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LADY LUCK CAN BE KIND

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DOCKING CHARGES

Han used an oily rag to shine his boots. Satisfied with the results, he grinned at Chewie. "We got us a good ship, pal."

Chewie looked worried, as usual He didn't share the Corellian's optimism Winning the ship from Calrissian was a stroke of good luck after that, by the law of all that's holy ... the Wookiee thought -- something bad was supposed to happen. Their luck was compounded by an unexpectedly easy job: the delivery of forty barrels of tiromi flour to Taxza, COD. Something had to go wrong now. Chewie felt it. "Just be careful, Hankho," he grumbled

"I'm always careful " Han double- checked the call-code of the buyer before he walked out into the bay, looking for the nearest comm station. Chewie followed him. The walkway led down into the common area.

Halfway down, two uniformed men stopped them. They were heavily armed and not very friendly. Chewie could smell their hostility.

"Are you the owners of the Millennium Falcon?" one of them asked "I am," Han said casually, as if he had owned the ship for years.

"The SalinHo Port Authority demands two thousand and five credits in unpaid docking charges. Neither the ship, nor the cargo can be moved until the fees are paid"

Han swallowed, looking at Chewie. They both knew what had happened: Calrissian neglected to pay here, maybe years ago, and forgot to mention the item to the new owner of his ship. Who knows in how many ports had similar demands on the Falcon. Two thousand credits wasn't something either Han or the Wookiee could pay. Their combined fortune amounted to ten credits and the hope of four thousand when the tiriomi flour was delivered.

Han sighed "I don't have that kind of money now, but as soon as I deliver my cargo, I'll be able to pay the fees."

"Captain, the PA guard said smugly, "you must have trouble hearing. I said neither ship nor cargo can be moved until the fees are paid"

"There is a certain logic to this thing," Han explained, seething, but still fairly calm. "I don't have the money now. I will have the money when I deliver the cargo. Then I can pay the fees. If you want me to pay the fees, you have to let me deliver my cargo."

The official shook his head "Logic, eh? Our logic is better than yours, human. Listen. Your ship and your cargo is worth a lot more, than two thousand and five, is that true? Is it not logical, that we would rather confiscate ship and cargo than see you paying the fees? Why should I give you an illegal advantage by letting you take out your cargo from a sealed bay'?"

Chewie laid a hand on Han's arm. "Try and call the buyer, maybe he'd be willing to pay half in advance"

"Fat chance," Han growled "And how much time do I have to pay the fees?"

"Five hours. Taxzan laws are very generous." The two guards grinned, or at least Han thought there was a grin on their arachnoid faces. "This is a VERY civilized world"

Han gritted his teeth till he thought they'd break Still, he remained calm, thanks to the iron grip of the Wookiee's hand on his arm "I will try to call my buyer," he said and continued walking towards the common area, while the guards took their position at the door of the bay.

TO SELL A SLAVE

The port was busy, noisy and very colorful. The air was heavy with sweet, spicy smells of alien food, and thin, rhythmical sounds emanated from overhead speakers, interrupted by unintelligible announcements. But the signs on the walls were multilingual, standard space-int among them, and most of the

equipment was high-tech by Rimworld standards.

Han found a comm and contacted the buyer. As he expected, the Taxzan wasn't the kind of fool who'd pay good credits for a cargo sight unseen.

"Two thousand lousy credits!" Han whispered "Now I understand why the Calrissian-types are wearing a couple of rings with gemstones; I wish I had something like that to sell!"

"We have nothing to sell, Hankho," Chewie said, looking utterly forlorn. "I guess we will lose the ship, as fast as we won it ... as the Goddess wills."

Han slammed his fist into the metal box of the comm, hard enough to dent it "I'm not giving up the Falcon! Don't you see? They're just waiting for an excuse to take it from me! I guess I should be thankful that at least I get a five-hour chance; they could make up Taxzan laws to take my ship as soon as I touch down... There's gotta be something I have that's worth two thousand credits..." He froze, staring at something in the distance.

"What is it?" Chewie asked, feeling very worried. When Han had this cold, determined look on his face, the day usually ended with shootings, rushed exits and bloody bandages. "Hankho, what is it?"

"Me."

"What?"

"We do have something to sell -- Me." Han pointed at a colorful sign on the wall "They are offering two thousand credits for Standard Human slaves. "Come, let's do it. You sell me for two thousand, pay the fees, deliver the cargo: that would leave you with four thousand more than enough to buy me back We'd lose money, but we'd still have the ship. Simple. "

"Simple?!" Chewie howled. "Insanity! What if something goes wrong? What if the client won't pay? What if I break my leg and won't be back in time?"

"Stop worrying." Han was adamant. "You're wasting time. I'm not going to lose the Falcon."

The Wookiee gave up. There was no use to argue with the Corellian Not when the ship was at stake. The patched-up freighter meant more to Han than life -- it was his independence. Han would risk anything for that There was no talking to him now. All the Wookiee could do was to follow the Corellian's long-legged stride out of the port, onto the city streets, where fluorescent arrows guided the public to the nearest slave market.

Compared to the city, the port was luxurious and urbane. It was morning in SalinHo, but the sky was gray with smog; black soot darkened the buildings, and the damp plastic pavement was covered with garbage. Small scavengers feasted on rotting food unafraid of anything

"Hankho, look around," Chewie whispered urgently. "This is not the kind of place where you'd want to try this stunt."

Han turned around, furious. "What choice do I have? Let them take my ship, the cargo, and leave me stranded here? Do you think we have a better chance to make a living in this port? For all I know, they have a dozen laws against migrant offworlders and we could both find ourselves in some detention camp. I want out of here as fast as possible."

The Wookiee couldn't argue with that. Even the smell of SalinHo felt wrong. No, this was not the place to be stranded without money and employment. By the looks of the ragged, filthy people on the street, work was probably a rare commodity around here. Han kept walking. The street widened and ended in front of a large, impressive building, where an almost perfectly working sign proclaimed that they had arrived at the slave market. A variety of ground vehicles were parked there, and a group of well-dressed traders argued by the door. Han went in, looking more confident than he felt.

The lobby was huge and beautiful, with shining metal and polished true-wood paneling. Guards stood by the doors in fancy costumes. Chewie was guided, very politely, to a hall where he could sell his ware. The Wookiee looked at the time-display, hoping that he could manage the sale quickly.

It took less than thirty minutes. Han was immediately taken to a cubicle, where a droid stripped, examined, weighed and measured him. Han's bundled-up clothes and boots were given back to the Wookiee. Chewie then had to fill out a paper, that listed the slave's skills.

"Don't put down too much," Han said.

Chewie nodded, marking only space-int among the languages, and general, manual labor at the "work skills", not wanting to make Han appear too valuable or too interesting. While the Wookiee signed the papers, the droid fastened a collar around Han's neck. Chewie noted that it was a high-tech device. Han's hands and feet were not restrained in any way -- a bad sign, Chewie thought, because it probably meant that the collar had some kind of built-in stunner. Still, if all went well, Han would only have to wear it for a few hours. As soon as the

papers were signed, Chewie received the two thousand credits. Han was taken away by then, and the Wookiee rushed back to the port to pay the fees.

Worried, afraid apprehensive, Chewie expected delays and problems, but the transaction was remarkably smooth. SalinHo might have been a wretched hellhole, but they knew how to do business, and they apparently respected their own crooked laws. Counting off the two thousand and five credits, Chewie received a valid access plate to the bay where the Falcon rested.

Feeling a little better, he called the buyer about the tiromi flour, and to his great relief, the being arrived before long with a splendid little floater-truck inspected and accepted the containers and paid the agreed price. He even told Chewie that he'd buy a similar quality and quantity of tiromi flour every six planetary months.

When the Wookiee left the port, with the four thousand and the valid access plate in his bag, he was almost confident. Almost, because it was not in his nature to expect anything good, and his experiences only served to reinforce his natural pessimism. But with the sun climbing higher in the sky over SalinHo, even the city showed a miraculous transformation. The smog lifted and over the rooftops, the gold and silver domes and towers of faraway palaces were visible. Still, the Wookiee sniffed at the greasy odor of cheap cooking in the air, and growled at the scavengers on the street as he hurried to the slave market. This time, he had to go up to the third floor, where the sales were conducted. The entire floor was a giant showcase, with small enclosures housing the live merchandise. Taxzans regarded a wide variety of beings as slaves, starting with the small, lively Gimpans sold as house-pets, or the long, colorful Barzan snakes they kept for guarding cattle; droids of all kinds belonged to this category, and a good number of obviously vicious, large creatures, advertised openly as something guaranteed to eat trespassers.

Chewie passed by the cage of a gray, shapeless thing that according to the sign over it, was "the best baby-sitter money can buy". The Wookiee was amazed and intrigued by all this, but he didn't pause anywhere, wanting to find Han as soon as possible. The Corellian was in a cubicle at the far end of the hall, wearing something the Taxzans considered suitable clothing for a Stan. The sign overhead claimed that he was "a Standard Human, sturdy herbivore, young male, can be trained to operate most Stan machinery Only then did Chewie understand that the Taxzans weren't built to manipulate the majority of the devices manufactured on the Core Worlds, and Han, with his five-fingered hands, was a definite asset to any Taxzan who owned for example, stolen Imperial hardware Taxza was a free world and a ready market for anything -- customs never asked where the tiromi flour came from. The tentacles of the Empires universal import- export controls didn't reach Taxza yet.

To Chewie's relief, Han looked unharmed and smelled calm. "I got the money,"- Chewie said

Han nodded and winked at him "See, nothing to it. Buy me back and we're off. "

The Wookiee memorized the number on Han's cubicle and hurried off to the sales office. He had to stand in line; a tall glass of cold tea was offered to him, courtesy of the management, It was good; the wait wasn't too long. Soon the Wookiee was seated in a small room, facing a salesbeing.

"Number 5757," Chewie said. The Taxzan called up the file on an old-fashioned comp screen. "Standard Human?"

"Yes."

"Young, male, herbivore, house-broken, only one previous owner, healthy, good-natured, free of parasites. Excellent choice," the Taxzan beamed "Comes with a five-year warranty against sudden death. However, if he is intentionally damaged we can't give your money back obviously."

"How much?" Chewie asked feeling inexplicably uneasy.

"We have a bid on him already, for three thousand credits."

"Three thousand one hundred in cash, and I take him now," Chewie said

The Taxzan shook his head. "He is going on auction, with two bids."

"When?"

"You can go to the auction hall. We will notify the other bidder. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

TO BUY A SIAVE

Chewie elbowed his way through the corridor. The auction hall was a flashy room with velvety cushions arranged in a semi-circle around a raised platform. When the Wookiee entered, the barker was extolling the values of a three-foot tall, leathered creature that glared at the audience with four malevolent eyes. It was sold within seconds for five hundred credits.

Chewie wondered who was the other bidder for Han. He found out shortly, when the barker guided the Corellian up on the platform. Han looked tense and uncertain.

"Fellow Taxzans and honored offworlders," said the barker, "number 5757, young male, Standard Human, sturdy, herbivore, clean, housebroken, trainable, only one previous owner, five year warranty, lifts four and a half toris, ten nimble fingers to operate Standard controls, compact body size fits into any Standard equipment a must for the modern merchant or farmer. I have a bid for three thousand one hundred, can I have more?"

Chewie saw a Taxzan waving a limb and yelling three thousand two hundred "Three thousand two hundred and fifty," Chewie howled.

Han looked at him and the Wookiee was suddenly very worried. The barker continued merrily. "I have three thousand two hundred and fifty, can I have more?" The Taxzan waved again. "Three thousand five hundred"

Chewie groaned. "Three thousand six hundred-"

"Three thousand six hundred can I have more?"

Han gritted his teeth, his hands clenched into fists. Chewie saw his shirt darken with perspiration. "Three thousand seven hundred" he said.

The Taxzan made a face and let it go. Han relaxed. Chewie swallowed hard, praying. "I have three thousand seven hundred, going once, can I have more?" The barker made whistling, clicking noises of encouragement. "Three thousand seven hundred, going twice, who gives more?"

"Four thousand, and twenty for luck!" a voice sounded from the back. Chewie froze. He couldn't bid higher.

The barker gave a shrill cry and proceeded. "Four thousand and twenty, going once, going twice, can I have more? Going, going, gone! Congratulations, your lordship, you got yourself a fine piece of merchandise! You can pick it up at the cashier's on the first floor. Thank you for buying from us." Chewie hardly dared to look at Han. Han, equally horrified averted his eyes. The Wookiee stood up, looking for the buyer. It was a splendidly attired Taxzan, wearing more jewelry than Chewie had ever seen in one place. Three armored bodyguards followed him, when he went to pay for his acquisition. Chewie whispered to the guard at the door. "Who is that person?"

"Pand Vol Viigoss, High Merchant, may the Gods bless his years." The guard sounded awed "A most charitable, most honorable patriot a true Taxzan, protector of orphans and widows."

The Wookiee risked a second question. "Does he live around here?"

"Are you crazy? In SalinHo? This city is fit only for vermin and offworlders. Lord Viigoss lives out on the Vazoo, and I'm telling you, his palace is something to see. Tourists go there all the time. "

Chewie was somewhat comforted by the news that Han's "owner" was a charitable man. And the Falcon was still there. If Han could get away, they could be off Taxza in minutes, never to come back. The Wookiee desperately longed for that moment. He knew Han couldn't play the slave for too long. The boy was wild, independent stubborn, proud -- the kind that won't survive in captivity. Freedom always had been a tangible thing for Han, Chewie sighed, something Han needed as much as he needed air.

Breaking Han out of the well-guarded market was out of the question. Chewie left, looking for transport to Vazoo, wherever it was. Out on the plaza, the first thing he saw was an open-sided landskimer, advertising guided tours to the most beautiful palaces, Viigoss among them. He paid and joined the tour.

The Vazoo was a beautifully landscaped lakeside, with a dozen architectural masterpieces floating on the water. Viigoss palace outshone all of them. Fine filigree work covered the entire surface of the walls like silver lace, with graceful arches and an imaginative, spiraling tower. It was forbidden to stop on the platform of the floating palaces, the tourguide said, but the tourists were allowed to stroll on the manicured lawn by the lake and look across the water at the palaces all they wanted.

Chewie did, trying to figure out how on Earth could he get into Viigoss' palace or how Han could get out. But it was not certain that Han would be kept there; he might be taken to one of the merchant's ships or to off world holdings, and disappear forever. Chewie was near panic.

As he stood there, he saw a transport approaching; it was decorated with the same silvery lacework he admired on Viigoss palace. It passed by him, close enough to see inside; Chewie saw Han in there.

There was blood on his face and clothes. Two guards were holding him up, because he couldn't stand. The Wookiee guessed that Han had tried to make a run for it at the market --why? Had he heard something about where they were taking him and felt that he had to risk everything to avoid that? Or was he just impulsive and angry. Was he fighting them with all his might and that's why he was beaten so badly, or had the "charitable" Viigoss ordered him punished for something?

The silvery transport floated over the water and landed in front of the palace. The guards dragged Han out: Chewie could see that he made an attempt to stand on his own. The stubborn, proud gesture wrenched the Wookiee's heart.

A minute later, the beautiful gates slid close behind Han and the guards, and Chewie felt a touch on his arm. "The tour is heading back to Salin- Ho, gentlebeing. Please board-"

A DISOBEDIENT MAN

"You will address me as Lord Viigoss."

"Yes," Han said.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, Lord Viigoss." There was no need to argue about such things, yet Han had to fight with himself for every word. Obedience wasn't coming naturally. Submission was something that had to be beaten into him, and even then, he was tempted to fight against it senselessly --but he had to show that they couldn't make him do it. Nobody could make him do what he didn't want to do. And if he proved himself a very bad slave, they might just sell him for so little that Chewie could buy him back. Or they would beat him to death, but he wouldn't know that, because he'd go down fighting, and a man doesn't know when death comes, while he fights.

He was standing in an incredibly beautiful room, delicate and artistic like poetry, every object a work of art. The very walls radiated harmony. He was dripping blood on the intricate pattern of the carpet. "I understand that you tried to escape. Why?"

Han decided that he might as well say the truth. "I heard the guards discussing my job. I can't do it."

Viigoss tilted his round head. "Fascinating. I thought you understood Standard only."

"I lied."

Viigoss didn't remind Han this time to use his proper title. He was extremely interested in his new slave. "Why do you think you can't do the job?"

"I could do it. I don't want to."

"Heavens above. Why not?"

Han swayed a little; he was still dizzy with the beating. "Because it is disgusting."

"Interesting choice of words. Why'?"

"You figure it out." He was hurting all over. Still, he felt hopeful even victorious, because the Falcon was still his, waiting in the bay, his wonderful bird waiting to take him away. Whatever idiotic trouble he had gotten himself into, he still had the Falcon, and Chewie was out there, free, with four thousand credits.

Viigoss studied Han, with little success. "I'm not familiar with your kind but I'm a great admirer of Stan technology. I'm unwilling to believe that you have moral reasons to refuse the job."

Han shrugged. "It doesn't mean kraat to me, whether you believe it or not. Most of my people wouldn't believe it either."

"Give the man some water," Viigoss told one of the guards. "And slap a bandage on his arm, he is bleeding on my carpet."

The guard rushed to obey. Han drank the water to the last drop and let his arm be bandaged.

"The equipment is Imperial. It was invented and created by your people. Why would you find it repulsive to operate it?" Viigoss asked.

Han looked at the Taxzan, measuring him. There was intelligence and curiosity in the large eyes. "I don't know about your race, but among Stans, not everybody is the same. I do things many Stans would find repulsive, and others do things I wouldn't do. Operating that particular equipment is not my style."

"Consider: I am not dealing with Stans that often, and it is highly unlikely that you'd ever have to operate the torture devices against one of your kind. What could it mean to you to see other beings suffer?"

"Maybe I just generally dislike torture."

"You are a slave: you have no choice."

That hit a cord in Han and he said defiantly, "There is always a choice."

Viigoss came closer to him, obviously fascinated. "What a marvelous philosophy. Naturally, you have a choice: if you consider death one of the choices."

"It is."

"What is it that drives you that far? Religion? Morals? Pride?"

Han thought about it, before he answered. "I guess it's mostly pride."

"What is pride for?"

Han felt himself grin. "To keep my backbone straight."

The Taxzan made a soft sound. "Human, you have the attitude of a king." Han had no answer to that. "I admire you," Viigoss said "Unfortunately, you are not a work of art to be displayed, neither are you a Taxzan, with whom I could develop a friendship. What you are now, in this palace, is a disobedient slave. I can't treat you any other way. I have very strict morals. I have to uphold our laws. Justice demands that I should treat all my slaves equally. I needed a Standard Human to operate my torture chamber - I bought you to do it. You must do it."

Han lowered his head. "You know I won't."

"Of course we both know that. But the guards will try to persuade you to obey, and, as you said you will resist. Eventually, you will be beaten to death. Viigoss rubbed his limbs together; they made a keening sound "I regret this. I almost wish I could let you go... But, you see, rewarding your disobedience with freedom would be a grave insult to my other slaves who serve me with total obedience. The best I can do is to give you a little time Would you consider studying the equipment learning how to operate it?"

Was there a message in Viigoss' words, Han wondered was the Taxzan trying to give him time to escape? He couldn't read the expression on the alien face, didn't understand the Taxzan concept of honor, or compassion -- if there was any. He couldn't tell what Viigoss wanted It didn't matter. If he agreed, he'd be given access to some kind of Imperial equipment, probably tools that he could use to get rid of his collar: Maybe even something he might convert into a weapon. He would be a fool not to try it.

"I don't mind studying it, "he said, adding: "Lord Viigoss."

The Taxzan clicked his pincers. "Excellent. Take him to the chamber. Tell the overseer to check what a Stan needs in terms of food, rest and hygiene."

A WORRIED WOOKIEE

Chewie spent the night on the Vazoo, staring at the silvery palace. Han was in there. He was bleeding, he had been beaten. Though it was unlikely that they'd kill him so soon after spending good money buying him, the Wookiee was sick with worry. It was not the first time, and he hoped it wouldn't be the last that he had to worry about the Corellian. Very few Wookiees would understand how he could develop such deep attachment to a Human. Han was his cub, his friend his partner -- he couldn't bear losing him.

By morning, the Wookiee made up his mind; this was a Rimworld planet, here it was Chewie whom the locals treated as equal, not like on the Core worlds, where the Standard Humans considered him little more than an animal. He had rights here. He rented a floater and crossed the water to Viigoss' palace.

"I'd like to talk to the overseer of the slaves" he told the guard
To his surprise, the guard immediately contacted someone on a comlink and in five minutes, Chewie was led inside to meet a well-dressed Taxzan. "Can I help you?"

"Lord Viigoss bought a Standard Human slave yesterday. I had been his previous owner, I was wondering how he fares," Chewie said.

"Stubborn as a pikat but I had no trouble with him. The guards did yesterday. It seems he adjusted to his new place nicely since then. Quite a mechanic, I think"

Chewie grinned. "He is, really."

"He's getting two libats of water and four bowls of cooked grain daily. Is this enough? We haven't had a Stan before."

"Plenty," Chewie assured him. He was almost sure Han would have a good chance to escape, if they let him tinker. The cub could work his way out from the depths of the seventh Hell with a single screwdriver, Chewie thought. He was ready to leave. "Wait," the overseer said. "Have you had him long?"

"Yes, years, why?"

"How often does he need to mate?"

"Stans don't need to mate: if there is no female around to stimulate him, he'll do without." Chewie shook his head, wondering how many Rim worlders knew this intimate bit of information about Standard Humans.

"Strange genetics," the Taxzan nodded. "One wonders how the species managed to survive this long."

The Wookiee suppressed a grin. I could tell you stories about adaptability and stubbornness, all in the same package called Han Solo... "Thank you," Chewie said in parting.

"I thank you: if you're staying on Taxza for a while drop in again later. I might have other questions about his keep."

The Wookiee was quite satisfied with the conversation. The overseer was a pleasant person, with the usual even temper of the insectoids and obviously interested in Han's well-being. The cub was in no immediate danger. Han would find a way to get out -- all the Wookiee had to do was to stay around and wait

SPECIAL MODIFICATIONS

While Chewie talked to the Taxzan, Han was hanging upside-down between the double walls of the torture chamber, trying to figure out whether the motor that worked the air conditioning could be made to drive the antigrav unit, which now served to hold up a slab in the middle of the small black room and wasn't designed to go anywhere. If he could turn it into a floating platform, he would have a surprisingly good vehicle to fly out of the palace, and if the electroshock device could be separated from the ceiling assembly, and hooked to the battery of the mind-probe globe, he could have a pretty fine weapon to stop anyone who wanted to keep him here. It wouldn't be accurate, but with a bit of practice, he was sure he could shoot a few guards with it

The slave collar on his neck was already deactivated; he took care of it by way of a laser cutter, which was originally designed to inflict horrible pain in any species. The torture chamber was the finest of the Imperial technology and Han was sure no Taxzan could tell what he was doing with it Whenever someone came in to check on his progress, he made a show of studying the instruction tapes that came with the equipment. He intended to take two or three smaller parts and a few instruments for future use on the Falcon-he would appropriate anything that wasn't welded down. After all, he had lost money on this trip to Taxza; would be a damned shame not to make up for it somehow. If he was caught, Viigoss would regretfully tear out his heart-that he was sure of. When they brought him down, he'd watched the doors: security wasn't much inside the palace, most of the doors opened automatically when anyone approached

Han climbed down, holding the motor -- the air conditioning stopped working, and he wondered if he'd made a mistake. As he fastened the motor under the slab, the chamber became warmer. Han had to open the door, when he realized that eventually he'd run out of oxygen. He tried the platform: it was working. The controls were built into the main panel of the chamber, in a small cubicle, where he was supposed to sit and operate the thing to torture Viigoss' enemies. Naturally, he had to separate them and affix them to the platform, but that was child's play. He was ready.

ESCAPE

Viigoss was already in his bed when all hell broke loose in the palace. The noise was loud enough to wake the dead. Guards screaming, shots being fired, the shrill noise of a motor he couldn't identify, and intermittent yelling, sounding suspiciously like the war whoops of a Human. Viigoss rushed to the door and looked out.

The main hall of his palace was in shambles. Guards were running up and down trying to catch a flying platform on which Han Solo stood, shooting cracking bolts in every direction, trying to clear his way to the gate.

Viigoss had to admit that the man was the stuff of the legends. How he could get off his collar, acquire a flying vehicle and a weapon, Viigoss couldn't imagine. It would have been wonderful to command the loyalty of such an intelligent, resourceful slave. Wonderful, but impossible. A shame to destroy this excellent being, Viigoss sighed, but Han's execution had to be both spectacular and uplifting, for the benefit of all Taxzans in Viigoss' employ. He set his personal blaster on stun and fired, catching Han in the back a mere few inches from the main door.

But the platform continued flying and the doors swung open, allowing the makeshift vehicle to float out into the balmy Taxzan night with its unconscious rider. The guards ran for their speeders. Viigoss asked for his own vehicle.

By the time they caught up with the platform, its battery had run out of power. It lay on its side among the bushes on the lakeside. Han was on his stomach, still under the effects of the stun bolt. The guards took him back to the palace, manacled hand and foot. Viigoss walked down to the water, deep in thought.

A pair of strong, hairy hands grabbed him. "Don't make a sound" his attacker whispered pressing a blaster to his side. Viigoss froze. "I will offer your life

in exchange for the human. I release you if you order your guards to give him back to me."

Viigoss recognized the Wookiee. "I saw you at the auction Why do you need this one so badly'?"

"It's a long story, Lord Viigoss."

"I'm listening."

Chewie sniffed at Viigoss, trying to judge what kind of a being he was dealing with The lord was remarkably unafraid and very calm, if anything, curious. The Wookiee sighed and explained the situation completely honestly. Viigoss clicked his pincers. "An astonishing story, indeed. And very moving. Reminds me of the great Taxzan saga, the story of the sainted thieves. Beautiful: you should read it sometime. But you see, I have to uphold my laws. You understand perhaps: maybe your people are law- abiding, too. Imagine how my faithful servants would feel, if I let this disobedient slave go. They'd feel belittled, ignored humiliated. I can't hurt them this way. There must be an execution, for all to see."

Chewie growled. "I kill you if you don't order him freed-"

Viigoss didn't move, but a silvery thread of webbing issued from his body, enveloping the Wookiee into a sticky, tight net. "You forgot, offworlder, that we Taxzans are an arachnoid race. We seldom resort to our ancient methods of fighting, with all this new technology coming from the Imperial worlds, but the old ways still work.. And now, you will stay still and what I will tell you'll find very enlightening."

EXECUTION

Morning came with sunlight dancing on the lake. Viigoss' household gathered on the beach, wives, children, servants, slaves and guards, plus a sizable crowd of newsbeings from the Taxzan Holo Service. Their cameras were trained at a purple platform on which stood Lord Viigoss, magnificent in all his jewels and flowing robes. Beside him was Han Solo, stripped of his garments, wearing only his manacles and his attitude. If there had been another Standard Human in the crowd, they would've noticed how young he looked, but there was no one present to feel sorry for him

The excited crowd fell silent, when the executioner approached the platform. She was Viigoss' first wife, a well- known woman on Taxza, as beautiful as she was deadly. Her family had been famous for their slow-acting, painful poison.

She came slowly. The palace orchestra played Viigoss' personal hymn when she mounted the steps and stood beside Han. The Corellian stared at her with stark terror. She was twice the size of any Taxzan he had seen and her body was a brilliant ebony.

"Let justice be done," Viigoss announced. The crowd cheered.

"I serve the law," the woman said. Han couldn't take his eyes off her. Her gaze, her smell and her posture was mesmerizing. He dreaded to die, outraged by the injustice of it: to die, when he had a ship waiting, to die so young!

She began enveloping him in her webbing, starting with his bare feet, threading silver around him, turning him till he was dizzy, enfolding him into a glittering cocoon. By then he didn't mind anything. Dazed numb, he submitted to the ritual. She was the predator, and he was prey. It was natural-- thousands of years of technological progress were lost in the smooth efficiency of her web spinning. The only part she left out was Han's right shoulder. There, into the smooth, tanned skin, she sunk her stinger. The orchestra stopped playing, to let the people hear Han's screams.

It took almost twenty minutes till the cocoon fell silent. The crowd began to walk towards the palace, where, on splendid floating gondolas a feast was laid out. The generosity of Lord Viigoss wasn't famous for nothing. Only the newsbeings hung around the platform to snap a few pictures of the cocoon being taken away, then even they hurried to sample the appetizing edibles. Viigoss escorted his wife inside.

THE SAGA OF THE SAINTED THIEVES

Chewie guided his raft to the opening where the sewer pipe met the lake. As he expected, a silvery, oblong object floated out of the pipe. The Wookiee grabbed it and lifted it onto the raft. Carefully, gently, he began to cut away the cocoon from the rigid body. The skin was discolored on Han's shoulder, where the stinger cut into his flesh. Chewie opened a small jar, and forced its contents into Han's mouth.

Then he just crouched on the raft, and prayed.

The sun was already high in the sky when Han first moved. The deadly rigidity left his body, and he relaxed, still unconscious. The Wookiee stopped praying and picked up his bag. He had brought clothes and now he began to dress Han, watching his breathing. When a long, ragged intake of breath indicated that he was coming to, Chewie helped him to sit up.

"It's over," Chewie said.

Han blinked. His eyes opened wide. "Kraat, I hurt everywhere."

"Better than being dead," the Wookiee growled- "You can give thanks for your life to Vjigoss. He is really a magnificent person. I told him everything and he decided to save you. He said he would make you his grand vizier, if you'd be less stubborn."

"They told me her poison was deadly," Han sighed, cradling his aching head in his hands.

"It is, but Viigoss told me what antidote to buy. You had twenty hours or more before the poison actually killed."

"Some woman," Han said. "We'd had some of their kind on Corellia, or so the legends say, but they were much smaller, and we called them spiders. They were exterminated, what, five hundred years ago, with most of the rest of the insects."

Chewie shrugged. "Guess it might have been the opposite process on Taxza: the arachnoids stayed and the mammals went."

"This is a big galaxy," Han nodded "But I don't have to like everything in it."

Chewie offered him a water container. "Drink- We have to get to the ship. Viigoss made it clear that we must disappear and never, ever, set foot on Taxza."

"Strange how there are more and more planets we can't set foot on," Han said, drinking thirstily. "Not that I care ever to see this place again." He stretched his still numb body, surprised at the glittery package his boot bumped into. "What the hell is this?"

Chewie lifted up the object carefully. "A Taxzan reading tape. Look, even the packaging is precious. Viigoss gave it to me ... and you. It's the saga of the sainted thieves, something you should read, he said- About a pair of lawbreakers with a honor code, he said. Just the box it is in is a work of art. You should read it sometime, on a long trip."

Han turned the box over, marveling at its beauty. He made a promise to read it on the next boring voyage, but as circumstances dictated, he sold it in Mos Eisley, for seven barrels of fuel for the Falcon.

Sometimes he regretted it, though.

END

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