

[Back To Index](#)

Rancor Delivery  
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"Oww..."

The pained growl of the Corellian didn't phase Chewbacca. The Wookiee merely glanced at Han's unshaven, groggy visage and grinned.

"I told you not to drink that last one," the Wookiee said.

"I'll be all right after breakfast," Han assured him.

"You won't. How much do you remember from last night?" Chewie inquired.

"Some parts are mercifully foggy," Han admitted, sitting down at the table. His head was pounding.

"Do you remember that job you accepted?"

"What job?"

"The delivery job for Jabba."

Han shook his head. "I accepted a job?"

"Yes, and it's quite interesting." Chewie was grinning smugly. "Now that I'm off to Kashyyk to see my family, it's good to know that you'll have something to do in my absence."

Han eyed his partner with growing suspicion. "What job?"

"I guess it had something to do with delivering an animal..."

"So what--the Falcon's cargo space has life support. I don't like that grin on your hairy face, pal. What animal?"

Chewie guffawed, patting Han on the back. "Oh, nothing special. Just a little old Rancor."

The Corellian gasped. "I agreed to delivering a Rancor?"

"Well, after drinking two gourds of Kessel brandy, I guess you would've agreed to deliver TWO Rancors and SIX Emperors in the same cage!" Chewie enjoyed himself immensely.

"Stop being so damn happy about it. So I had a bit to drink," Han growled. "And you are going home, leaving me with THAT?"

"Oh, it's not such a long trip..." The Wookiee smirked. "You pick up the Rancor on Belya."

"Sweet suns," sighed the pilot. "I hope I asked good money for it."

Chewie couldn't stay on his feet anymore: he collapsed on the seat and laughed so hard he was gasping for breath. "You said you're going to do it for free! You said... "

"What?"

"Well, no one wanted to deliver the Rancor for Jabba, they all said it's too difficult, and you said, you'd do it for free, just to show them it was no big deal for a Corellian!"

"This, after only two gourds of Kessel brandy???"

"And a whole pitcher of Tattoine ale, and a carafe of Corelli port, and a mug of spiced wine. "

Chewie laughed. "Serves you right! Good luck with the Rancor, friend, I hope you can teach him to eat out of your hand! or your arm! I'm leaving...the tall trees of home are calling to me!"

"Traitor..." Han sighed. "Why did you let me drink that much?"

"Thank me for taking away the bottle of Mantell's best you wanted to drink on a bet, pal, or you'd have this conversation now with a

med-droid in the Hospice for the Clinically Overdosed," the Wookiee grinned, and went to his cabin for his bags. "See you around in a while, when you can tell me all about the Rancor in the hold!"

It was a very distraught Han Solo who went down to the Cantina looking for a co-pilot for the trip to Belya. The bar was full. The usual crowd of free spacers sat there talking, drinking, waiting for some job to come along. At Han's arrival, there was a moment of silence.

"I need a co-pilot for a short trip," Han announced. The reception was hardly surprising. News traveled fast in Mos Eisley.

"I'm busy."

"I'm not feeling well."

"I have to visit my sick uncle."

"I'd go with you, but I'm allergic to Belyan air."

"I'm allergic to Rancors!"

Laughter. Han glared at the spacers with disgust. "Lazy sons of a no-good Bantha trainer, are you afraid of a stupid Rancor?"

"I'm not," came a fresh, cheerful voice from the dim depths of the bar. "I know all about Rancors: it's no big deal. "

"Herlivon!" Han yelled, leaping across tables to get to the back, embracing the tall spacer with a bear-hug. "I didn't know you were back!"

"They let me off a month sooner for good behavior."

Han disengaged from the embrace and looked at his friend. The time spent in the local jail didn't affect Herlivon Xalnodest: he was, as always, a bit less than clean and a lot less than respectable-looking in his screaming red glittersilk flightsuit, and loose gray longcoat, his reddish-brown curls crowning a face that sported the widest grin in the Galaxy.

"I didn't know you were an expert on Rancors," Han said.

"I am," Herlivon replied. "Now sit down here and help me make up for all the dry times in the cooler. Where is that hairy co-pilot of yours?"

"He developed an acute case of homesickness, when the Rancor came into the picture," Han explained.

"Needless worry..." Xalnodest grinned. "When are we leaving?"

"Now?" Han asked, grinning back.

"Lemme get my gear. I meet you in the bay. Still in four?"

"Sixtynine. Cheaper."

"Still broke?"

"Not still. Again."

Han whistled as he run the preflight tests on the Falcon. Chewie was gone, but he had the second best: Xal might have been a bit eccentric, but he was a good pilot. And the fact that at least one of them knew about Rancors was immensely reassuring.

"A good Corellian morning to you!" Xal yelled from the ramp. "Ready?"

"As ever! Come and we take off. "

Xal walked in, and threw two stuffed bags on the floor. "Brought enough to last us till Belya and back."

"Enough of what?"

"Liquid refreshments. I told you I have a lot to make up for. " Herlivon sunk into the co-pilot's seat and run his long fingers across the board. "Still the good old jury-rigged system, huh? You still have that secondary gun-control in the sani?"

"Yeah, and I also had a little toy installed on the underbelly: rotates 360 degrees. Bought a nice sensor cluster, too. That's where my money went." Han strapped himself in. "Here we go."

They were leaving Tatooine's atmosphere, when Xal turned to Han with a smile. "Hope you didn't take me too seriously when I said I know about Rancors."

Han frowned. "I did."

"I only said that because I was boiling mad that everyone in the Cantina made such a show of being scared stiff of them. I couldn't let them think that Corellians are just as scared, now, could I?"

"No, you couldn't," Han agreed. He wasn't mad: he was unable to get mad at Herlivon. The half-crazy Corellian was his only Standard Human friend. Besides, he understood the reasoning: it was the same as his motivation for taking the job on the first place. Corellians had a reputation to keep up, after all. "Anyhow," Han reasoned, "What could be so difficult about Rancor delivery? It's just a dumb animal: it can stay in the cargo hold, and as long as we keep it well fed, what can it do?"

"Yeah," Xal relaxed in the seat, pulling one of his bags on his lap. "What do you want to start with 'Kessel brandy, Corelli bitters... Tusken Goo?"

"Tusken Goo?" Han peered into the bag. "Where did you get that?"

"I had a cellmate in the cooler: a Raider, he was doing life, because his Bantha ate a Stormtrooper. The judge said it was assault with a deadly instrument. Good, huh? The guy gave me this address in Mos Eisley, where they sell the stuff. I bought six jars." Xal stood up, and took one of the containers to the galley. The small jar had enough concentrate to make a large jug of what the spacers called Bantha Fleabath, one of the deadliest intoxicants known to men or any other sentient.

"Interesting," Han remarked, seeing the dark blue colors swirl as Xal shook the jug. "Did he tell you what was it made of?"

"No..." Xal sounded sad. "I thought he did, but he said it's a religious secret. I think it's Sarlacc pee."

Han laughed. "Just hope it's not something worse."

"Naah, I've only heard of one guy who'd died of it, and he tried it without diluting." Xal poured two healthy doses into two plastic cups and from then on, they were just sitting there drinking and talking about things Corellians talked about: ship engines, sensor suites,

weaponry, card games and clever ways to make fake IDs to fool the Imperials or any authority that came along. A day and a few more cups later, the conversation drifted to less important things: beings they both knew, spaceport gossip, possible ways to make money. The trip was long enough to touch on nearly every subject in the dictionary, including womprats, xenophobia, yuenger and zeepee. After that, they played cards and hologames, on friendly terms, without money, or dozed in their seats.

"Look at the size of that thing," Herlivon said, awed in front of the Rancor's cage. It was an orange and golden sunset on Belya, and the natives gave the two Corellians the customary welcome, fresh bread and sweet wine. Han was still munching on the bread, when they led them to the holding cage, but as soon as he saw the animal, he nearly choked on the food.

"What a great monster," Xal sighed. "Doesn't it make you feel kinda religious, seeing how life can produce this sort of creature?"

Han couldn't have been further from having an uplifting religious experience hanging upside down in a torture chamber. The drooling, brown mountain of loose skin and palpable hostility reminded him of the worst things that had ever happened to him. "Cut the adoration, Xal," Han growled irritably. "This thing hates us."

"Nonsense," Xalnodest grinned, helping himself to a healthy swig from one of the numerous bottles he always carried in the many pockets of his longcoat. "This is an animal: it can't possibly know what lousy characters we are. Unless, of course, someone told him how exactly did you win the Falcon from Calrissian. "

"Cut the wit, Xal," Han said.

Herlivon eyed the Rancor, and the Rancor looked back with its small, dumb and very evil eyes. "You know what, Han," Xal admitted, "It does look like it has something against Corellians in general."

"Hopefully it's because he knows Corellians don't taste good, " Han grated.

The monster growled mournfully.

"He knows, " Xal nodded.

Han felt a tap on his shoulder. The Belyan trader stood behind him, waving his tentacles.

"Gentlebeings, " he said, "If you'd just put your fingerprint on this document, I'd give the key of the cage to you and you could then take your Rancor to your ship."

"I could?" Han asked, flabbergasted. "I - could - take - THIS - to - my - ship? How, by the hand--or does it come with a rhinestone studded leash?"

"The contract does not contain provisions on how you prefer to take the Rancor," the Belyan explained smoothly. "My responsibility ends at the conclusion of the sale. I have been paid: my print is here: you print here and take the Rancor, transaction closed: Rancor is yours. I go home to sit on my eggs. It's not healthy to leave them under the heatlamp for long. They need the parent."

"I'm all choked up hearing how you have babysitting problems here," Han said, teeth clenched. "But if I open this cage, what do you think the Rancor will do?"

The emotion on the Belyan's face, or on whatever passed for the face, was unmistakable on any body language. "The Rancor will eat you, Corellian. And your friend, and me. And whoever else is around. "

"So...HOW do you expect me to take it to my ship?" Han yelled.

Xal had enough of the exchange and extended a hand. "Hold it, both of you. I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. How much would it cost to have the Rancor installed in our hold?"

The Belyan nodded. "I was sure we can find a suitable compromise. Five hundred credits and we will have the beast in your ship."

Han counted off the five hundred with the face of a man on whom a Mynoc was feeding. I took this job for free and I have to pay on top of it, he thought.

"Take it easy for about two hours, " the Belyan advised, " We'll arrange everything. Give me the code to your cargo hold."

Xal nudged Han with his elbow. "How about eating some real food for a change? There must be a few eateries in the port, where they serve something Corelli."

Han was cheered by the idea, and the two friends headed back to the port.

The restaurant was clean and the Corelli kippa stew actually contained large pieces of green kippa, something that moved Xal to make several patriotic toasts, drinking to the glory of Corell, to the skill and talent of the Corellian shipbuilders, to the grand tradition of kippa growing in the fertile valleys of the home planet, and to anything else he could think of -- and after a shared bottle of Corell's best, even Han could think of a few things to be patriotic about. The Belyan sunset turned into an eerie twilight, when they left the eatery and went back to the Falcon.

To their great surprise, the Belyan trader was still there, sitting on the ramp.

"I'm glad you enjoyed Belyan hospitality," he said. "The Rancor is in there, I opened two partitions to fit him. I think the walls are solid enough to hold him. "

"You think?" Han asked.

"I'm reasonably sure. Keep him well fed and he'll sleep most of the time."

Han froze. "Sweet Mother Sun."

"What?" Xal asked, worried about the expression on Han's face.

"Xal, there's not a thing on my ship to feed a Rancor with, " Han sighed.

The Belyan smirked. "Toss a coin and one of you jumps into his mouth?"

"Kraat, how can this guy smirk when he doesn't even have a face?" Xal whispered in Corellian.

"Anything can smirk with this good of a reason, " Han answered with a resigned shrug. Visions of the immediate future floated on the haze of brandy in his brain.

"One thousand credits and I'll supply you with enough food for the Rancor till Mos Eisley," the Belyan offered.

"Xal, please, would you be so kind and just shoot me?" Han asked.

"Take it easy, friend," Xal smiled. "It could be worse."

"You sure it's not already worse?" Han inquired, while he arranged the payment. "This is the last of my money!"

The Belyan disappeared, promising to be back.

Xal dug into his deep pockets and pulled out two painted Kesselian gourds. "I think, my fellow Corellian, this calls for spice brandy."

"Thanks, Xal. When this is over, it'll be a while before I can afford a drink," Han said sourly.

"There's always sabacc," Xal grinned. "Think of this as an adventure."

"Yeah, sure, the scenic route to the fifth blue hell." Han sat down on the ramp, uncorked the gourd, sniffed at it appreciatively and drank it with the small sips of a true connoisseur. "At least, the Rancor is in the hold."

A tremor shook the Falcon and Han jumped off the ramp. The tremor intensified. "That thing is beating on the walls," Xal said.

"Where is that Belyan with the food?" Han asked.

Just on cue, two dozen Belyan workers came into the bay, carrying heavy bales of compressed vegetation. The trader came with them and instructed them to put the stuff into the Falcon.

"I thought the Rancor is a carnivore!" Han exclaimed.

"It is, gentlebeing, it is. The hay is for the bebupps," the Belyan informed him. "Belyan law demands that any bebupps used as Rancor food must be fed till it is time for them to be consumed. After all, doesn't the Great Blue Spirit tell us to treat all beings with kindness?"

"Didn't say a word to me," Han mumbled. His eyes were on the entry door. The bebupps were coming. They were about seventy pounds each, very fat and incredibly fluffy, their fronts and backs identical: Han wouldn't know which end to feed. They were making loud, shrill chirpy

noises all the way from the door to the cargo hold. Han was afraid they'd run in every which direction, but they walked into the ship peacefully.

"Grade one bebupps," the Belyan assured the two Corellians. "Guaranteed not to upset the Rancor's digestion. "

Han said something, just to himself, about things the Belyan could do with the Rancor's digestion.

"So far so good," Xal gestured with the Kesselian gourd, when the bebupps were all in the hold, and the Belyan left with the workers. "Let's get going."

"You know, Xal, " Han said as he entered the cockpit, "I think there are a lot of things we didn't really think of."

"Ease up, Solo, we'll wing it." Xal grinned. "If two Corellians can't make it, who can? We have the Rancor, we have the babucthamacallits, and it's only five days home. And we had a really fine meal, too. "

Han was running the preflight checks, when the ship shook again, but this time they could clearly hear the sound of Rancor hitting metal. "He didn't have a fine meal, Xal, I think that's what he's tryin' to say."

"I'll go feed him, just take off," Xal said easily and left.

Han was in the middle of raising the ship out of the bay, when Xal came back, remarkably subdued. "Hey, and how are we supposed to get the babubuthingies in the Rancor's compartment?"

Han turned in his seat and gave his friend a really sour smile. "That's exactly the part I was worried about. "

Xal leaned against the bulkhead and begun to examine his pockets.

"Oh, no, no, no, no! " Han shook his head. "You're not going to drink yourself happy now, no way! I want you sober, pal, we have to figure this out. We are going to hyper, and then we both go down and see to it."

Xal obediently abandoned the search for drinkables and assisted Han with the jump, spurred by the repeated thumping noises from below. As soon as the ship was on automatic, both of them rushed to the cargo hold.

"Look, why don't we unscrew one of the top plates and just drop a few babubies down for the Rancor?" Xal asked, reaching for a varidriver.

"It's an idea," Han agreed.

In five minutes, they managed to remove the heavy plate and got a look at the Rancor below them. It was definitely larger than Han remembered, and as he leaned down to get a closer look, a huge clawed paw shoot up, aiming to pull him in. Han jumped back like lightning.

"Mother of Corell," Xal gasped. "That was close."

Han's eyes slowly opened as he got his breath back. "Now THIS was a religious experience. Let's go get some bebupps."

"They're kinda cute, " Xal said. "I gave them water: I let a sprinkler run for them."

"Good idea -- hey, does the Rancor need water, too?" Han asked.

"I guess. "

"Yeah, and who's gonna go in there to open a sprinkler?" Han sighed. "Maybe while he's busy eating, I can kinda reach in and untwist just one."

"See, there is a solution for everything," Xal said cheerfully.

"One more grin outta ya and you're bebupp!" Han growled at him.

They went down to the hold and waded into a sea of fluffy bebupps. Han was about to admit that they were kind of cute, when Xal gave a sharp cry.

"Damn! I think I just figured out how to tell which end is the front," Herlivon said among assorted curses.

"Yeah, how?"

"One end bites," Xal raised his hand: he was dripping blood.

"Wonderful," Han growled. He grabbed one of the animals and tried to lift it: the weight wasn't much, but the bebupp squirmed in his arms, and one end did bite - while the other kicked, with remarkably sharp

hooves. "Ow! " Han yelled. "I think this thing just saved the portside girls from becoming unwed mothers with my children!"

"I'm sure the effect is only temporary," the ever-optimistic Xal answered from behind him. He, too, carried a squirming bebupp, and squirmed himself, trying to avoid both ends of the animal at the same time. The bebupp wasn't choosy: if it couldn't bite Xal, it bit Han as soon as it got close enough to the seat of the bloodstriped pants.

The ensuing string of Corellian, Wookan and Standard curses were worthy of the museum of Language Arts. Xal laughed so hard, he dropped his bebupp, and ended up chasing it all over the ship.

Han was past caring at that point and carried his burden to the opening over the Rancor's hold, dropping it in with a triumphant "good riddance!" His yell was answered from below, when the Rancor discovered that there was something edible nearby.

"Han, Han, I can't find the damn thing!" Xal howled from above.

"Well, you better do," Han growled, taking his time examining his backside. "Ye gods, I'm bleeding!"

The Rancor banged on the deckplates, demanding seconds. Han sighed and went to help Xal to find the bebupp. They checked every possible place, and a few impossible ones, when all the lights went out.

"Great," Han said. "Just what we needed. Bebupp chase in the dark, a new Corellian sport. Sane people need not apply."

"The trouble is, you're too sober and can't see the humor of the situation," Xal replied from somewhere

"It's dark: I can't see anything," Han said and froze. "Xal, I know where the thing is."

"Where?"

"In the lower gun turret. That's where I have this cable going through, that could black out all lights if ...broken."

"Why would a herbivore eat cables?" Xan asked.

"Chewie uses this vegetable oil to keep the cables supple."

"Why can't he use Bantha lard like anyone else? Is this another of his re --"

Han screamed. "I'm not going to discuss Chewie's religious life here with ya in the dark! Geddownthere and catch that thing! You'd never have dropped it, if you weren't so damn busy laughing at me!"

"All right, I'll go get it," Xal said and went, tripping a few times in the total darkness. Han searched for a spotlight. "What we need here is a lamp to find the torch with," he grumbled.

Rapid Corellian curses signaled that Xal indeed located the bebupp. "I'm bringing it up! Ow! Can you light my waaa...."

"Xal?"

Silence.

"Xal'Answer me, you bastard! "

Nothing. Han abandoned his search for the lamp and headed below. Something cylindrical rolled under his boot and he fell, banging his head painfully. "I guess I just found the lamp," he said. The object he tripped on was really a small spotlihter. He turned it on and looked down into the gun turret. Xal was in there, holding the bebupp, grinning happily.

"Sonova hwimat, you're ok!" Han cried.

"Yeah, but I really need you to take this thing, I can't climb up with it."

"I get you for this," Han promised: he took the lamp between his teeth and grabbed the bebupp. It squirmed, but Han was not about to let it go. As soon as Xal came up, Han thrust the animal back into his arms. "Take this, I have to fix that cable."

"You know, it's a really stupid idea to have that cable there," Xal said.

"This was the only way I could route a line to Chewie's cabin for the holoviewer. He insisted on it, when we got this tape of the Wookan beauty contest last year. " It didn't take long to fix the cable and bring the lights back on.

"There," Han announced. "Now go and feed the Rancor. "

"Don't forget, you said you'd open a sprinkler to get him water."

"Yeah, " Han agreed. "I'll go with you."

The Rancor was banging on the walls and the ceiling, roaring and stomping; Han saw the clawed paw reaching through the hole, trying to tear off the deckplates. "Xal, this thing will be out of there before we reach Mos Eisley."

"The Belyan said it sleeps mostly, when well fed."

"Then FEED it!"

Xal was reluctant to approach the paw that came through the opening.

"GIVE!" Han roared, louder than the Rancor. "I don't care if it eats you, too! it is tearing my ship apart!"

Xal pushed the bebupp into the Rancor's hand and stepped back. The bebupp whined pitifully. Han shook his head. "Damn."

"Yeah, it's kinda rotten," Xal agreed. "I need a drink."

"So does the Rancor," Han sighed, peering down into the cargo hold. "It is not happy. How many bebupps do we have?"

"Dunno, I didn't count. I thought you did. "

Han bit back his answer. "How many bebupps do you think we have for the five days? Ten a day?"

"I guess. I better go get more."

"I'll try to reach a sprinkler," Han said. "If the Rancor pulls me in, tell Jabba I died a hero's death in his service. Maybe he'll give me a medal, posthumously."

"I'll pin it on your urn," Xal grinned.

When he came back with another bebupp, he didn't look happy. "Han, it's getting awfully smelly down there."

"Yeah? Don't tell me the bebupps aren't housebroken." Han was flat on the deck, his right arm extended. "Can't reach the tap. An inch or two but I just can't reach it."

"I have longer arms, let me try. You put in the bebupp, and while the thing is eating, I'll do it." Xal offered. Han grabbed the bebupp and pushed it into the hole: Xal went on his stomach and groped for the sprinkler.

"Almost," he reported cheerfully. "Hold my leg, I need a better grip...here! Got it!"

Water started to pour from the sprinkler.

"Too much," Han said. "We don't want to drown it: give it a half-turn to the left."

Xal reached in again, trying to be quick about it, slipped and Han had to drag him back.

"I turned it, though," Xal announced. "It's ok now. But I think I lost a gourd. I felt something falling out of my pocket."

Han aimed the light into the hold, just to see the painted Kesselian gourd disappear into the Rancor's mouth.

"Say goodbye to your spice brandy, it just ate it."

"We can always drink Tusken Goo, " Xal said easily. "Your turn to bring the next bebupp."

"How many he got so far?"

"Three."

"Seven more to go. "

Dragging seven bebupps to the Rancor took most of the day: there were two more escapes, four more bites and five more kicks: Han nearly used up the Falcon's medical supplies and Xal had to make a new batch of Tusken Goo to keep up the working spirit in their bandaged bodies.

"Look at us, " Han sighed, when the Rancor finally settled down to sleep. "I didn't look that bad after that run-in with Boba Fett last year!"

Xal sniffed the air. "Can you do something with the filtering system? It's getting smelly here. "

Han grinned. "I think one of the bebupps musta done something on you...check your coat."

Herlivon vented his anger with a string of curses and disappeared into the sani. When he came out, his clothes cleaned, Han was at the controls, fiddling with the air cleaning setup. "You know, it does smell here. I don't care, though, I want to sleep. Let's toss for the first watch."

Han lost. Xal went to sleep, whistling, and left Han in the cockpit. He dozed off after a while, and had a very vivid nightmare about wet Wookiees. When he jerked awake, he knew why: the air in the ship smelled worse than a dozen Wookiees after three rainy days. He went to look for the source of the trouble and found it: the stench came from the Rancor. It was wide awake and growling.

"Huh," Han sighed. "I don't blame you, there is no sani down there, but hey, the air filters are already on the max, and...there's still quite a bit of the trip left..."

Xal was up, too, moving around in the galley. "I can't sleep in this smell, Han. Why don't you start the sprinklers and give that thing a shower? Wouldn't it just wash off the do?"

Han shook his head, very sadly. "Think, Herlivon, think. A ship is a closed system: isn't this the first thing they teach you in piloting 101? Do you think the Falcon's water cycle can handle what causes the smell, if the air cycle can't handle the smell itself? You know what we're going to drink, if all this gets into the pipes?"

"Yeah," Xal said cheerfully. "Tusken Goo. I make up enough for the rest of the trip, while the water is clean: the alcohol will keep the water from becoming stale..."

"Trust you to come up with a thousand noble uses for booze," Han smiled.

The interruption didn't phase Herlivon. "... and then you can wash the Rancor all you want. It's better to get home drunk, than suffocated, isn't it?"

"All right," Han shrugged. "I better not be sober for what's coming, anyways. I didn't sleep a wink and it's time to bring up the bebupps again. Go ahead, there are a few large containers: mix the Goo, and I'll start on the bebupps."

Xal worked on the drink, while Han dragged up three bebupps and acquired a few more bites, then Xal generously offered to take over. "Go to sleep for a while, I take care of the rest."

Han couldn't resist. He was more tired than he had ever been in his life. He was fast asleep as soon as his head hit the bed. This time, he didn't even dream.

Cheerful sounds woke him up. Loud Corellian singing came from below. Xal's pleasant baritone was slightly slurred.

"One lovely maiden bathing in the stream,  
two lovely maidens bathing in the stream,  
three lovely maidens bathing in the stream,  
when they see me, they all scream!"

"What in the blazes are you doing?" Han yelled.

"Come on down, I'm washing the Rancor, and you know what, he loves it. Come, I want to show you something!" Xal hollered. Han was down in a second.

The sprinklers were on full force, Xal crouched by the hole with a container of Tusken Goo, pouring it down.

Han leaned closer. The Rancor's head was a mere six inches from Xal's hand, its mouth open, and it was that mouth Xal poured the booze into. Han was almost sure he saw bliss on the monster's wrinkled face.

"Don't tell me...you're making friends with this?"

"Why not?" Xal smiled. "Hey, it's just a dumb animal. Look here." Xal reached down with his other hand, and rubbed the Rancor's nose. "See? He likes me. Love me, love my booze."

"How much did you have?"

"I'm fair. We share the jug half and half. He ate six bebupps, and then we both got bored, and I thought, why not. He liked the Kessel brandy yesterday, but Tusken Goo is really his favorite."

Han turned off the sprinklers, then leaned against the wall, feeling weak. "He could've eaten you."

"Corellians never get eaten, " Xal answered confidently. "Come, you scratch him, my hand's getting tired. And you know, maybe you should sing to him, too, you sing a lot better than me, remember?"

"I don't remember ever singing anything anywhere," Han said, his teeth set.

"It's because you're the kind of drinker who doesn't remember the next morning. That was on Calrissian's nameday, you sang all seventeen verses of All the good things men can do ."

"I never did that," Han repeated. "And I won't do it now. And I won't scratch the Rancor. You are different, you can make friends with a Sarlacc, but it would eat me."

Xal shrugged and continued petting the monster. It stared up at him, and made sucking noises. "See, he's gentle. "

"He's drunk! and you aren't sober either! And if you make him drink all the Goo, what will be left for us?" Han yelled.

The Rancor decided that Han was about to attack his new friend and growled threateningly, trying to reach Han through the hole.

"Hush, hush," Xal said softly. "Solo is my very best friend, you shouldn't growl at him, ok, please? Hush now. Hush, or I won't sing anymore."

Han was astonished to see the Rancor placated. It sat down and kept staring at Xal with mournful eyes.

"All right," Xal grinned. "You're a good pup. Here, uncle Xalnodest will sing to you." And he did.

Han sat down on the floor, shaking his head. But Xal's singing was contagious and soon he was humming, then he joined in, and they sang the last ten verses of the song together. The Rancor curled up and fell asleep. It still stank, but somewhat less than before. " Mother of Corell," Han said, "Xal, you are the craziest son of a hwiimat I've ever seen. Sometimes I wonder if you're a saint or just too stupid to know what's impossible."

Xal stretched out on the floor, his hands under his curly head. "And that from the pilot who tried to outrun two big Corellian ships with the Falcon and actually did it. Anybody would tell you it's impossible."

"It's not. The Falcon is fast. Very fast. It might be the most ferploinkt ship in the Galaxy, but it is fast," Han said passionately.

"It's fast BECAUSE it is ferploinkt." Xal grinned. "My turn to sleep."

"Get to the cabin."

"I'm not moving. I brought up a zillion bebupps, I'm tired. I'm gonna sleep here." Xal didn't budge. Han sighed and gave up. He didn't dare to leave, though, worried that his friend might roll over and fall in the hole. Not that the Rancor would eat him, he grumbled to himself. And so he just sat there, hugging his knees, taking a small sip from the jug once in a while. He knew he must have fallen asleep at one point, when he woke up with a start. The Rancor was banging on the ceiling.

"Shut up, beast, let Xal sleep," Han growled at it.

The Rancor continued the racket. Han tried giving it whatever was left in the jug: that helped for a while, but then he had no choice but to sing. Resigned, he sang, knowing that there wouldn't be a being in the whole Galaxy who'd believe that Han Solo had been singing portside ballades to a mutant Rancor. When even the singing did no good, he stood up and went to fetch bebupps. The task wasn't any easier than before: it was hard to get a good grip on the wiggling, fluffy creatures, and they were kicking, biting -- not that Han cared. Actually, he was grateful, deep in his heart, that the bebupps weren't meek, obedient, cute, gentle animals: then it would have been twice as hard to use them for Rancor food. Now, he was almost glad when he could drop them into the hole and had a minute to slap bandages onto his many bites before the Rancor howled for seconds.

"Will take me weeks to get the smell outta the hold," Han told himself sourly.

When he brought up the eighth bebupp, he was totally exhausted. No more, he swore. He looked around. Xal wasn't there sleeping: Han dragged himself to the cockpit to look for him.

"I thought I'd fix something to eat," Xal said, coming out of the galley with two containers of hot food.

"Yeah, I guess it was mostly the Rancor eating, huh?" Han grabbed a spoon and ate, his exhaustion momentarily forgotten. "What in the blue hells is this?"

"You like it?"

"Well, yes: but it tastes like Tusken Goo."

"Oh, that..." Xal shrugged. "The synth signaled that the water wasn't suitable for food rehydration, so I disconnected the pipes and used the booze."

Han was too hungry to say what he wanted to say, namely that at this rate, only the Rancor would be sober enough to land the ship in any spaceport. He ate the whole mess without a word, then, with a supreme effort to stay awake, he marched into the sani to take a shower.

The yellowish, malodorous liquid pouring out of the shower head had him jumping out of the cubicle faster than a startled womprat. Xal only glanced at him streaking by stark naked, and said, "I guess the sani's filters are on the blink, too. Pity you never got the money together for a sonic shower."

Han tried his best to be cheerful. "At least the air is still okay up here. "

The Rancor was hammering on the ceiling again and Xal generously acknowledged that it was his turn to go for bebupps. Han fished out a pair of pants from his cabin, dragged them on and went to take a nap on the couch. He only had to wake up twice: first, when an escaped bebupp galloped across his chest, second, when Herlivon entered to announce that the Rancor was asleep.

"And so am I," Han growled.

Xal stretched and grinned at him. "Quite an adventure, this."

Han gave him short but extremely precise instructions on what he could do with the adventure, then went back to sleep.

In his dream, a bebupp was sitting on his face with the end that was opposite its mouth. He woke with a whimper, fully expecting that there indeed was a bebupp on his head. Reality was worse.

The whole air in the ship smelled like bebupps and Rancor. Apparently, the air filters had also capitulated in the face of the Rancor's waste output.

Xal - a long shawl twisted around his nose and mouth - slept like a baby in the cockpit. Han grabbed a jug of Tusken Goo, to gargle

with in lieu of toothbrushing, soaked a bandana in it and tied it over his mouth.

It helped. Some.

The Rancor was banging on the ceiling and howling at the top of its lungs. Han vacillated between a long prayer and a short curse. The latter won out, because he didn't have enough breath for a long prayer. He went down to fetch bebupps.

The first one bit him on the calf, the second kicked him on the knee, and the third bit him on the thigh. He decided to stun the fourth one, just in case he changed his mind later in his life about having children.

By the time he was tired enough to consider death a welcome alternative, the Rancor quieted down and curled up to sleep.

Han went to look for Xal and found him on the couch, with an ornamental incense burner on his lap. The smell of high-potency spice hung in the air and by the look on Herlivon's face, he was someplace else, where Rancors, bebupps and dead filters weren't even heard of.

Han managed to come up with fourteen derogatory names in three languages to describe Xal, and traitor wasn't even among them. When he was too tired even to curse, he staggered into his cabin and collapsed on the bunk. He was sure nothing in the world would wake him up, not even hearing the Rancor beating on the deck plates, but when he heard the plates giving way with a shriek of torn plastisteel, he was up and running. A glance at Xal showed that the worthless hwimat was either sleeping or passed out.

Han drew his blaster as he ran, arriving in time to see a gigantic clawed arm emerging from the hole in the deck: two of the plates were twisted. One more, and there would be no way to keep the Rancor from taking a grand tour of the ship. Han didn't dare to imagine the consequences. He threw himself into the bebupps' keep and grabbed two, ignoring the bites and kicks he received. Panting, cursing, he dragged the bebupps to the hole, pushing them in. One hooked its teeth into Han's boots, and held on, while the Rancor pulled it down. Han, deathly pale, didn't make a sound. He tried to slip out of his boot, while holding on to a crossbeam: the Rancor took a bite out of the bebupp, which suddenly let go of Han's foot and disappeared into the hole. Han lost his balance and slipped on the twisted deckplates, clawing desperately

for a handhold. He felt himself falling. A steely grip grabbed his belt and pulled him back from the hole.

He looked up into Xal's grinning face.

"Taking the easy way out, huh?" Xal asked. "Throwing yourself into the Rancor's mouth, eh? It's very un-Corellian to commit suicide, even when the smell is too much to bear, Solo."

Han took his first breath in an hour. "Stars, Xal, I thought you passed out."

"I did, but you would've wakened the dead with all that yelling."

"I was not yelling."

"Yes, you were. Come on, anybody would've yelled. It's no shame."

"Damnit, Xal, I was not yelling cause I was scared breathless. I know."

"Well, something musta wakened me up. Or maybe I am a telepath, yeah, that's it." Xal shrugged. "Here, have a drink. I'll bring up a coupla more bebupps. Take it easy."

Han took a long swig of the Tusken Goo, wiped his mouth with his dirty shirtsleeve and went to the cockpit, muttering to himself. He had it in his good mind to give hell to Xal for spicing himself away from his duties, but how could he say anything now, when the drunken hwimat just saved his life?

Han checked the instruments. Forty-eight more hours to survive, and then he was gonna get rid of the Rancor, the bebupps, and the stink. Chewie should be back by then, maybe he'd let Chewie scrub the ship, it was the least the hairy beast could do to make up for running away from it all. He went to the synth and programmed food: he was rewarded with two bowls of imitation stew that, of course, tasted like Tusken Goo. He carried the bowls below, caught Xal between two loads of bebupps and they ate on the walkway.

Two hours later the long-range sensors blinked out.

"I don't believe it," Han sighed.

"I do. I think the ship is getting fed up with the Rancor."

Han leaned against the instrument panel, pressing his forehead to the metal, silently begging forgiveness from the Falcon. Then he went and checked every wire, following them down to the sensor cluster, and found that the sensitive instruments were soaked with something that looked rather corrosive and very yellow.

"Xal, come on down here!" he howled.

His friend slid down the ladder and surveyed the damage. "Something is dripping from the ceiling here. Hey, aren't we directly below the Rancor?"

Without a word, Han marched into his cabin, brought down all his clean shirts, socks and underwear, towels and sheets, and a raincoat. The latter was to cover the sensor cluster, the rags to dry them. A man does what a man has to do. The stink brought tears into his eyes, or maybe he was crying, because it was a horrible thing to happen to a sensor cluster that one paid eight thousand for. Xal, to his credit, stood there all the time, silently sharing Han's grief and the air he breathed, not even trying to be cheerful about it. By the time Han was through, the Rancor was stomping on the deck plates again.

"Bebupp time," Xal said.

Han nodded. The sensors were clean, but he was unspeakably dirty.

"Come on, friend, we are going to survive this, " Xal nudged him.

"You sure?"

"Actually, no," Xal grinned. "Are you?"

Before Han could answer, an ominous sound ripped through the ship, as if a dozen deck plates were torn from their casing at the same time.

"Been nice knowing you," Han said.

They both went up, without undue haste, knowing what they would find.

The Rancor was out of the hole, up on the corridor of the cargo hold, a corridor that was way too narrow to hold it. The beast was down on its belly, trying to get ahead or back: it was stuck completely.

"Doesn't look good." Xal said, sounding gloomy.

"If we go around, we might be able to get to his other side and push him back down." Han said slowly.

"His head is on the other side, with all the teeth," Xal reminded him.

"We could bring down some engine oil and grease him, and then he'd just slide back in."

"How do you propose to go up? He is blocking the access door."

"That he does," Han admitted. "If we can't get him away from there, we can't even get into the cockpit, and then how are we going to land?"

Xal began to laugh. "Hey, this is the stuff of the legends! The Wandering Spacers, the Ship That Could Not Land...I can just hear the songs..."

"That ship supposedly carried untold treasures, not Rancor shit." Han growled. "Come, we have to try to push it by the head."

Xal shrugged. "Maybe you push while I sing to him. He likes that."

Han hesitated, seeing the madness of the whole idea. "Hey, I could just go down into the hold with a varidriver and loosen the deckplates under him, and then he'd fall down back in..."

"And crush you?" Xal thought the idea was hilarious. "No, my friend, you're not going to get off that easy! Dying comfortably, leaving me with the problem?! If you're into taking out walls, why don't you take out walls somewhere to get us to the storage room and get the grease? I think the greased Rancor is still the best idea."

"Let's try." Han unhooked the tool from his belt and began to work on the plates, while the Rancor howled, whined, whimpered and wiggled, trying to extricate himself from the narrow space.

"Han," Xal said after about twenty minutes.

"What now?"

"The walls are bending."

"What?"

"This thing is very strong. The walls can't stand the pressure."

"Sweet Mother of Corell," Han stood there, varidriver in hand, pale as a ghost. The walls were indeed twisting out of shape, the million wires and pipes creaking as their moorings cracked.

Xal dug into his bottomless pocket and brought forth a gourd of Kessel spiced brandy. "Now that we're both going, I think we should finish this," he said solemnly. "It's no use to die sober. "

"Agreed," Han said with equal seriousness. "Life was short, but had a few sweet moments."

"You know what, Solo? I never deserved a friend like you."

"Same here. "

They shook hands, and then, quietly, bravely, without any further talk, finished the gourd, sharing equally. Nothing much mattered to them after that. Han felt the walls moving, heard the crack of breaking joints, the howls of the Rancor, but all this was coming to him like the meaningless noise of a holovid that someone else was watching. Even that faded after a while.

Something was chewing on his vest. Han raised a weary hand to wave it away and found himself staring into the fluffy end of a bebupp. Somewhere above, a klaxon was making pitiful noises. Han tried to get up and found that a pair of boots rested on his shoulder. He slid out from under them and came to his feet, swaying.

He was looking at a nightmare. The walls of the access corridor were bent, dented and twisted. Loose cables hung from the ceiling, some of them crackling with electricity. A lone bebupp, the one that tried to eat his vest, now munched on Xal's prized belt buckle that showed a Gamorrean and a Human in a rather compromising position.

There was no sign of the Rancor.

Han peered down into the hold: it was empty. For a moment he nearly believed that the Rancor was up in the cockpit flying the ship. Kessel spice brandy does strange things to a man's imagination.

He kicked the bebupp away from Xal, then kicked Xal awake.

Herlivon yawned, stretched, combed his hair with his fingers, all before opening his eyes. He, too, was looking for the Rancor.

Han looked at the bent walls, and the peacefully wandering bebupp.

Then he sighed. "You know where he is?"

"Yes," Xal said. "Went and broke into the bebupps' hold. Ate his fill and I bet he's asleep now."

"And he can come out any time he pleases..." Han speculated. "Do you hear the alarm?"

"I hope it's not the life support that's gone," Xal grinned. "I don't have another gourd of spice brandy to help us die again." Han climbed up and rushed into the cockpit.

"We are back," he shouted. "We came out of hyper." He bent down and kissed the control panel with passion. "Baby, you did it!" "We are not down yet," Xal warned.

"Don't you start!" Han laughed. "Now I know we are safe. Ten minutes and ..." He nudged the controls. "Xal? Xaal!"

"I see. I think I better go try connect some of the lose cables down there. "

"And fast," Han added.

They were heading towards the planet, at a good speed, and none of the atmospheric flight controls were responding, manual or automatic.

There is always the escape pod, Han thought, but then he'd have to say goodbye to the Falcon...and if the ship went, he wanted to be on it. Plus, he wasn't really interested in finding out what Jabba would do to the pilot who lost his Rancor.

As Xal was connecting the cables, some of the controls came to life gradually - first, of course, the holochess. "Great," Han said. "Just what we need."

The next thing that came alive was the comlink, only to connect Han to the port controller, who advised him that he was coming in too fast.

"Tell me something I don't know," Han grated. "Like, what am I going to crash into if I keep on this course? The Twilek prayer house? Thanks... "

He abandoned the cockpit and went down to Xal. "We have about five minutes to connect something that we really need," he announced.

"I'll go up, you try," Xal nodded.

Han stared at the loose cables, wishing the Falcon were like other ships, with cables neatly marked and placed in some logical order. He tied something to something, chased away the bebupp from a broken wire, patched something else, ignoring the sharp electrical shocks that stung his fingers.

"I have the braking thrusters," Xal yelled from the cockpit.

"Use them!"

"I don't have the landing legs."

Was it the blue cable? The gray? He tried the blue.

"I have the shields!" Xal reported.

"Gods, you mean we didn't have them up before now?" Han paled, working furiously.

"I guess not. Hey, I have the landing legs. Han! Hey! I have everything!"

Han was standing there, holding the broken ends of the gray cable together. There was no way to connect it, the wires barely touched: probably the bebupp had eaten a few inches, but he could stand and hold it. "Land this crate!"

"Everything works! Come up!"

"I can't! Just land! " Han shouted, praying that his hands wouldn't tremble. The bebupp was cruising around him, nuzzling his boots. He could feel the Falcon slowing down as they approached the port.

The bebupp shrieked and ran, nearly knocking Han off his feet, and he knew - he smelled - the Rancor crawling out of the cargo hold. He didn't move, he didn't even turn, just held the cable together.

The ship landed with a thud and the engines died. Xal came down.

"I guess we are alive... " He stared at Han, who slowly let go of the cable. "This is what I trusted my life to -- your bare hands?"

"So? We're down..." Han shrugged, perfectly calm now. The Rancor crawled closer, almost close enough to take him with one bite.

Xal reached out, grabbed Han and pulled him up the ladder brutally.

"You know, there was a Rancor behind you..."

"I know. But you know, it could've been a gundark. I don't think I'm capable of being afraid anymore."

"Five days on Tusken Goo can give a man a lot of courage," Xal grinned. "By the way, Jabba's men are waiting to take the beast, they already contacted me on the comlink. One of them is a certified Rancor keeper."

"Now that's a job I don't envy," Han said dryly.

"He wasn't that bad," Xal shrugged.

Han was already lowering the ramp and let the Rancor keeper in. The man made whistling noises: the Rancor whined and followed him obediently, like a nerf puppy.

"Shame on you two," the man said to the Corellians, "The poor creature is filthy. I wonder what kind of care he was getting from the two of ya. Probably not much. Your whole ship stinks. And both of you look drunk. "

Han stared at his boots. They had small holes in them where the bebupps had bitten him. Why, he had small holes all over him, and he had bruises on his bruises. His ship needed repairs to the tune of a godzillion credits he didn't have, he needed an entire systemful of fresh water, and new filters for that, he needed a shower, maybe two, a shave, definitely, he needed a cleaner for his clothes, a pair of new boots, maybe even a new sensor cluster...

Desolate, he sat down on the ramp, breathing deeply of the dry Tatooine air.

Xal looked at him. "I think you should come home with me and wash up. We can have a decent meal, something substantial to drink, and..."

An earth-shattering Wookiee howl interrupted Xal's plans. Chewie came into the bay, striding towards Han, loudly voicing his terror over his state.

"We had a bit of a problem..." Han said easily, "But not much. Nothing we can't fix. You're just a big coward, Chewie. See, Xal here, he knows all about Rancors."

Xal acknowledged the compliment with a bow and a flourish of his hand. "That's me, Chewie: the Rancor expert."

Chewie had his doubts. He sniffed at the ship: waves of horrid odor emanated from the inside, and a second later, a lone bebupp wandered out, took a look at the Wookiee and galloped out of the bay at full speed.

Han grinned and waved a cheerful goodbye to it.

Chewie went into the ship. His mournful howls indicated that he had noticed the damage, but he came back fairly fast, his sensitive nose trembling.

"I'm not setting foot in there, Han," he announced, "until you've scrubbed it clean."

Han didn't mind. Actually, he was past caring. All he wanted was to take Xal's offer, wash up, eat a decent meal and drink something - anything, but Tusken Goo.

"Let's go," he said, rising to his feet tiredly.

"At the first glance," Chewie said, "This is going to cost you ten thousand in repairs, even if we do most of the work ourselves. "

"No problem," Herlivon grinned, "A few nights with a pack of cards, and he'll make it."

Han looked up at the blue sky and felt like grinning himself.

Marching towards Xal's house, they passed by the cantina. Most of the regulars were out on the street, obviously waiting to see how

the two Corellians fared with the Rancor. Their bedraggled state elicited guffaws from all around.

"Hey, Han, don't tell me it was hard!"

"Nah, " Han smiled endearingly. "You know, that Rancor is really a fine, gentle creature. You gotta know how to handle it. "

"Then why do you two look like something the golledge dragged in?"

"Oh, that..." Xal looked embarrassed. "Han and I got drunk and had a fight..."

"Yeah," Han nodded. "Happens between friends. "

When a few doubting souls made disbelieving noises, it was Chewie himself who glared at them, asking whether anyone wanted to call his Corellians liars. Nobody did. And so they walked on, with the confident stride of those who routinely survive the impossible.

End

[Back to Index](#)