzy baby on his own starship, you know, he has one of those pies, the Emasculator, or the Avenger, that's it. Or

Depilator. So, he needs someone to babysit the thing. Can you imagine how he'd look with this thing in his arms, when he marches in front of a squadron of troopers, huuuh, haaah. And the baby goes, meow. Huuuh, haaah, meow, huuuh, haaah."

"Xal, you hoot one more time, I clobber you, so help me God. I don't believe one word of this. Where did you pick up the baby? And show me the four thousand!"

Herlivon dug into the pocket of his gray longcoat and produced a creditcube. "Here."

It was four thousand, in cold cash. Han mellowed, looking at the cube fondly. "Five hundred to the port authority and I can get my landing permit back. It'll be nice to be legal for a change." he said. "Listen. I still don't believe one word of this, but for all I care, we can go to Kalathan port, and see who's waiting for this...really, what is this, and what does it eat?"

Xal went fishing into his pockets again. "It came with instructions." He brought forth a folded paper. Han couldn't remember when he had last seen anything handwritten on paper. It was an elegant script, large, flowing letters.

Do not show him to anyone. Provide him with a litter box. Feed him with milk and protein from your synth. He is healthy. He should sleep most of the time. Guard him with your life. If unexpected events interfere with the delivery, take care of him and wait for instructions. I will find you. Fail me and your death will be very slow and extremely painful.

Han made a face. "Perhaps it WAS Darth Vader. Now, do we have a litter box? Is this an animal?"

"Well, I guess we might as well unwrap it," Xal suggested. Han put the bundle on the holochess table and proceeded to peel off the layers of fur and blankets. The baby kept staring at him. When all the packaging was gone, Han saw a fuzzily furred body, a long, lush tail, nails that resembled claws, but otherwise everything was as human as it could be. Han leaned closer. "Do you understand me?"

A soft little paw reached out and grabbed Han's nose, then his ear, poked at his eyes and tried to get into his mouth. "Strange," Han mused, separating himself from the curious baby.

"Never seen a species like this. Xal, go check the computer, see if something is in there about very yellow, long-tailed creatures. Feed it. I'll go pay the port fee and get a litter box."

"Yes, Captain," Xal picked up the baby and put it inside his coat. It nestled in there and made contented noises. "He likes me," Xal said. "Maybe he's Vader's son from the wrong side of the blanket, and he's hiding him from his wife."

"Don't bother to come up with a more idiotic explanation, Herlivon, you have already surpassed yourself."

Xal just laughed. "Ok, Solo, YOU tell me what's going on."

Han shrugged. "I think this is an exotic creature and Vader is giving him to some regional governor as a present."

"In that case, it would be in a gilded cage on Vader's ship."

"You have a point here." Han pocketed the creditcube and walked out, turning back to say: "I still think we are going to be in a lot of trouble, and soon."

It took Han less than an hour to pay the fee and get a sandbox. As he was walking back to the Falcon, two armored green men stopped him.

"Hey, Corelli. Seen you man into gray coat of red hair and him to a fur baby carry?"

Han nodded. "Yeah, just now, in the Port Authority's office. He should be still there, he was way behind me in the line waiting for his permit."

The men left in a hurry. Han grinned and went to his ship. He found Xal sleeping on the couch, the baby still inside his coat. "Wake up, Herlivon, we are taking off. "

Xal yawned. "You got the litter box?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I just wanted you to know that it's too late. Fuzzy here already honored me. You take him, I go to the sani and clean up."

Han had never tried to lift off with a curious furry creature crawling all over him, pawing his face and pulling his hair. The baby hung upside down on him, the bushy tail tickling Han's nose. For a baby, he was incredibly agile, sliding up and down on Han, rolling on the floor curled into a yellow furball.

"Endearing little kid, huh? " Xal said, coming out of the sani. "He ate two bowls of fake meat, you know. Carnivore. His mouth is full of sharp little teeth."

Han picked up the baby and studied him. "Found anything in the computer?"

"About him? Yes. He's a Morlan. A genetically engineered race, a cross between some feline Rimworlders and something else that was classified top secret with four marks. A small colony of them settled on Badrudden some two hundred years ago. Now they are slated to be exterminated to the last. The Badrudden fanatics swear that the presence of the Morlan colony angered the Gods, who caused seven years of drought, and will send rain only when the last Morlan had been killed. The latest netnews said they pretty much accomplished this noble goal. The Empire sent a detachment to evacuate the Morlans, but they came too late. You know, like when they sent the pardon for the nine Corellian chieftains, delicately timed to arrive two hours after the hanging. So how does this explain Vader and Fuzzy here?"

"Just as I said, this baby might be the last of his race and Vader wants to have him, but perhaps he doesn't want to antagonize the good Badruddens." Han was in his element, he loved to see the reality behind netnews and official announcements. "Apparently, as you said, there was a fine gesture made toward the really softhearted people like the good Alderaani by sending troops, but not too early, so the Badruddens could finish the job. They'd be royally upset if the Empire interfered with their righteous genocide."

"Neatly put, Solo." Xal grinned, stroking the baby's yellow fur. "Sinfully cute. He'll lose most of his body fur when he grows up. The adults have this kind of yellow fur only on the head, and the tail. Han, do you think his parents have been killed? "

"There's a good chance of that. But this should be the least of his troubles. I bet Vader plans to put him in a cage." Han said. "Hey, I wanted to tell you that I run into two locals who asked if I've seen you carrying a baby."

"What? Who'd know?"

"Have you been followed or something?"

"Perhaps. I didn't check. Now that you say, I think someone stared at me in the tavern where I got this really good deal on four gourds of Kessel spice brandy. Say, the Kalathans, do they have the same religion as the Badruddens?"

"I couldn't care less, Xal."

"I'm only asking because it'd be good to know whether they'd want to kill Fuzzy there, too. It's the same system. And they have the same drought. I think it's caused by something weird in their sun."

Han looked at the purring little creature and sighed. "Fuzzy is going to get us into a great lot of trouble."

"That's what we are best at, handling trouble. I kinda think we shouldn't let them get him. He's really nice. You hear, Fuzzy, Uncle Xalnodest is getting very fond of you, " Xal nuzzled the baby, nose to nose. "Han, if Vader wants to put him in a cage, I'm not going to give him over."

"Herlivon, do you want Darth Vader as a personal enemy?"

Xal seemed to consider the consequences. "Do you think I want to wake up one day, years from now, wondering if Fuzzy is still sitting in a cage? Growing up on display? Alone? It's worse than being killed by the Badrudden mob."

Han sighed again. He sighed fairly often in the company of Xal. "You know, the Galaxy is full of people suffering one kind of injustice or another, it's still better to agonize over their fate than to become one of them. I wouldn't try to antagonize Darth Vader, if that's who the client is."

"We'll see in Kalathan port, what's going on and play it by ear."

Han thought this was almost a promise that Xal will be reasonable, and with this comforting idea, he went to the synth and started to dial up stew and ale. The baby promptly climbed up the counter and went elbow-deep into the bowl, stuffing fistfuls of stew into Han's mouth. Han didn't know if he was supposed to scold him or praise him. He settled for a scowl that didn't look very convincing.

Less than six hours of sublight travel later, the Falcon approached Kalathan port. Flying low over the city, Han noticed that the streets were crowded with people carrying banners and flags.

"Some holiday," Xal shrugged. The baby, perched on his shoulder blinked sleepily at Han.

In the bay, Han shut off the engine and polished his boots with a greasy rag. "I think I better look around before we get outside with Fuzzy. I don't like this whole setup."

"I'll wait," Xal said, surprisingly agreeable.

"I take it, you don't like the looks of this either," Han grimaced.

"Well, you said two men were asking after me. When they realized you lied to them, they probably decided to follow us, or at least find out our destination."

"How do you know I lied to them?"

"Han, I didn't teach you to lie for nothing. You're very near surpassing me by now," Xal grinned happily. "See, Fuzzy, you are in good hands. Sweet Mother of Corell, Han, I wish we could keep him."

"Sure. With my lifestyle, and your boozing and spice-eating, it's an ideal setting for a baby. I train him to duck blaster shots, you teach him the basics of smuggling and gambling. In a year or two, he's going to play sabacc with the best of them."

Han strapped on his blaster. "I'll go take a look, you cuddle him for a while and that's the end of it."

Han didn't get farther than the bay doors when he spotted about a dozen green men in crude uniforms. Behind them, a sizable mob of people waited, some carrying banners with catchy slogans urging the faithful to kill as many Morlans as they can. Han turned back before they noticed him.

"Herlivon, we are in trouble. We can't leave with Fuzzy. There are people out there ready to eat him."

Xal got up and took a long drink from one of his many gourds of Kessel brandy that he carried in his coat pockets. "You have a plan?"

"I guess we could split up. I'll wear your coat and carry a bundle, you take my jacket and put Fuzzy in a crate. I'll leave with as much show as I can make, let them chase me for a while, and when I'm good and ready, I'll let them catch me, then they'll see I don't have the baby and let me go. Like what we did on Bizua. It worked then, it'll work again."

"They might rough you up some, you know."

"I hope to hell they won't have a chance. In the meantime, you can get to that inn and see what gives."

Xal spent a long time making a comfortable nest for the baby in a crate, then complained about Han's jacket sleeves being too short. Han made a creditable bundle out of the blankets and furs, put on Xal's trademark longcoat and covered his head with a red bandanna. Xal couldn't stop laughing at him.

"Curb the merriment, pal," Han said. "We might end up in need of a medic after this. Just take care of Fuzzy and get back in one piece."

"Sorry, it's just that you're not the type that looks good with a kerchief. But I see the point, you're as close to a redhead in a gray coat as you'll ever get."

Han grabbed the bundle and marched out. "Wait a few minutes before you get out, " he called back, "Let me lead them away from here."

As soon as Han was out in the bay, the mob came alive and began to chase him. Han ran up a long ladder and around a gallery, down on the other side. He was faster than the mob, as they couldn't really maneuver in the narrow walkways, it wasn't too difficult to keep ahead of them. A few stones landed near him, but no shots were fired. He was about two floors above the Falcon when he saw Xal leaving with a crate. Nobody was around the ship at all and Xal wasn't followed. Han grinned at the predictable success of his old tricks and kept running. Something stopped him. The walkway ended. He was trapped.

"Give up the baby, Morlan lover!" someone yelled at him.

"What baby?" Han asked.

"Put it down!"

Han raised his arms and let the bundle drop. Blankets and furs fall on the floor.

"Damn it," a woman said. "We got the wrong man."

Han looked at her with all the sympathy he could put on his face. "You were after someone who had a Morlan baby?"

"Yes, we were told to look for a man in a gray coat," she replied. "I am Perystir Wigndale, chairbeing of the Righteous Gundarks of Kalathan. Our brothers from Badrudden advised us that someone spirited away a Morlan. They saw a redheaded standard human male in a gray longcoat carrying a Morlan baby."

Han shook his head and tsked. "Some people has no sense of decency. What kind of depraved man would even think of saving a baby....when the good people of this system clearly declared that only by terminating the Morlan can the drought end. Outrageous."

"Indeed," Perystir Wigndale nodded solemnly. "How many men in gray coats can there be?"

"Lots," Han said. "Gray longcoats are the latest rage on the Core worlds. Both practical and attractive. I bought mine for a mere fifty credits. Of course it's not real nerf wool. Those are near a thousand. Honestly, I don't think they're worth that much. Synthwool is just as good, and even more durable. Why, my uncle

Darbil had a synthwool legwarmer and he used it for more than seven years. He was always cold, the poor devil."

He was ready to elaborate on the value of synthwool for a good hour, and Perystir Wigndale looked ready to listen, but her followers weren't half as interested. They marched away, singing. It was a merry song about spilling Morlan blood for a better future. Han thought he haven't heard such a spirited hymn since he was a cadet at the Imperial Academy where the cadets had to start every day with a lively song to praise the Emperor.

As he followed the crowd down the ladders, he stopped one of the stragglers and asked directions to the Inn of the Green Gundark. He was dismayed to learn that it took more than an hour to get there with a landspeeder.

He wondered if Xal had enough brains to rent one. At the portside rental, he paid for a day's rent and got a rickety contraption that reminded him of the beaten speeder of a certain Tatooine farmer he used to buy water from. He was worried about Xal and the baby. He didn't want to think about what Vader would want with a baby Morlan, he didn't want to think about whether the baby's parents were killed. He didn't want to think about what'd happen to Xal and the kid if the fanatics find them. He was hoping to run into Xal on the way. Halfway there, he noticed a dilapidated building advertising Kessel Spice brandy, that was, apparently, not illegal on Kalathan. He stopped the speeder and went in. He was not disappointed.

Xal was there, sitting in a booth, his long legs casually crossed, the crate on the floor beside him. He was holding a fat gourd of Kesselian design. Han thought he had not seen him quite this drunk before.

"What do you think you're doing, you bastard?" Han growled.

"I'm thinking. Han, I can't just give the kid to Vader. I can't. I have to know, what'll happen to him. Han, you stay here and watch Fuzzy, and I'm going to see Vader and ask him."

"Herlivon, for the blood of Corell, how long do you want to keep him in that crate?"

"He's ok. He's not afraid. He knows we are taking care of him."

"Oh, he told you, huh?"

"Han, he's..." Xal grabbed Han's collar and pulled him closer to whisper into his ear. "He's one of those. You know. That's why the Empire let them be killed. That's what's classified about them. He thinks in my head."

"Xal, you are drunk."

"Sure, but just sit here and he'll think in your head, too. Let me go. I'll go see Vader. Give me back my coat. Hey, you don't even look bruised. They didn't beat you? "

"No, as far as murderous mobs go, this was the nicest I've ever seen. I was lucky. But that doesn't mean you'll be lucky with Vader. Listen, can I talk you out of this?" Han inquired, throwing the coat at him.

"No."

"I know how you get when you get this way. Damn. You want to walk up to a Sith Lord and ask him if he's going to be nice to a baby, or you're not going to give it to him? You took the money, you had a contract. If not that, then an ounce of common sense..." Han sighed, sinking into a seat. "You don't have an ounce of common sense. I could use an ale. Listen, you're not sober enough to drive a speeder."

"Watch me," Xal said with a reassuring smile. He rose, tall and graceful, struggled into his beloved coat, turned to go and promptly stumbled over Han's outstretched legs.

"I'm watching," Han grinned.

"Ok, so you tripped me."

"I did not!"

"You did so!"

"I didn't."

"You did. I'm going. See you. I'll come back to let you know what I decided."

"Xal, if you are not back in two hours, I'll go after ya."

"Yes, mother. You don't trust me?"

"The blue hells I trust you. I can feel myself sinking deeper into trouble even as we speak," Han grumbled. "Let me drive you. I'll drop you off just near that inn and you can go from there."

"I don't need a nurse," Xal said with deep indignation, and turned to leave, only to bump into a stool. With all his outraged momentum he knocked the stool over, managing to trip himself with it. He ended up face down across a low table.

"You could have a lucrative career as a tablecloth, Herlivon," Han remarked with glee. "I think the debate is over. I'm driving you. "

Xal blinked up at him. Shamefaced, he got to his feet. "You won, Solo. Put Fuzzy on the back seat."

The Inn of the Green Gundark was a solitary building past Kalathan city limits, the kind of elegant establishment where they don't let Corelli in through the front door.

"Snazzy." Xal remarked.

"Very snazzy. Like the ivy?"

Xal got out of the speeder and grinned at Han. "Wish me luck."

"A heap of Corelli luck to you, pal. Have a nice suicide."

"Ah, stop looking so worried. If he goes huuuh, haaah at me, I'll hoot right back at him."

"That'd help, " Han said. "He'd drop dead right there from the spice brandy on your breath."

Xal ignored the insult. "And don't even think of coming after me with blaster blazing. Sit tight and guard Fuzzy. "

Han didn't answer.

Xal disappeared behind the masterfully trimmed shrubbery.

Han waited for a whole hour, restlessly patting the crate. Occasionally a soft, plaintive meow answered him. Finally the sound of agitated scratching came from the crate. "What is it? You have to go?" Han thought the baby was probably thirsty, hungry or in need of a litter box. "All right, I'll drive you behind those trees and you can get out. I know it's not good to be in a crate, kid. I've spent time in a crate before, wasn't much fun."

For the entire hour not a single soul appeared and Han felt it was safe to give a bit of fresh air to the baby. He stopped the speeder, and walked a way into the woods before opening the crate. The baby peered at him with huge green eyes, then jumped up and gave Han a sound kiss. Han hugged him impulsively, something he had never thought he'd do. This was the first time in his entire life that a baby kissed him. He wondered briefly if Corellians living in clans get kissed regularly by children. It was a strangely touching experience. "Have you done this to Xal, Fuzzy? That's why he wants to keep you?"

He looked for a place to put the baby down. "See, it's a nice sandy spot, you can pee here."

The baby scrambled down and went on all fours, his tail waving like a bright yellow flag. Han thought he could use the time to take care of his own business behind a tree.

When he returned, all he could see was a flash of yellow among the bushes. "What the! Come back here!" Han yelled. He wasn't worried, after all, how fast can a baby travel on all fours. He was wrong about it. Apparently, Morlan babies were just as fast as the felines they resembled. Whatever way were Morlans genetically engineered, their development was definitely not like the average human's. Han found himself chasing a yellow streak of lightning.

The baby galloped across the road, heading straight toward the Inn of the Green Gundark. Han thought he'd be better off dead than to face Xal with the news of losing Fuzzy. Then again, perhaps Xal was already dead, if the client was really the fearsome Sith Lord and Xal managed to anger him. But beyond all that, he was terrified for the baby who was now climbing up the ivy-covered side of the building like a regular treecat. Han tried to follow him and found that the ivy couldn't support his weight. He fell back heavily, tried again, this time carefully

choosing the thicker vines. The baby looked down at him and made little noises that sounded encouraging, then scrambled higher, apparently in no danger of falling. Han reached the second floor window and looked inside. He saw an empty bedroom. So far, there wasn't a single soul in sight.

"Fuzzy, please," Han whispered. "Come back down."

The baby gave him a wide smile and went higher. Han was at the third floor. He still didn't see a soul in any of the rooms he peeked in. He began to wonder if there was anyone in the whole building. He risked a glance at the road and his blood ran cold. A tidal wave of people approached with the flags and banners he had seen before. The baby was a bright and very visible yellow presence against the dark green of the ivy. There was no way the mob could miss him if they get any closer. Han wondered what could he do to stop some two thousand Kalathaners from coming this way. Trusting his luck, he decided to climb down and meet them with some kind of a story. Just when he started down, a window opened on the fourth floor and Han saw the baby dive inside. Han changed his mind and climbed higher, going through the same window, not quite knowing what to expect.

There was a woman in the room, robed and veiled, holding the baby in her arms, laughing and crying at the same time. The baby held onto her for his dear life, purring loud enough to wake the dead.

"You're his mother?" Han gasped.

"Yes. Are you the Corellian who was hired to bring him?" she asked.

"Sort of," Han said. "Would you mind telling me, what's going on? There's a large crowd of people outside bent on killing Morlans."

"I know," she nodded. "They've killed everybody on Badrudden."

"Someone tipped them off here, they know about your baby."

"It'll be all right. The Lord Vader promised to protect us."

"Why?" Han couldn't imagine a single reason.

"My husband swore an oath to serve and guard him as long as he lives, if he saved us. Even the Lord Vader needs an aide he could trust blindly. He has many enemies. He'll take me and the baby to his private estate. It'll be a lifetime of servitude for my husband, and I perhaps won't see him very often, but we'd do anything for the safety of Lauranthalas."

It took a moment for Han to register that he had just learned the name of the baby. Lauranthalas, he grinned, a great deal more dignified than Fuzzy. But he still had a million questions. "Lady, I don't mean anything by this, but I've yet to see anyone in Imperial service with a tail."

"My husband is willing to make any sacrifice," she answered proudly. "Vader sent him to a surgeon. He will be altered to pass as a standard human. He has...certain abilities that the Lord Vader values greatly."

Han didn't say that he had a fair guess about what abilities a Morlan had to make him valuable to an ex-Jedi turned Dark Lord. He looked at the baby, so happy and content in his mother's arms, and felt a twinge of pain knowing he'll never see them again. "He's a fine kid," he said casually.

"I must go and tell the Lord Vader you have arrived," she said. "I'm very grateful to you. You proved yourself to be as trustworthy as the Lord Vader thought."

Han had to ask. "Why didn't Vader let you carry the baby?"

"He kept me at his side, I'm posing as his mistress for now. Veiled as I am, no one would guess I'm a Morlan. But there was no way to conceal Lauranthalas. You better wait here, if there's a mob outside."

She turned to leave, and the baby climbed over her shoulder, looking at Han with huge green eyes.

Damn, Han thought, why do I care.

Once alone in the room, he looked out the window. The mob was coming closer, marching on the road. Han hoped they might just walk past the inn. A good while later, he was quite sure that the chanting sounded a lot louder than before.

"Kill the Morlan! Kill the Morlan! Holy, Holy, Holy is our God the Rainbringer!"

Han looked out again: they were gathering right in front of the building. He was wondering if the same woman he had run into was leading them. The breath caught in his throat. The man leading the mob was Herlivon Xalnodest, fists raised, looking for all the world like a madman bent on murder, his long coat flapping in the wind.

Han heard him yelling.

"I know the Morlan baby is here! Give him to us! The Gods must be satisfied!"

What is the twisted son of a hwimat up to, Han asked himself. He had to go down. He was out of the room in a flash, down the stairs and out in front. He figured he might as well join the crowd. He got behind Xal, and screamed into his ear.

"Blessed are the true believers! Let me kill the Morlan!"

Xal turned and stared at him. "Welcome into the fold, brother. You have seen the light!"

"I have seen the light!" Han answered, trying to read Xal's expression and got nowhere. That was the trouble with Xal, when he was lying, he looked more earnest than when he was telling the truth.

Xal gave him a bear hug. "Holy is the Rainbringer!" he screamed. "Yet another one had seen the light!"

Some of the more enthusiastic Kalathaners began to bang on the front door of the inn, others threw stones at the windows. Shards of glass fall down, forcing them to retreat a little. Someone started to shoot at the building, and two of the green men in uniform worked on assembling a short range missile launcher. Xal went to them and urged them to work faster, then he joined the man who was shooting at the windows, helping out with his own blaster.

Han stood there, amazed. Xal's aim was usually good, even when he was drunk. Now he was methodically shattering the windows of the second floor.

Just as he managed to blast the large french doors leading to the balcony, a huge, black shape stepped through them. Mask and cape, it was Darth Vader. In his right hand, he was holding a small, yellow and very motionless body by the tail.

"Here is the Morlan baby," he announced calmly. "My troops found him hidden in a crate by the roadside, in a rented speeder."

"Give him to us, so that we may kill him!" the crowd roared.

Vader raised the little body higher. "He's already dead."

The mob wasn't placated. "Throw him down, Lord!" they demanded.

Vader came closer to the railing. Han thought he'll actually drop the baby, when the wind started to roar across the trees and the sky darkened. Black clouds raced overhead. Han saw lightning flash, heard thunder.

Xal gave a yell that was louder than that. "The last Morlan is dead! The rains are coming!"

Vader threw the little fuzzy body back into the room and glanced up at the sky. Lightning reflected from his mask. Han thought he looked like one of the minions of Sohol from the old legends. One of the gauntleted hands moved, just barely.

The rain started to fall in sheets. Han had never seen rain like that. It was a pounding, brutal deluge, sending the Kalathaners running for cover. A servant opened the doors of the inn and invited them inside. Xal grabbed Han's arm and dragged him in.

The Kalathaners were dancing from joy. One of them started to sing the system's anthem, or something Han thought was the system's anthem.

He pulled Xal aside. "He didn't..."

"I guess he did," Xal grinned.

"Vader killed Fuzzy and you're grinning?"

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know what you were asking. I thought you wanted to know if Vader made rain. He used to be a Jedi, you know. A master. He said he will make rain if necessary. It'll rain for about two hours and then...more drought. Even a Dark Lord can't keep it up longer. Takes a lot out of him, you know."

"But the kid, Xal..."

"He's all right. His mama said it's ok to hold him by the tail. She could even make him go limp, it's like a game to him. Vader had this all planned. We agreed that I'll lead the crowd here, and he comes out when I shoot at the french doors. You rushed the scenario a bit when you brought Fuzzy in." Xal winked. "She told you about the deal, huh? A really fine woman. Fuzzy has a good mama."

"So you spent all this time talking to Vader."

"Yeah, and you know what, for an agent of unspeakable evil, he's an ok guy. We had a nice chat. "

"What about?"

Xal's grin widened. "My belt buckle."

Han stared at the item in question, the fine steel piece of Huttese art depicting a Gamorrhean and a human in a rather compromising position. "Darth Vader and you talked a whole hour about your belt buckle?"

"Yeah. I guess that for a cyborg, talking about it is about the closest he can get to having a love life. See, he wanted to know if I actually, you know, uh, dated a green pig."

"Have you?"

"Oh, so you want to know it, too, " Xal laughed. "Now let's get the hell out of here, unless you want to dance with Perystir Wigndale. She's here, you know, and she can't stop talking about a handsome Corellian guy she had seen in the port, I guess it was you. Lively woman, Han, I bet she'll show you a good time."

"I take a raincheck." Han said.

"See, this is why you don't have experiences worth talking about. Don't you want to be able to tell you've spent quality

time in the arms of the leader of the Righteous Gundarks of Kalathan?"

"Not really, Xal. Let's go. I left the speeder in the woods, with any luck, it's still there. Say, have you actually, I mean, have you really... with a Gamorrean?"

Xal grinned and slapped Han on the back. "Come on, let's celebrate. This was a very good day. Besides, we better get off this planet before the rain stops. Vader sure will. He has a shuttle here. Hey, why did you bring the kid in the inn anyway?"

"I didn't. He ran away from me, climbed up the ivy and found his mama."

"Must've felt her presence. Climbed up the ivy? Son of a... Han, you ever thought about having kids of your own?"

"I don't know if you've noticed, Xal, but I'm not very likely to get pregnant. And I'm not the kind who goes and gets bonded."

"Should I? I'd really like to have a kid."

"Xal, would you trust your own flesh and blood to a woman crazy enough to bond with a guy like you? Or me, for that matter?"

"You are a cynical man, Solo. But that was a good one. I guess you do have a point. Come, let's get out of here."

The rain was still pouring like it'd never stop. The speeder was there where Han left it, filled to the rim with rainwater.

"This is a first," Han growled. "Taking a bath and a shower while driving."

"Stop complaining. You'd give your right arm to have this on Tatooine. Enjoy."

Odd, Han grinned, I actually do. Through the curtain of rain, the muffled noise of a departing shuttle came to him. For a

moment, he thought he felt something like a very sweet, very childish bye-bye right inside his head.

End

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