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Incident on Ord Mantell

by [T.S. Weddell](#)

It was over as quickly as it began. Before the stray currents of the afternoon breeze had dissipated the last of the blaster-smoke, a man lay dead in the street, his blood seeping slowly out onto the fusion-formed soil of Ord Mantell.

It was Alliance business that had brought Han Solo to the tiny outpost planet, serving as pilot, escort and bodyguard to Princess Leia Organa, who was there to conclude a deal with a wealthy Coreworld businessman who had expressed an interest in becoming an anonymous donor to the Rebel cause. Solo was aware that there had originally been a certain hesitancy on the part of the Alliance top brass about appointing him to the mission, since Luke, who was too busy with the Hoth base construction to be spared, would not be able to accompany them. Han couldn't really blame them; without young Skywalker around to chaperone and provide a foil for him, Han's provocative manner toward the Princess could well take on a different, less innocent light. So, partly to avoid any problems and partly to prove that he could act like a gentleman if he set his mind to it, Han had privately resolved to be on his best and most decorous behavior for the duration of the trip. Strangely enough, his decision was not to be without consequences of its own, for all the teasing, the irreverent mangling of Leia's title, the double entendres--and her haughty reaction to them--had served as an unconscious device to keep a safe and reassuring emotional distance between the two of them. When each, as Chewbacca had put it, 'cut the crap,' and dropped their respective acts, they found each other a pleasant surprise.

In fact, by trip's end, Solo and Leia had become so at ease with one another that an impartial observer might have mistaken the two of them for a courting couple as they strolled leisurely back to the Falcon, laughing and talking, with their huge Wookiee duenna in tow.

But it was a very different kind of observer who stalked them now, congratulating himself on his luck in being the first to spot such a rich prize. He had first seen and recognized his quarry as the trio had left the tiny cantina where their private meeting had just concluded, confirming the identification by a careful comparison with a flyer he had stashed in his breast pocket. He had been trailing them ever since, biding his time and choosing his moment carefully.

The opportunity finally came when the Wookiee stepped out of the way briefly, leaving him with a clear shot at the two humans. He drew his blaster, holding it out stiffly in front of him with a two-handed grip made unsteady by excitement.

'Solo!'

Han whirled at the sound of his name, absorbing in a frozen millisecond the pointed blaster and the menacing figure behind. Ordinarily, he would never have considered drawing against a man who already had the drop on him, preferring in that sort of situation to use his wits instead, but a growing feeling of protectiveness toward Leia had made him hypersensitive to danger. His hand instinctively dropped toward his holster before his conscious will could override the gesture.

The gunman, made nervous by warnings of Solo's skill with a blaster, reacted with panic when he saw him begin to go for his weapon. He closed his fingers on the trigger of his blaster and fired.

The bright energy bolt tore between Han and Leia, who were standing almost shoulder to shoulder, barely missing the Princess and leaving a deep burn across Solo's upper arm. In one lightning-fast, seamless motion, Han drew his blaster and returned the fire. His shot was on target, taking the stranger squarely through the chest.

For a moment the three Rebels stood frozen, staring at the crumpled form lying in the street. Then, ignoring the pain in his arm, Solo turned to the Princess.

"Are you all right?" he demanded. She nodded wordlessly, somewhat pale but otherwise unhurt.

"Who was that?" she asked shakily. Chewbacca had rushed over and was adding his hooted questions to hers.

"I don't know," Han said. "I barely got a chance to look at his face." He cast his eye quickly up and down the street. The other people in the vicinity, obviously used to such violent confrontations, were watching curiously but keeping their distance. "Stay here and keep an eye out. I'm gonna go take a look at him."

The man was lying face down on the pavement. Solo approached cautiously, but as he neared the body, he saw it had the unmistakable limp, flabby look of death about it. Slowly, he rolled the corpse over for a look at the face, swallowing hard and ignoring his revulsion at the wide smoking hole in the chest.

"Sweet gods!" Han whispered. "He's just a kid!" From the look of him, the boy couldn't even have been as old as Luke. Han was certain that he had never set eyes on him before. 'Now why would he wanna ... ?'

He began to search through the dead youth's pockets for identification, instead finding the tattered piece of paper. He unfolded it anxiously, then grimaced as if with sudden pain. The paper was a bounty flyer, consisting of a slightly blurry photo of himself and a brief description of his habits, listing the interested party as one Jabba the Hutt, of Tatooine. For the return of Han Solo dead, a hefty sum was offered; for his return alive, the reward was tripled.

From their vantage point down the street, Chewie and Leia merely saw Han read the paper, become stricken and hastily stuff it into his vest. He remained kneeling over the body as if in shock, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings. A commotion some distance down the street was signalling the imminent arrival of the authorities. Leia and Chewie exchanged a quick, nervous glance and hurried to warn Solo.

'He didn't even mean to kill me; I was worth too much to him alive,' Han muttered numbly. 'Stupid kid just panicked and blew it ... just a damn, stupid kid!'

He became dimly aware of Chewbacca tugging at his shoulder and growling something about stormtroopers, but he was too shaken by the shooting and the even more chilling implications of a bounty flyer for it to register. Finally, as if losing patience, the Wookiee howled a Kaszhykian obscenity, and Han felt himself being hauled roughly to his feet. A glimpse of familiar-looking white helmets brought him to his senses and rekindled instincts of self-preservation. Grabbing Leia's hand, he was off and running.

They managed to lose the 'troopers in the city's complicated maze of streets and alleyways; nevertheless, they took off immediately upon reaching the Falcon. Leia kept still until they had reached the safety of hyperspace, but as Han re-entered the main cabin she was on him like a mynock on a power cable.

"What was on that paper?" she demanded. 'You looked like you'd seen a ghost.'

Han shook his head tiredly and waved her off. "Not now, Leia. I don't want to talk about it.'

Ignoring an uncharacteristic hunch of his shoulders, she persisted. 'Who was he, and why did he try to kill you?'

"Leave it alone, Leia. It doesn't concern you."

"Doesn't concern me? Listen, flyboy, that shot came with centimeters of taking my head off, and that makes it my business!"

It was the very worst thing she could have said. He was already feeling guilty enough about that as it was. Han's overburdened emotions exploded into anger.

"What the hell makes you think you've got the right?" he shouted, turning on her with fury that shocked her with its intensity, "Let's get this straight, Princess; you don't own me and you never will! Now leave me alone!"

He stalked angrily from the room, leaving her staring after him in stunned silence. Despite of their occasional mild sparring, Leia had always seen Han as basically unperturbable, was fooled by his air of good-natured detachment. In the past few days, she had learned that he had a serious side, too, discovering a hitherto unsuspected gentleness and sensitivity in him. Treading upon their new intimacy, she had pushed too far, and she had been totally unprepared for the violence of his reaction.

Chewbacca came over and laid his immense hands briefly on her shoulders. Rumbling something in a reassuring tone, he headed aft in the wake of his partner.

Han stormed into the large main cargo hold and flung himself down on a handy crate. He barely noticed the throbbing in his arm; at the moment, the wound was the least of his troubles. "Solo, you stupid ass!" he muttered angrily. "You and your goddamn temper. Stupid. Stupid!" He leaned his head back against the bulkhead and mumbled a steady stream of profanity.

The door to the hold hissed open and Chewbacca entered quietly. He made his way to a crate near Han and sat down, waiting in patient silence. Over ten years' worth of handling Solo had taught the Wookiee that his partner's sudden rages burned themselves out quickly and Solo would reveal what was bothering him soon enough.

Han dug into his vest for the bounty flyer and held it out wordlessly. Chewbacca took it, his huge fingers fastidiously avoiding a charred, bloodstained corner. A growl of concern escaped him as he read.

'Yeah, I know. But you can't call me any more kinds of fool than I've already been calling myself,' Han said wearily. 'You tried to warn me, and I went right ahead and insulted Jabba anyway. But I swear to all the gods, Chewie, I never figured it would make him so mad that he'd leave the price on my head--much less raise it!.'

Chewbacca grunted acerbically, and Han nodded. 'You're right. Sometimes I just don't think. Period.' He sagged down on his crate and began to massage the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. 'Sweet gods--the reward! Three times the price for bringing me back alive. I don't like the sound of that ... not at all!'

Chewbacca growled a short question.

"Hell, I don't know what he's got planned for me, but I'm sure of one thing--whatever it is won't be pleasant.' Han shuddered a little as he pictured the various possibilities. Jabba had a reputation for inventiveness when it came to revenge, and it was obvious that the Hutt planned to make an example of him that wouldn't soon be forgotten.

Han stood up and began to pace the length of the hold. "'Who knows how many of those damn flyers Jabba's put into circulation if an amateur like the guy I shot today had one. I've probably got every bounty hunter in the galaxy on my tail. I figure the only reason we haven't been shot at before now is that we're halfway across the galaxy from Tatooine and I've been keeping my head pretty low for the past year. Today might've been bad luck, but if those bounty flyers have spread out this far, then I can expect more nasty surprises like the one today from now on.'

At a hooted interjection from the Wookiee, Solo shook his head. 'Nah, it isn't pros like Zuckuss or Fett that worry me. If I'm worth three times more alive than dead, an expert bounty hunter'll be real careful not to spoil the prize. That gives me a fighting chance at least. it's jumpy greenhorns like that guy today.'

Han stopped his pacing, his back turned to his partner, and stared resolutely into the far bulkhead. 'You didn't see his face, Chewie. He was just a kid--a damn fool kid who thought he had some easy money and ended up getting himself killed out of sheer funk. I didn't enjoy having to fry someone so green he couldn't even shoot straight.'

Han made his way back over to the crate and sat back down, slumping dejectedly.

"Remember almost a year ago, right after we'd paid off Jabba, when I told you I wasn't going back to the Alliance?'

Chewbacca answered affirmatively, his tone uncertain, as if he wondered where the drift of his partner's thoughts were heading.

"Well, I should've been smart and followed my instincts back then, 'cause now what I've got to do is gonna be all the harder."

Filled with sudden foreboding, Chewie asked what his partner meant by 'got to do'?

"I mean I'm going back to face Jabba and--"

A roar of negation from Chewbacca brought Han up short. 'Quit howling the ship down, dammit! She'll hear you! I don't like it any better than you do, but don't you see, it's the only way! It was too close today. Suppose next time some trigger happy amateur comes after me someone gets hurt? Like Leia, or Luke ... or YOU!" Han shook his head to rid it of the painful image he had conjured up. "I can't let that happen, fuzzball. I'd almost rather have Jabba do whatever he has planned for me."

The Wookiee gave a short bark of protest.

'Hell, no! I don't intend to give up without a fight. You know me better than that."

That was met with a questioning hoot: What could Han hope to do?

"I dunno, I'll think of something," Han mused. 'Maybe I can pay him the price of the contract myself. I figure I made Jabba look stupid once too often and what he wants now is to make an example of me. Well, paying my own head-price oughtta make me look meek enough to satisfy him." Chewbacca snorted derisively and asked where Han was going to get that kind of money. "I'll find it somewhere. Or else I'll work it off; run spice for Jabba for the next ten years if I have to. That's even better... makes me look twice as stupid. Jabba'll love it."

Chewie uttered a dubious sounding reply.

'You think he's madder than that, huh?" Han's shoulders sagged a little, his optimistic act disintegrating. "Okay, then I'll call him out if I have to. And hold off with your howling--I know what my chances are! But whatever happens, it's better than running scared and letting one of my friends get hurt--or getting it in the back when I least expect it."

He leaned forward and sighed. 'Damn. why does this have to happen just when my life's getting ... Aw, hell, it doesn't make any difference now. But I meant what I said before about things being harder. I told you what would happen and it has. I've gotten used to having Luke around, and, when she's not making me want to strangle her, Leia's ..all right." He turned his head away. 'I'll miss them, Chewie, and now that they've assumed that I'm sticking around it'll be hard to have to tell them otherwise."

Chewbacca rumbled a short suggestion, and Solo turned back to face him.

'That's exactly what I can't tell them. if I say that I'm going off to pay Jabba and I'll be right back, then.. " Han's voice trailed off, and in his partner's hazel eyes Chewbacca saw a look that said Solo had no illusions about the sort of fate he was returning to. 'If Jabba ... if things don't go real well for me on Tatooine, then I won't be right back. I don't want Luke starting to wonder where I am and maybe charging in to rescue me and getting himself hurt. Better to let them both think I'm off somewhere living it up and flying free.'

Han paused and looked carefully into the Wookiee's large blue eyes. "In fact, Chewie I don't want anyone getting hurt on account of me. And I don't want that sleezeball Jabba getting his paws on my ship. So maybe it would be best if you just flew me to Mos Eisley and then took the Falcon and--*

This statement was met with a bone-shaking roar that made Chewbacca's previous outburst seem like a gentle purr, and Solo, who of all human beings in the galaxy ought to have been comfortable around Wookiees, flinched and pulled back nervously.

"Okay--I take it back! we're partners all the way in this thing." The Wookiee answered with a firm growl, sounding somewhat mollified.

"And for what it's worth, Chewie ... thanks," Han said softly, reaching out to ruffle the long hair on his partner's arm. Chewbacca responded by playfully cuffing him on the side of the head as he would an erring cub.

As Han shook his head to clear the ringing from his ears, the Wookiee rumbled another question.

'When? The sooner the better, I guess. Might as well get it ov--'

Chewie interrupted with several soft hoots, pointing out that it would look strange if they suddenly left at a time when the Alliance was so badly in need of workers.

'Yeah, you've got a point,' Han agreed, letting his partner's words sink in. "Okay. I'll wait until the Hoth base is operational and running smoothly before I tell 'em I'm leaving--but not a minute longer!"

Chewbacca replied reluctantly, then before his partner could change his mind and take back even that small concession, suggested that they rejoin the Princess in the main cabin.

'Yeah, she's going to be wondering--,' Solo paused abruptly and made an unhappy face. "Oh, shit! I almost forgot ... Leia! I bet she's ready to kill me after the way I blew up at her. You better go back in by yourself and leave me here."

Chewie growled that he'd match his two hundred and fifty odd years of experience with the opposite sex against his partner's mere thirty-one any day, picked the startled, protesting Corellian up bodily, and proceeded to drag him from the hold.

After Chewbacca had followed Han aft, Leia had sunk down into the acceleration couch at the gameboard table, halfheartedly keeping herself occupied by programming the tiny hologures to march in close order drill, and trying to ignore the occasional angry Wookiee howls that echoed forth from the hold.

She sprang to her feet when Chewbacca reappeared with a rather sheepish looking Han in tow. The two humans stared at each other uneasily for a moment.

"Han, I'm-- ' 'Leia, I--' they both began at once and trailed off.

"Go on. You first,' she said softly.

'I'm really sorry I yelled at you like that, Leia," Han said lamely.

She shrugged. 'I should have known better than to keep pestering you when your arm must have been bothering you.'

He smiled tentatively, grateful for the excuse she had given him. 'Yeah, it hurts like hell now that you mention it.'

"Then come and sit down. I'll take care of it.' She reached for the med-kit and found a pair of scissors, which she used to slit the sleeve of his shirt, gently unsticking the cloth from the burnt portions of the wound and applying disinfectant as she went. As she worked she said, "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what all of this was about..."

Han sighed. "He was a bounty hunter-working for Jabba the Hutt."

'Han! You mean to tell me that after all this time you still haven't paid off--' Fearful of provoking another outburst, Leia bit of her words, but Han seemed to take no notice.

He shrugged and grinned disarmingly up at her. "Some things just kinda slip my mind, Yer Worship--you know how it is. Don't worry, it isn't anything I can't handle."

"I'm sure it isn't,' she replied dryly. She decided that it was time for a diplomatic change of subject. 'Well, except for that ... slight unpleasantness, our mission to Ord Mantell was a success. The new funds mean that we have enough money to finish off the Hoth base in less than a month. Isn't that wonderful, Han?'

'Yeah. Wonderful.' Leia was so intent upon her ministrations to Han's arm that she failed to notice that he was looking at her as if he were seeing her for the first time and that his cheerful tone sounded forced. "A month. That's hardly any time at all." He caught his partner's eye and repeated it softly. 'Hardly any time at all.'

end

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