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Just a Little Inconvenience

by [Sheila Paulson](#)

I brought the whole thing on myself, I suppose, but anybody in my place would have done the same thing. It's damn hard to pass up 25,000 credits just for hauling some passenger from Sterth to Corzine, and I had to go to Corzine anyway to pick up Luke Skywalker who was there on a mission for the Rebel Alliance. So sure I agreed to deliver one passenger, after I made sure I wasn't gonna get in all kinds of trouble for it.

I had been contacted by an agent, a Corzinian named Kell, and he seemed anxious to make the deal. That set off a few alarms in my head--in my profession, you can't be too cautious. But my questions all got the right answers. No, the passenger wasn't wanted, not by the locals, not by the Empire. He wasn't running from anybody, it seemed. He was just in a hurry to get back to Corzine. It sounded too good to be true, and I wasn't inclined to believe it, but that's when Kell mentioned the 25,000, and I decided that maybe it just might work out. Kell had strolled in here openly, after all, and was sitting, his back to the door, like he didn't have a care in the world. He was either as innocent as he claimed, or he was a fool. Either way, I'd get my money, and I sure could use it. The rebels paid me what they could, but they expected me to come up with anything else I needed on my own, so I did.

Kell paid me in advance and promised to deliver my passenger to the Millennium *Falcon* shortly. The passenger's name was Azz; that was all the name Kell gave me, and I've learned not to ask too many unnecessary questions 'cause sometimes I don't much like the answers I get. I told him to turn the passenger

over to Chewie and that I'd be there before too long. I was supposed to pick up a message for the Alliance, but I sure wasn't gonna mention that to Kell. So he went off to pick up the mysterious Azz, and I went to fetch the message tape, feeling good about the 25,000 credits in my pocket and the easy charter. I shoulda known better.

Chewie was waiting when I got back to the *Falcon*, and he looked amused. It was better'n looking worried, but still I wondered what kind of passenger I'd let myself in for. The trip to Corzine from Sterth is a long one, even fast as the *Falcon* is, and I didn't want to be stuck with some creep for two days and a night if I didn't have to. But Chewie looked aroused, like he was doing his damndest not to laugh, and I wondered what dumb thing had gone wrong this time.

He said, *Our passenger arrived.*

"Oh yeah?" I said cautiously. "Trouble?"

Chewie did laugh this time. *Not exactly,* he told me. *See for yourself.*

"Where is he?"

In the spare cabin.

Well, Chewie wasn't gonna put an end to the suspense, but I had the uncomfortable feeling as I headed for the spare cabin that I wasn't gonna like what I was about to find. When Chewie trailed along behind me chuckling to himself, I was sure of it. I reminded myself of the twenty-five thousand credits as I pushed the button to open the cabin door. Then I just stood there and stared in disbelief.

"What the hell--" I said blankly. Lying on the bed in my spare cabin was a baby. It wasn't a new baby, maybe it was a couple years old, but it was still a baby, and a baby was the last thing I needed. "What's he doing here?" I demanded.

The kid opened his eyes and looked at me. He didn't seem to like what he saw, 'cause he started howling right off. Chewie pushed past me into the cabin, and the kid brightened at the sight of him. "Fuzzy," he said distinctly. "Nice fuzzy," and held out his arms to be picked up. Chewie complied, looking pleased as hell with himself.

He likes me, he pointed out smugly.

I wasn't impressed. "What's he doing here?" I demanded.

He's our passenger.

"Well, he can't be," I said reasonably. "Who's gonna take care of him?"

Who agreed to take him to Corzine?

I didn't like the sound of that. "He likes you," I said. "You take care of him. Besides, I didn't know it was a kid. We ain't set up to take care of kids. I suppose he ain't even housebroken."

Chewie laughed at the horrified expression on my face. *Here,* he said. *You agreed to take him on. You take care of him.*

He passed the kid over to me. At least he wasn't yelling any more. But all at once he grabbed me around the neck and said clearly, "Daddy."

"Now just a minute here," I protested. "Listen, kid, I ain't your daddy."

"Want Daddy!" Azz insisted.

"Now what do I do?" I asked Chewie. Give me a blaster and I can handle just about anything. But a baby--hell, this ain't my idea of a good time. I sat down on the edge of the bed and balanced the kid on my knee. "Listen, kid, we're gonna go for a ride in the ship now."

The kid looked like he was gonna cry again, and that was all I needed. Hell, I ain't used to kids, especially kids this young, and I wanted as little to do with them as possible. Chewie seemed to know more about kids than me--well, he ought to; he had a kid of his own. But when I reminded him of this, he shook his head and pointed out that baby Wookiees and baby humans were two different things, and since the baby and I were both human, I had my work cut out for me. Well, I'd taken the damn money, and I suppose there wasn't nothing I could do about it. Kell was gone, and I didn't have any idea where to find him. I could manage if I had to--I learn fast after all, and I ain't dumb. I oughta be able to take care of a baby.

A horrible sensation of wetness on my knee changed my mind in a hurry. "Shit," I yelled, thrusting the kid at Chewie and leaping to my feet. Sure enough the little monster had wet all over me. That was the last straw. I glared at Chewie, who was howling with laughter. "Okay, that does it. He's your responsibility, damn it, and I don't want any arguments." Chewie, holding the wet baby gingerly at arm's length, knew better than to argue. The kid was screaming his head off, but I left him to Chewie. With all the dignity I could muster, I stalked out of the cabin and went to change my pants. Afterward, I went forward and prepared to take off. In a few minutes, Chewie joined me.

"What'd you do with the kid?" I asked him. If it weren't for the 25,000 credits, he coulda dumped the kid on a garbage heap for all I cared. But since I had the money, we were stuck.

He's asleep, Chewie told me. *I put dry clothes on him and put him to sleep. I don't think he likes you very much.*

"The feeling is mutual," I assured him. "I'll be damn glad when we get to Corzine. Keep him outa my hair till then."

Chewie agreed, but he didn't sound any too happy about it. Well, that's one of the advantages of being captain, you get to pass the buck. I just grinned, and we got off Sterth without any problems. Pretty soon we were in hyperspace, and Chewie and I went to relax for awhile.

No sooner'n we got sat down comfortable, along toddled the little kid and said to me, "Wanna eat now."

"Hell," I said. "Uh...what do you usually eat?"

The kid just looked at me like he didn't know what I was talking about, and he started to get tears in his eyes. Shit, didn't the kid ever do anything but cry? Why the hell did I ever agree to take this charter?

Chewie, who looked amused again, damn him, pointed out that Azz didn't have many teeth yet, so he'd need something that didn't take much chewing.

"I don't suppose Kell left anything for him to eat?" I asked angrily. If I ever saw Kell again, I was gonna beat the hell outa him and love every minute of it.

Chewie shook his head. He told me Kell had brought diapers and clean clothes and that was all. Well, I oughta be able to program the food synthesizer to come up with soft food easy enough. "Do you think he can feed himself?" I asked. "Hey, Azz, can you feed yourself?"

Damn brat only looked at me. Well, he had to eat, so I went away and came back with a plate of some mushy stuff that looked repulsive as hell. Even Azz must've thought so 'cause he got a funny look on his face like he was gonna throw a tantrum or something. Chewie saved the day by picking him up and growling softly at him, and sure enough the kid cheered up. Chewie talked to him for a little while, then sat him down in front of the plate and put a spoon in his hand, and damned if the kid didn't start to eat. He didn't eat very neat--about half the stuff wound up on his face and the front of his shirt, but he must have been hungry 'cause he kept on shoveling it in. I'd've had to be starving a week before I woulda touched it.

We got the idea he was done eating it when he started playing with the food, especially when he started throwing pieces of it. Chewie retrieved the plate quick, gave the kid a light swat on his hand and told him *No.* Azz wasn't dumb--he caught on right away, but he looked sulky as if we'd kept him from having a good time.

"You better clean him up," I told Chewie. "Can't leave him all messy like that."

You can do it, Chewie told me. *All you need to do is change his shirt and wash him off. Anybody could do that.* It was a challenge, I guess. I don't want to think there's stuff I can't do, 'specially if it's easy stuff.

"Shit," I said. "Chewie, don't press your luck. Okay. C'mere, kid, let's get you cleaned up."

The kid grinned at me and reached out for my hand. I didn't particularly want to give it to him--he was all sticky--but I didn't want him howling either, so I took hold of his hand. He came along with me cheerfully enough, talking away, though he didn't seem to be using words, just babbling. For a kid that young, he was pretty brave. Musta been scary for him to get stuck with a couple strangers on a strange ship with no trace of his family. Hell, no wonder he cried as much as he did. You could hardly blame him, I guess. But he was a punky little brat, I had to give him that.

Neither of us enjoyed the cleaning up process very much. Azz yelled like mad when I took his dirty shirt off--you'd have thought I was torturing the brat instead of trying to help him. And he didn't take too kindly to being washed either. Gave me this reproachful look with his big blue eyes as though he took it as a personal affront. And then, when I thought I was done, he gave a tug to his diapers and said, "Wet."

"Again?" I complained and started to yell for Chewie. Then I changed my mind. Chewie thought the whole thing was funny enough already. I sure as hell wasn't gonna give him a chance to have another laugh at my expense. If Chewie could change diapers, I could change diapers, and even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, I was damn well gonna do it and show Chewie that I could. After that, I would turn that little job over to Chewie for the rest of the trip.

"Well, okay, kid," I told him. "Don't worry. Uncle Han is gonna take care of you."

I didn't blame Azz for looking skeptical.

So I got a clean diaper and took off Azz's wet one. And damned if the brat wasn't dirty as well as wet. "Oh, shit," I said, then I realized that that was a poor choice of words. I almost called Chewie, but then I got stubborn. Hell, I'd had to do worse jobs than this with a whole lot less pay than 25,000 credits. Besides, it couldn't have been much fun for the kid to have to wear messy pants like that. So I tossed them into the disposal, used a rag to clean the kid up and threw that into the disposal too. It wasn't as easy to put the clean pants on the kid as I had expected, and the ungrateful troublemaker fought me all the way. But when he was all dressed and clean again, he stopped struggling and even smiled. I found

myself smiling back at him, feeling damn pleased with myself. It wasn't something I'd ever brag about--some of my old buddies would laugh until they were sick if they ever heard about it--but I bet they couldn't have done it any easier than I had. Picking up Azz, I carried him back out to where Chewie was waiting. He didn't say anything, but his face was full of questions.

"Next time is your turn," I assured him. "And that's final." I sat down, still holding the brat, and he cuddled up against me and closed his eyes. I looked up at Chewie. "Uh, Chewie, now what do I do?"

He laughed. *Nothing. Just rock him, and when he's asleep, put him to bed.*

Well, that didn't sound too hard. So I sat there with the kid on my lap, muttering a few soft words to him and feeling like a damn fool. If Chewie laughed at me then, I was gonna take my life in my hands and slug him, but he didn't. He just sat there watching us, not saying anything, and even though he was smiling, it wasn't the kind of smile he uses when something strikes him as funny. In a little while, the kid went to sleep, and I got up carefully and carried him in to bed. He seemed heavier asleep, but he sure looked peaceful. Hard to believe he'd been yelling earlier and throwing his food around.

When I got back, Chewie asked me who I was supposed to deliver Azz to when we got to Corzine.

"A woman named Ardessa. I thought it was a little funny that Kell would tell me who to expect to meet the ship, but that was before I knew he was sticking us with a dumb kid. This Ardessa's supposed to come to the *Falcon* when we land. I hope she ain't too late. Kids! I got enough trouble without that."

Chewie chuckled. *Luke will be waiting when we get there,* he reminded me.

"Yeah, I know," I said without any enthusiasm. It wasn't that I didn't want to see Luke. I like Luke--he's not a bad kid. But I didn't want Luke to see me with the brat. If he did, the story would be all over the Rebel Base, and every time I showed up there, I'd hafta put up with a lot of damn teasing. I could just hear Leia. She'd never let me live it down.

Chewie looked at me like he knew what I was thinking, but he didn't say so. Instead he said he hoped Luke was managing all right on Corzine.

I hoped Luke was having an easy time, but I kinda doubted it. If it were me, I'd have been climbing the walls, but then I never had any interest in being a diplomat. Luke's job was to contact the ruler of Corzine, King Sandon. It had been rumored, I guess, that the king had rebel sympathies, and the Alliance was sending somebody to see if there were any truth in the rumors. I don't know how Luke got the job--guess it was just his turn. Corzine's not a bad planet. The Empire never bothered with them all that much, so I never had a lotta trouble there, at least not with the Empire. But lately, the Empire started coming down on Corzine a little harder, and the people there didn't like it much. They heard about what happened to Alderaan, and I think they just started to get fed up. The Alliance wasn't gonna pass up a chance to bring another world over to their side, but last I heard, Sandon was stalling a little. It didn't look like Luke would have an easy time of it. Rumors were that the Empire had some kinda threat that they were holding over the king's head. Whatever it was, Luke had thought maybe the rebels could help, but you never know. I been around enough to know that you can't ever underestimate the Empire. They got enough power to back up their threats.

Chewie and I talked about Corzine awhile longer, then I wandered off to get some sleep. The last couple days hadn't been very exciting, and boredom tends to make me sleepy. Chewie said he'd look in on Azz before he went to bed, and he stopped in on the way to his cabin long enough to report that the kid was sound asleep.

Unfortunately he didn't stay that way.

I was having a real beaut of a dream all about a very beautiful and very willing woman who reminded me just a little bit of Leia when the most awful shrieks cut across my sleep, waking me instantly. It sounded like somebody was being butchered. Took me a second to get oriented, then I jumped outta bed. It was the kid, and from the way he sounded, he had to be dying at the very least. I didn't stop to get dressed, I just headed that way fast. Chewie, who could probably sleep through a supernova, hadn't even stirred.

The kid was standing in the middle of the bed, screaming his head off. He didn't look like he was hurt, but he sounded like it. I brought up the light-we'd left it on dim for the kid's sake--and went across the room wondering what the hell I was supposed to do next.

"Hey, Azz?" I said, keeping my voice as soft as I could. "What's the matter?"

"I want mama," screamed Azz, and kept on screaming.

"Hey, come on, it's okay." I sat down and picked the kid up. Damned if the little brat wasn't wet again. That might be reason enough to yell, I thought, wondering how old a kid was before he stopped wetting his pants. Older than Azz anyway. Feeling like an old pro, I changed his pants again, then sat down on the bed, holding the kid on my lap. He'd stopped screeching, but he was still crying, and it didn't seem to do a whole lotta good to rock him. What did people do to put kids to sleep? I thought about it. They sang to them, that was it. "Hey, Azz," I said to him, "come on, now, don't cry. Want me to sing you a song?"

The kid didn't say anything, but he didn't seem to be crying as hard. He'd grabbed me around the neck tight enough to make me wonder if he was gonna choke me. Maybe he was just scared, waking up in a strange place. I'd done that a few times, not remembering where I was or how I'd got there, and it ain't got much to recommend it. So I started to sing. I ain't got much of a voice, but the kid seemed to like it. He quieted right down as if he was listening to every word.

That stopped me right there. Hell, most of the songs I know ain't fit for kids to hear, and this one sure as hell wasn't. So I thought a minute, then started another song, this one more respectable. Azz relaxed his death grip on my neck, and he let me put him back into bed, but he tended to get fussy if I stopped singing, so I kept it up. Musta sung that damn lullaby five or six times before his eyes finally closed. I sang the blasted thing one more time just to be on the safe side, then climbed to my feet and turned to go.

Chewie was standing in the doorway.

I felt like a damn fool for singing to the kid, so I snapped at him. "What the hell are you doing awake?"

Chewie grinned at me. *I heard you singing.*

"Trying to, you mean? Yeah, so what?"

Where'd you ever learn a song like that?

"How the hell should I know? Musta heard it someplace, I guess. Never mind." I pushed past him and headed for my cabin. Damn it, I shoulda tried to get 50,000 out of Kell for this voyage. I felt like I woulda earned it.

Chewie followed me. *The boy likes you,* he said. *You're good with him.*

That was all I needed. "Listen, pal, if that's a way to get me to keep changing his pants, you can forget it, okay?" But Chewie must be right. The kid had gone to sleep for me after all. Only it wasn't exactly a useful talent, and it sure wasn't one I wanted mentioned anywhere else. So I said as much to Chewie and stalked off to my cabin. I needed sleep.

In the morning, Chewie had Azz up and dressed and was giving him breakfast when I emerged from my cabin. Little Azz sure was a sloppy eater, but at least he wasn't throwing any food this morning. When he saw me, he got a big smile on his face and said, "Uncle Han." At least that's what it sounded like. Smart kid. I said, "Hi there, kid," and sat down well out of range of his sticky hands.

Chewie didn't mention my midnight adventures which was just as well. I didn't want him making any snide comments. Wookiees have a weird sense of humor anyway, and I got enough troubles without being laughed at. So I grabbed a bite to eat and then I set off to check our heading.

I was reading some of the instruments when along came Azz and tried to climb into my lap. Well, I couldn't let him push some wrong button by accident, so I told him to beat it. "Go find Chewie, kid," I told him. "He'll play with you."

Azz just stared at me for a minute, then he started bawling again. I couldn't take much more of this. Good thing we'd get to Corzine before too long.

"Aw, hell, kid, c'mere," I told him and picked him up. He stopped crying at once and settled down. I was getting kinda good at this, I told myself smugly. Well, why not? Corellians can do anything they set their minds to, even if it's taking care of kids. "Okay, Azz," I told him. "you stay here, but you gotta keep your hands off the controls, okay?"

He gave me a stubborn look, then pointed at the astrogation panel and said, "What's that?"

I told him. He was too little to understand, but what the hell? He listened for a little and then pointed to something else and said, "What's that?"

I wound up telling him the name of every button and light on the board-more than once. The little brat was persistent, and he was too young to make any sense of what I told him. That was starting to get boring, but at least it was keeping him quiet, and I had to monitor the instruments anyway, so I took him forward to the cockpit. Might as well give the kid a look at hyperspace.

Soon as we got sat down, we had to play the 'what's that' game all over again, but after awhile he quieted down. He was looking out at the blurred pattern of stars like it fascinated him. I took advantage of his being distracted to get a little work in, monitoring some of the equipment. The *Falcon* was running smoothly, in real top notch shape since I had access to the rebels' spare parts and repair shop. In fact, things were going pretty good for me. Soon as I got rid of the little monster and picked up Luke, they'd be going even better.

Azz waved a hand toward the stars. "Pretty," he insisted.

I grinned at him. "Yep, kid, you're right. It's something, ain't it?" He didn't get all of that, but he grinned back and took it into his head to hug me. What the hell, I thought, and hugged him back. Nobody would ever know after all.

The kid was pretty good after that. We did have one squabble, and that was when the kid decided he didn't want his lunch. Proved it by dumping the whole plate on the floor, the little bastard. Chewie enjoyed the whole thing--until I made him clean it up. He didn't think it was so funny then.

When we came up on Corzine, the kid was asleep. Just as well. We didn't need an extra pair of hands to pull the wrong lever and mess things up. Well, we came out of hyperspace above Corzine, and the next thing you know, the whole ship lurched. Tractor beam! Right in front of us sat an Imperial cruiser, and it had us cold. We didn't have a chance.

"It's a trap," I told Chewie, but before he could answer, the radio crackled.

"This is Captain Kudar of the Imperial forces. Do not try to escape us. This is a routine search, and if you are not carrying contraband or rebel materials, we will permit you to go."

Well, the only rebel materials I had was the message tape, and it was too well hid for any Imperial to find. So I got on the radio and told him he was free to search. I didn't want to antagonize him unnecessarily and ask for trouble, though I would be ready for it if it came. "I got nothing to hide," I assured him.

"We shall see," Kudar said ominously and signed off. While the *Falcon* was being dragged into their docking bay, I remembered the kid. "Hey, Chewie, I don't suppose that creep Kell gave us papers for the brat?" I could come up with a good story if I had to, but the Empire was real touchy about having proper identification, and they'd be suspicious if the kid didn't have any. Might make them check mine. Then they'd see I had forged papers for the *Falcon*, and that would be that.

But Chewie nodded. The kid had papers, and he went for them so we could get our story straight. When he came back, he was holding the papers, but he had a funny expression on his face, and he gave me a really weird look.

"Gimme that," I said, starting to worry. Wouldn't surprise me none if the kid himself was wanted by the Empire. It'd be just my luck. I snatched the papers.

But that wasn't the way it turned out. The papers were very clear. I took one look at them and said, "Holy shit!" Because according to the papers I held in my hand, Azz's full name was Azz Solo. It listed his parents as-get this--Han Solo and Marna Solo, deceased.

"What the hell?" I said. I had not only never been married to anybody named Marna, I had never been married at all. I'd never even known anybody named Marna. "That Kell's gotta be crazy," I complained. "He can't do this to me."

Chewie looked thoughtful. Well, why not. He wasn't the one who was on the spot. *Nobody would find it strange for you to have your own child on the ship,* he pointed out.

His meaning dawned on me. Maybe Kell hadn't been trying to stick me with a kid. Maybe he'd just been trying to make things safe for Azz. Probably the Imperials wouldn't pay much attention to him if they thought he was mine. Meaning that there probably was a good reason for the kid's real identity to be concealed, and I wasn't sure I liked the idea of that too much. Most likely his real parents were rebels or crooks or something safe like that. Kell wouldn't have paid such a whopping big fee otherwise and been so eager to make the deal, not unless it was pretty important to get the brat to Corzine with a good cover story. He probably already had the fake papers when he talked to me. They looked too good to have been run through in the time he had between talking to me and delivering Azz to the *Falcon*.

But I didn't have a whole lotta time to think the thing out. The damned Imperials were ready to board, and I didn't have a good excuse to stall them. So I went to meet them, putting on a real long-suffering look, like I'm humoring the poor fools and bored by the whole thing.

Kudar was the type of official I don't have anything to do with unless I got no choice, shrewd and cynical, with the kind of eyes that seem to be able to see all sorts of things I needed to keep secret. He was about as yielding as the hull of the *Falcon*; I couldn't bribe him, and it wouldn't have done any good to appeal to the better side of his nature, 'cause he didn't have one. He was sizing me up as I looked him over, and he didn't like what he saw either. His face got a kind of pinched look like he smelled something bad, and he looked around as if he expected to find piles of contraband spread around in plain sight. When he saw Chewie, his face got even more pinched than ever.

"You keep that Wookiee of yours out of my way," he told me. "I don't like Wookiees."

Chewie growled at him menacingly--I didn't blame him; I felt like decking the bastard myself. "Easy, Chewie," I told him warningly. The storm troopers who

were crowding into the ship would probably have taken a shot at Chewie if he made the slightest hostile move. I didn't want Chewie hurt, and I didn't want to give that son of a bitch Kudar the satisfaction of making trouble. Chewie gave me a sour look but he backed off.

"Search the ship," Kudar ordered the storm troopers, then when they moved off, he turned to me. "Your identification," he barked. Nobody ever taught him manners, that was for sure. I gave him all the papers, mine, Chewie's, the brat's and the *Falcon's* forged registration. He made a show of reading them over in extreme detail as if he suspected forgeries. I was starting to get worried when all at once terrified shrieks began to echo through the ship. The storm troopers had found Azz.

I went into my act. "Damn it, if they've hurt my kid, you'll be sorry," and I took off fast in the direction of the screams, aware that Kudar was following me. If only the kid didn't blow it.

And he didn't. The troopers hadn't hurt him, but they'd scared him good. When he saw me, he came charging over, and I picked him up. He grabbed onto me tight and held on. If I didn't wind up choked to death on this trip, it'd be a miracle. And the damn kid was wet again, and he was getting me wet too.

"The child is not hurt," Kudar pointed out. "He is your son?"

"No," I said with immense sarcasm. "I picked him up off a passing asteroid. What the hell kind of question is that?" Then to the kid in a different tone of voice, "Don't cry, Azz. I won't let them hurt you."

Kudar backed off a little, motioning for the storm troopers to leave the cabin, and Azz relaxed a little and stopped crying. "Gone?" he asked me.

"Yeah, they're gone. They won't hurt you." Kudar was starting to look impatient, and I didn't want him getting any funny ideas. I didn't want him picking on Chewie either, so I talked to Azz for a minute or so to soothe him a little, then turned to Kudar. "I'll leave Chewie with him, how's that?"

Kudar's lip curled. "Just keep him away from me," he snarled, giving Chewie a nasty look.

I passed Azz to Chewie before he could do something to Kudar that would get us all into trouble. Chewie's not quite as quick tempered as we let people think, but he can be pushed too far, and I was pretty sure he was nearing his limit fast. I didn't blame him either. "Okay," I said to Kudar, "let's get this over with. I ain't got nothing to hide--and I can't control Chewie When he gets mad."

Kudar gave Chewie a quick look, then led the way out of the room in a hurry. So the damn son of a bitch was a coward. I winked at Chewie and followed him.

Well, Kudar couldn't find anything suspicious though it sure wasn't from lack of trying. He and his damn snoopers even found one of my hidden storage compartments. It was empty, and though Kudar was mad enough to arrest me just for having a secret compartment, he wasn't quite that much of a fool, so he let us go.

I managed not to tell him what I thought of him, but after the *Falcon* was sealed again and on its way down to Corzine, I called the bastard a few names. Chewie appeared with Azz--now wearing dry pants--and he wasn't looking any too happy.

"Hey, Chewie, I'm sorry about that," I told him. "I woulda liked to slug the bastard too." And then I grinned at him. "You sure had him scared though, pal."

Chewie grinned back at me, looking rather pleased with himself, and I didn't blame him. He'd made that hypocrite Kudar look like the damn fool he was, and Kudar had known it. He wasn't so much bigoted as scared, and it showed.

We got clearance to land with no problems...I suppose anybody who'd managed to get through the blockade rated clearance no matter who they were. Whatever the reason, we had no trouble. Chewie kept Azz and did his part one handed. The kid enjoyed the whole process; the view of the landing seemed to fascinate him. Give the little monster seventeen or eighteen years and he'd be wanting to ship out himself. Well, more power to him.

I'd hoped that Ardessa, whoever she was, would get to the ship first and pick up Azz before Luke got here so I wouldn't have to put up with his kidding me about baby sitting and dumb stuff like that. But it didn't work out that way. Leaving Azz with Chewie, I unsealed the ramp--and Luke was there waiting for me, a big grin on his face.

"Hey, Han, you got through the blockade," he said happily.

"Didn't you think I would? I can handle those Imperial bastards any day of the week."

Luke nodded. "I believe it." He frowned suddenly. "Hey, Han, what's that smell?"

"Smell?" I echoed, puzzled, then it dawned on me what he meant. I hadn't had a chance to change my shirt after Azz had managed to wet on it, and I guess I'd forgotten about it. Now that Luke called it to mind, I realized that the damn shirt was still a little damp and it did have a pretty nasty smell to it. "Never mind," I said quickly. I turned and stalked to my cabin where I pulled the shirt off and flung it aside. Luke had trailed after me, and when I had a clean shirt on, I could see that he had a whole lotta questions just waiting, so I got in with one of my own first, hoping Chewie would keep Azz quiet until I could distract Luke.

"Hey, kid, how'd your mission go?"

Luke looked frustrated. "Oh, heck, Han, I don't know. They've been stalling me for days, and now they say they might give me an answer today, but I don't know. They've been waiting for something, but they won't tell me what. It's driving me up the walls."

"I hope they aren't waiting for somebody like Darth Vader to show up."

Luke shook his head positively. "No, I know it's not that. They hate the Empire-- you should hear King Sandon. That's why I can't understand why he won't join us. He wants to, I can tell. But there's some sort of conspiracy at the palace. Sandon won't talk to me and the Queen stays in her rooms all the time. It's weird, Han."

It sounded like trouble to me. I don't like it much when somebody tries to stall; it can mean so many bad things. It could be a trap or a set-up, a plan to betray the rebellion to the Empire. It made me wonder if Kudar's search hadn't been just a little too easy. Maybe they were waiting because Chewie and me were supposed to be part of the deal. "Shit," I said, "I don't like it, kid. It feels like a trap. what do you say we get outa here, soon as my...cargo...gets picked up?"

"Cargo? What cargo?"

Right on cue, Azz started to cry. Blasted little creep had great timing. He would have to go and blow it. Luke's eyes got big and he asked, "What's that?"

"What the hell does it sound like, kid?" With no way to keep Azz a secret any longer, I gave up and went in search of him. Maybe I could at least keep him quiet until Ardessa came for him. Luke trailed after me, looking amused and curious. When he saw Azz, he looked like he couldn't believe his eyes.

Chewie passed the brat to me--he was dry for once--and he stopped crying right away. Luke's eyes got bigger'n ever, and the only way I could get outa this was just to play it like it was no big deal. "Meet my cargo, kid. Paid a damn big pile of credits, too."

"I didn't know you liked kids, Han," Luke commented, watching me bounce Azz on my knee.

"I don't," I said with a silent apology to Azz. "But I sure as hell wasn't gonna pass up 25,000 credits, was I?"

"No, I suppose not." Luke still looked skeptical.

"All Corellians're good with kids," I told Luke. "It just comes natural to us."

"Oh, sure." Luke's been around me long enough to know when I'm bullshitting him. He didn't believe it. I could just see him telling the whole rebel base about Azz. He grinned suddenly. "Somebody's supposed to come and pick him up then?"

"Yeah. I hope they hurry up. I'm getting tired of all this." I bounced Azz on my knee as I spoke, and he laughed, enjoying himself. I smiled at him a little, then wiped the smile off fast when I saw Luke give me a funny look.

Chewie, who'd gone off when he gave Azz to me, reappeared then accompanied by a woman. She wore a loose hooded robe that was as good as a disguise, and I was wondering what was going on when she pushed the hood back from her face and said, "Azz."

Luke scrambled to his feet, about to say something, but he bit back the words as Azz saw the woman and cried, "Mama, Mama." He wiggled out of my grasp, and the woman ran forward to take him into her arms. "My baby, my baby," she said, and there were tears running down her cheeks. "I thought I'd never see you again. Thank the Force you're alive."

Then she looked at me. "Captain Solo, I can never thank you enough for bringing my son safely back to me."

"Uh...I was just doing what they hired me to," I told her awkwardly.

"I saw you holding Azz--I know you were good to him. You will always be welcome on Corzine."

I was a little surprised at her being able to make such a sweeping statement, but then Luke really floored me. "Your Majesty, is it safe for you to be so far from the palace alone? "

"Majesty?" I echoed. "Palace?"

"I have my bodyguards outside, Luke. Besides, now that Azz is safe, things will be different."

Things started to dawn on me. "You mean the Empire was using Azz as a hostage?" I asked this woman, who was apparently queen of Corzine.

She nodded. "The Empire knew that Sandon had rebel sympathies, perhaps they even knew that the Alliance was to send us a representative. So a month ago, Azz was stolen. We think they bribed his nurse. The Empire told us that as long as Corzine remained neutral, Azz would be safe. So you see, Luke, why we

could make no promises to you. I know you've wondered why we stalled you so dreadfully, but our son's life was at stake." She hugged Azz tightly; he had his usual death grip on her already.

"But how'd Azz get free?" I asked.

"The man Kell who contacted you is our best secret agent. He got Azz away from the Empire somehow. We knew, Captain Solo, that you were to come here to pick up Luke, so we found out where you were to be and Kell hired you. We had to offer you enough money so you'd ask no questions, because Kell wasn't sure if the Empire was watching you or not."

"And I suppose Azz's fake papers were his idea too? Cute. Real cute."

"It got you through the blockade, didn't it?" Her eyes sparkled. "Poor Captain Solo. Did you think we were trying to give you a baby?"

"Nah, I figured out by then that it was to keep the kid's real identity a secret."

"Good. Now I must take Azz and return to my husband. Luke, he commissioned me to tell you that the Alliance may now consider Corzine a rebel world."

Luke's face brightened. "Thank him for me, Queen Ardessa."

"Thank rather your friend Captain Solo." She smiled at me, then said, "Azz, we must go now. Tell Captain Solo goodbye."

Azz didn't know how 'Captain Solo' was, but he knew what goodbye meant. He wiggled free of his mother's hold and came over to me. I gave Luke a quick look. He was staring off into space. "C'mere, kid," I said to Azz, picking him up and hugging him. "You be a good kid for your mama," I told him, "or you'll have me to answer to. Is that a deal, kid?"

Azz gave me one of his choking hugs. Damn it, I was really gonna miss the kid a little, though I wouldn't ever admit it to anybody. Sure he could be a real pain in the ass, screaming in the middle of the night and throwing food on the floor, but I guess he wasn't too bad after all.

"Well," I said, starting to pass Azz back to the queen. And then I started to swear. Chewie and Luke started laughing, damn them, but Ardessa gave me an apologetic smile as she took her son back, and she managed not to laugh.

The damn little brat had wet on me again.

end

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