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Kill or Be Killed Part 2

by [Carolyn Golledge](#)

The early morning light cast long shadows from the high circular walls of the arena behind him as Solo stood at the entrance to the maze. Up in the viewing room he knew the Overseers were probably salivating with excitement. Directly ahead, an electronic barrier sizzled and flashed, preventing early entrance to the secrets of the maze. Chewbacca would enter from the opposite side at the same time, or so Solo had been told. He didn't think it would be wise to place much faith in anything Gethrak said. Chewie could come at him from any angle. Even if Solo could unravel the mysterious twists and turns of the maze so as to come within reach of the antidote, he wouldn't put it past the Overseers to change the conditions at the last minute. It didn't seem he had much chance other than that the Overseers might find a fair contest more exhilarating.

"Let's keep a little optimism here, huh, Solo?" He told himself. "Remember, you promised Leia you'd be back in time."

As if the words were a cue, the electronic barrier suddenly disappeared, leaving the mouth to the first of the maze's long, eerily silent tunnels tempting him to step forward. Warily, all senses on the alert, he did so. He had gone no more than twenty yards before he heard Chewbacca's victory howl. The wookiee had his scent. "Chewie!" Solo called desperately. The name echoed mockingly through the metallic corridors. "Chewie!" Surely the wookiee would remember his scent, his voice, and know of the friendship and love they represented. A howl came in response, closer now, but sounding confused, hesitant. Then there was a shriek of pain. A television monitor screen appeared in the wall nearest Solo and he saw that the wookiee had been burned by a stinger bolt. "You bastards!!" he cursed. Gethrak's laughter came from the speaker. "Every time he tries to

remember you, we'll hit him again. Soon he'll learn to associate your voice and your smell with that pain. Good luck." Solo took up the cudgel that suddenly emerged from a panel beneath the screen. It was a heavy enough weapon to do damage, even though made only of wood. Solo was not at all sure he wanted to use it against Chewbacca, but he did find one immediate purpose for it. It gave him considerable satisfaction to smash the surveillance equipment to pieces.

Punishment was swift and unexpected. The floor suddenly dipped beneath his feet, sloping away at a forty-five degree angle and a slick grease began gushing from tiny pores in its upper seam. At the base of the slope, sharp knives protruded, their blades gleaming wickedly as they pointed toward him. Instinctively he backed away, then slipped and fell to his stomach. He clutched at the wall, but to no avail. He was slowly but surely slipping on to the daggers.

"Insult will only earn you injury and delay, Solo!" Gethrak sneered from a further speaker. "I hope you learn your lesson well!"

Solo scabbled about and eventually, miraculously, found a small groove into which he dug his fingers of his left hand. With his right he tore at his jacket, obtaining a strip of material that he jammed into the nozzles producing the grease. The flow stopped in a clean line down the middle of the slope. Solo knew the soles of his boots were covered with mire. Slowly, carefully, he removed each by bringing one foot at a time up to his free hand. The muscles of his left arm and shoulder screamed at him for release. The knives were embedded in a strip about ten feet wide. If he took a running jump he should clear it easily.

Carefully, feeling for purchase with his toes, he stood, picked up the cudgel, edged forward and then took three running steps down the slope. Gethrak, or one of the Overseers, had decided he was not to elude punishment completely. Just as he leaped, a tongue of fire shot out from the wall immediately over the knives. He jerked away from it, lost trajectory and came down short.

Blades nicked his hip, thigh and calf muscle on the left side as he slid free. Cursing, Solo sat up and examined the damage. Not serious, but enough to slow him down. Again he heard Chewbacca's battle call. The wookiee was getting closer, had smelled his blood. Desperately, he pushed himself up. He had one major advantage of which his adversaries knew nothing. His uncanny homing instinct, a Corellian trait, refined in those brought up by jungle clans. Though the walls of the maze had been altered to those he had seen the day before, the configuration of the arena itself remained the same. Solo knew precisely where he was in relation to the centrepoint and the antidote reward. He began a shambling run toward it, instinctively choosing correctly at each junction.

He had not gone far before the Overseers decided he was getting it too easy. An electronic barrier sizzled into life bare inches from his face. He avoided plunging headlong into it only by dropping backwards to fall flat on the hard floor. There

was no choice, he'd have to turn about and try to find another approach corridor. Chewbacca's mind was clouded by drugs. Solo knew it could only be the Overseers' guidance that kept the wookiee moving correctly. So much for a fair game! It was time to alter the odds a little. He stripped off his jacket, wrapped it about the cudgel and threw it at the electronic fence. There was an explosion and the air filled with smoke. That should give the wookiee's nostrils something else to worry about.

Solo turned away and took the nearest side corridor, feeling somewhat pleased with his trick. But again he was made to pay the price. Without warning, the wall upon which he leaned fell flat, taking him with it, and throwing him into a small, roofed, in tunnel. The side wall snapped back into place and pitch blackness closed about him. No air, no light. He was trapped. His heart raced like a trip hammer as the old terror returned, the terror he had inherited after his carbonite internment. Blink and locked in. His muscles spasmed and he began to tremble. "Leia!" he chanted aloud. "Gotta get back to Leia! You can do it!" The fear eased and he began edging forward, feeling his way, and in so doing discovering the cruel intent of the darkness. The wall and floor were covered with stingers, set off by the merest touch. Well at least the frequent jabs kept his mind of the job. His sense seemed heightened by the darkness so that suddenly he was sure he could hear a familiar voice. "Luke? Luke?" he whispered.

"Here!" Came the joyful response. "I have you on Link! I've been trying to pick up your ..."

"Ow, Damnit!" Solo cursed as his bare foot came down on another stinger. That broke his concentration and the Mindlink was gone, but the comfort remained. He knew Skywalker would be homing in on him now. Another wookiee roar reminded him he had someone less friendly on his tail. Ignoring the minor stings and cuts, he moved forward again, this time bumping up against a solid barrier. Instinct told him the centre of the maze was just beyond it. Chewbacca was somewhere behind him, there was no turning back. He began searching for some way over, under or around the obstacle. His fingers and toes searched and prodded, losing sensitivity as blood smeared them and cuts and burns sent their own messages of outrage. Then he felt it, a weaker spot, slightly concave, a minute hollow. He drew his arm back, then punched as hard as he dared and was rewarded by a crumbling sound and a glimmer of light. He placed his eye to the hole he had created and saw another corridor beyond. He was sure it was the final passage and it appeared free of hazards. He pounded harder at the weak spot and slowly the hole began to widen.

Then came a snarl from the darkness behind him that froze the blood in his veins. The wookiee had found him. Solo whirled about, the murky beam of light from the hole his only illumination as he faced the enraged Wookiee. "Chewie," he pleaded. "C'mon pal. It's me, Han. You know me, Chewie ..."

Again the wookiee screamed as a stinger bolt found its mark. Driven by pain, he charged toward the scent that was his tormentor. Instead of backing away, Solo took two quick steps toward his attacker. He needed room to build up momentum. He turned again and hurled himself feet first at the small hole, hoping to smash his way through. No such luck. The hole did widen, huge chunks fell away, but the impact caused enough resistance to cause Solo to fall back to the floor of the darkened chamber. The wookiee bore down upon him. Furry fingers brushed Solo's chest as Chewbacca snatched blindly, guided only by smell in the dim light. Terrified, Solo got to his knees and dove head and shoulders through the hole. A giant, powerful fist clamped tight about his left ankle and began hauling him back. Solo struggled to break free and the steel-sinewed hand closed tighter still. The bones in Solo's foot and ankle creaked in protest then snapped. Solo screamed as a bolt of searing agony shot up his leg. He thrashed and kicked out with the other leg and by pure chance caught the wookiee full in the sensitive snout. The crushing fingers released him and he pushed free, falling in a dazed, limp heap to the brightly lit, silent corridor beyond.

Pain washed through him, threatening to send him reeling into unconsciousness. He gulped huge lungfuls of air, lying immobile on his side, fighting the dizziness. A long, muscled wookiee arm suddenly shot through the opening, narrowly missing ensnaring its prey again. Chewbacca drew back, howling and screaming with rage as he pounded at the wall, widening the hole. Terror pushed the pain back, and Solo got his good leg under him, shoulder to the wall, he turned toward the end of the corridor. Round its corner he hoped he would find the antidote. It was his only chance.

For once the Overseers chose not to punish him. He made his way unobstructed into the small, inner circle. He gave a gasping cry of relief as he spotted a low shelf near the far wall. Upon it lay a clear vial attached to a pressure-loaded dart-shaped syringe. Theoretically, all he had to do was ensure it made contact with the wookiee's flesh. He hobbled painfully toward it, hearing Chewbacca's ear-shattering howls and the crashing of more material from the wall of the darkened chamber. Ten feet short of his target, he came to a standstill, suspicious. It was all too easy. Every fibre of his being warned him against taking another step. Somehow, just letting him walk up and himself seemed insufficient to sate the Overseers' sadism. There had to be a catch. But what was it? The pain in his crushed ankle was excruciating, blocking his thought processes. There had been a time when Luke had trained him in the use of a pain-block. But, as he recalled, it required a state of relaxation. He snorted to himself, and muttered, "Relax!? You gotta be kiddin' me!"

Exhausted and unable to see any other way out, he lowered himself to the floor, incapable of standing any longer in any case. He struggled to clear his mind of pain, find the answer, but pain was not the only intrusion on his thoughts. Judging by the amount of noise coming from behind him, Chewbacca must be making short work of that wall! Solo knew that if the wookiee had been rational,

he would have broken through by now. As it was, he was striking out in blind rage, probably missing his target more often than not. The knowledge of what the Overseers had done to his friend caused anger to flare in him. Concentrate!!

Time seemed to drag, then suddenly inspiration struck. Whatever hazard lay between him and the antidote, it had to be triggered by either weight or body heat. He had to obtain the antidote without actually going near it. The image that came to his mind was himself as a small boy back in the jungle-edged marshes of Corell, hunting blantirs. The small rodents used the shifting sands as their protection from predators. The trick was to snare them without falling prey yourself to the quicksand. Solo's eyes snapped open, alert and triumphant as he surveyed his present-day blantirs. Of course, that was it! It'd be easier in fact! The antidote wasn't about to run from his snare.

He set to work, tugging off his belt and his shirt, tearing strips of material and twisting them to form line and lasso. The end product lengthened his reach, but still not quite far enough. An almighty crash and a blood-curdling bellow informed him that the wookiee was free. He was out of time. He slid forward on his stomach as far as he dared and threw his lasso.

The transferral of weight set off a hidden sensor and a small square of floor disappeared. Solo caught sight of a very long drop into a darkened pit. His first throw had fallen to one side of the vial. Mouth dry and heart racing, he hauled in and prepared to try again.

But all too late. The wookiee has reached the inner circle. Desperately, Solo threw again, giving a whoop of pleasure as his snare hit dead on target, capturing the antidote with the noose. A quick jerk and the prize flew toward him, but before his fingers could grasp it, the wookiee charged. Instinctively, Solo threw himself to one side and the mammoth creature plunged onward. But the trap was sprung. The floor caved in. "No!" Solo shouted, as he saw the wookiee fall. He scrambled to the edge of the pit and leaned forward. An immense, hairy arm shot upward, clamped about Solo's shoulder and pulled him down too.

Perhaps the Overseers had altered the drop at the last second, or perhaps Solo's earlier estimate had been a false impression. Either way he was surprised after falling only fifteen feet or so, slamming into a rough rocky surface with enough force to drive the breath from his lungs but cause him no real damage. The surge of pain from his broken foot and ankle left him stunned and sickened for a few moments. No less than an arm's length away, the wookiee's mad, vacant eyes burned out of the dim shadows.

"C'mon pal, please," Han gasped, the words rattling from a fear-frozen throat. "Take it easy, Chewie. It's me, Han. C'mon ..." He kept talking as he backed away, still seated on his haunches, his bad leg twisted and useless. He didn't have time to struggle to his feet, not much point anyway when he couldn't run.

Still the wookiee didn't move, the blue eyes ablaze with hatred, empty of recognition, a low, chilling, snarl rumbling from deep within his huge chest, foam-flecked spittle crusting his lips and jaw-line. Completely mad. Where the hell was that antidote!? The noose was still wrapped about Solo's wrist. Quickly, he began reeling it in.

The pressurised capsule bumped against his hand just as the wookiee got to his feet and charged forward. The impact nearly knocked Solo senseless. He was lifted and slammed against the rear wall. It was made of loose earth and small rocks, and gave way behind him, otherwise Solo would not have survived that first rush. Chewbacca let go, and dazed, Solo slid to the floor, his fingers still fumbling to properly grasp and fire the antidote dart. The wookiee moved away, then cat-like, closed slowly upon him once more, the gleam of kill-lust bright in the baleful eyes flaring in the dark.

"Chewie," Solo said once, suddenly torn by pity for his lost friend. "Chewie ... awww pal, look what they've done to ya."

Incredibly, somewhere, the tone of those words reached Chewbacca's soul, and he paused, head cocked to one side, listening, hopeful, searching. "Chewie?" Solo questioned. Then he fired the dart. The wookiee screamed in outrage, lunged forward and heaved Solo into the air. At that range, the dart hadn't missed. It dug deep into Chewbacca's flank and seemed to have no effect whatever.

Solo no longer had the breath for pleading. He barely had breath enough for life. It was being squeezed, slowly, cruelly, from him by his friend's crushing arms. Lowered face to face with the wookiee, Han stared into the blue eyes, seeking some sign of the soul he knew and loved. As oxygen continued to be denied him, his vision clouded and horror filled him as he realised the antidote would come too late to prevent Chewbacca killing his best friend. That knowledge would destroy the wookiee forever, even if Luke arrived in time to save him from the slave-world. The image was too awful to take with him into the realm of death. Solo struggled pathetically. The grip tightened in response and ribs began to crack. He gave one low groan and passed out.

His faint could have lasted no more than seconds. When he came round, he was lying on his side where the wookiee had dropped him. He tried to sit up, hopeful that his freedom meant the antidote was working, and not simply that the wookiee wanted to draw out his death. The attempt at movement only brought nerve-endings to agonising life, and he cried out involuntarily. There was a muffled grunt from Chewbacca in response. Solo's heart lurched with hope. It almost sounded like 'Han'. Carefully, he lifted his head and saw the wookiee sitting huddled and shaking against a side wall.

"Chewie?" You okay now?" Solo ground out over the pain in his chest. "Can y'hear me, pal?"

The wookiee shook his head, blinked and squinted at Solo, but did not answer. Han took that as a good sign. The burning rage was gone from the blue eyes, leaving them full of confusion. Hoping that the wookiee would eventually come to his senses, Solo dropped his head back tiredly to the soft earthy floor. He was content just to lie there and rest, hurting too much to move anyway. Consciousness faded again, so that Solo was unaware when shortly afterward the chamber was flooded with stun gas.

When Solo next awoke, he was lying on something softer and his head was supported by a warm cushion. Other than that not much seemed to have changed. He still hurt badly enough that consciousness came and went, it was still dark and he was sure he was still somewhere below ground level. Dizzy and sick, his memory was uncertain, but he knew he had to get moving, the wookiee must be close. The urgency of that thought finally cleared his head completely, and he struggled to prop himself up, gasping as pain flared in his chest. An immense, furry hand descended out of the darkness, reaching for him. Solo let out a terrified scream and tried desperately to back away, but again pain held him prisoner. Still he fought, scrabbling back, expecting any moment that those cruelly crushing arms would recapture him. Light suddenly pushed back the blackness, hurting Solo's eyes. The steady glow of a battery lamp flooded the underground cavern, and Solo lay, half-sitting, shaking with fear as he stared up at Chewbacca.

"I am sorry, Little One," a sorrow-laden wookiee voice rumbled, ever so gently. "I have hurt you. I do not blame you for being afraid of me. I won't touch you again. Please don't move."

Solo blinked and gaped. Finally realisation dawned and he remembered that he had administered the antidote. What he'd thought had been a cushion beneath his head, had in fact been the wookiee's thigh. Dimly now, he recalled being cradled in arms as tender and careful as a mother's, soft fingers stroking his hair and a rumbling voice making such sounds of distress that he had fought hard to awaken so as to offer comfort. Elation surged through him as he understood he had his friend back at last.

"Chewie!" he cheered, grimacing as his ribs protested. "You're okay!!" Cautiously, he edged forward and shook the wookiee's arm in welcome. "Hey! We're a team again! C'mon, we gotta get outa here."

Chewbacca did not react other than to say, "I almost killed you. I saw the light leaving your eyes and yet still I crushed the life from you."

Solo let out an exasperated sigh. "Ahh shit, fuzzface, we ain't got time for apologies. I forgive ya, okay? It wasn't you anyhow, it was the drugs that Imperial sithslime pumped into ya. Now he's the one we've gotta settle with. I swore Blood Oath for the both of us. Now, c'mon, will ya snap out of it, please?"

"Blood Oath?" The wookiee repeated. Hopefully he added, "You ... you are not afraid of me? There was so much terror. I caused that."

Han realised that no amount of words would instantly erase so great a sense of shock, but he needed the wookiee up and running on all burners somehow. "C'mon," he said teasingly, grasping the wookiee's hand. "I'm the one who knows what a big sook you really are, remember? Who's the only wookiee we know who's got a stuffed toy bantha on his bed?"

"I told you, I bought that for the baby!" the wookiee responded with automatic insult.

"Right," Solo agreed, unsmiling. He looked long into the wookiee's eyes, silently communicating his desperate need to return to Leia. "So let's get outa here and make sure we can give it to the kid when she arrives."

The tension drained from Chewbacca's giant body and a smile played about his eyes. "He. I still say it will be a boy."

"Nope. It's a girl. I can feeeeeeeel it." Solo drawled the word, mocking his Jedi brother-in-law's favourite phrase. The wookiee snorted. "So, let's get movin'! You're gonna have a bet to pay out on!" Again, Solo made to get to his feet. Fire lanced through his shattered ankle and seared its way up to explode in his head. "Holy shit!" he swore when he got his breath back. "What the hell did I do to my foot?"

"I don't know," the wookiee replied in concern. "Let me take a look at it. I thought I had, I mean, I thought only your ribs ... were ..." He stopped, shocked as he realised the extent of the damage. Solo's entire left foot and ankle were swollen to twice their normal size and were a deep, ugly purple-blue colour. "You can't walk on this," Chewbacca said flatly. "It's broken. Badly broken. Where are your boots? It looks like you caught it in a grinder! Don't you remember what happened?"

Suddenly, Solo did remember, and, as the wookiee looked him in the face, he tried hard to hide the answer. "Ahh yeah. Well. There were a lot of booby traps in there."

"I did this to you, didn't I?" the wookiee asked in a tone that would tolerate no lies.

Solo simply nodded and said, "It'll heal."

The wookiee let out a long, weary sigh. "I'll do what I can to splint it," he said. "I'll need what's left of your shirt, and I saw some wood on the other side of this cell. I'll go ..."

"Cell!?" Solo interrupted. "Aren't we still in the arena?"

"No. They hit us with stun gas a few minutes after I came to my senses. Then they moved us back here. This is the same cell I've been held in for several days."

"Oh great! Wonderful!" Solo scowled. He sat back defeatedly, shrugged out of the remnants of his shirt and began tearing bandaging. He wished there was enough material to help secure his ribs too, but no go. As he sat thinking, he realised they were probably better off here than back in the maze, where surveillance cameras could monitor their every move. This underground cell was very crude, more like a cave, and as he looked about, Han spotted a barred door beyond a slight curve. There was a water bucket and lantern but not much else. "Well," he finally said with a sigh, "it could be worse."

A tremendous explosion suddenly shook the ground beneath him and soil and small rocks rained down, coming loose from the roof of the cavern. The trembling aftershocks felt like an earthquake. Solo was thrown to one side, his injuries causing him to cry out as he was jolted. Then, the shock waves stopped as suddenly as they had started.

"Are you all right?" Chewbacca asked as he helped him back to a sitting position.

"Do I look all right?!" Solo answered sourly. "I'm gonna have to stop saying that."

"What?" the wookiee queried as he assembled the pieces to the makeshift splint.

Solo gave him an exasperated look. "Every time I say," he paused, "y'know, something always happens."

"Every time you say y'know?"

Solo groaned. "No, fleabrain! Every time I say "Things could be worse". Aahhh!" he screamed as the wookiee suddenly straightened his leg and fastened the splint. "See what I mean?" he finished with a weak smile.

The wookiee finished tying the bandage then ruffled Solo's hair and gave him a steady look that said more by way of apology than any words. Now that Solo had completely removed his shirt, the wookiee could see the horrific swelling and bruising encircling the man's chest and shoulders. He touched gentle fingers to

the welts, sighed and shook his head. "You said it was an Imperial who drugged me?"

"Yep. Gethrak. Remember him?"

"Gethrak!" the wookiee snarled. "How could I forget!? It took me two months to recover from that blaster burn!"

"Right. So you got a double score to settle with him. But leave me a piece, okay?" The wookiee nodded and Solo added, "Now, how do we get outa here?"

Chewbacca slumped back against the wall. "I hate to have to tell you this, Solo, but there is no way out. I tried everything when I first got here."

"There's got to be a way! Lemme think!"

Time passed and finally Chewbacca said, "Maybe I should turn out the lantern again. The batteries are running low."

"Okay," Solo agreed distantly, still lost to his scheming. As the cell was plunged into darkness, he asked, "I know they didn't kill me because they want a repeat performance, what I can't figure is why they just threw me in here with you? I mean, if they want to sell me as a gladiator they'd have at least patched me up first."

"They seemed to be in quite a panic up there," Chewbacca commented. "Running around like an upended swarm of tenbees."

"I thought you were out to it?"

"And who was going to carry me down here? No, they chained me, woke me up and made me walk. They had a blaster held on you. I didn't give them any trouble."

"Oh. Panicked y'reckon. I wonder ... hey!" Solo snapped his fingers. "Luke must be up to his old tricks! That's probably what that explosion was all about!! I'll bet he's got half the fleet in orbit up there by now! Go get 'em Skywalker!"

"Luke!?"

"Yeah," Solo explained. "He sorta ... y'know ... talked to me like he can sometimes. Back in the Maze. I only just remembered. He said something about homing in on me, I think."

"Then we could be in real trouble!" the wookiee rumbled.

"Now whatever gives ya that idea!" Solo commented sarcastically.

"I'm serious. If Luke brings the Alliance in here, our captors may decide to destroy the evidence."

Solo sobered. "Meaning us." The wookiee simply nodded. "Damnit! There's gotta be a way outa here! Look around, check it out again. Maybe you missed something."

"We're fifty feet underground," Chewbacca said grimly. "Below the castle. Solid rock walls and a barred door that even I couldn't make a dent in."

"You're real cheerful company, y'know that, fuzzface? Go look anyway. How far back does this cave extend?"

"About one hundred and fifty feet," the wookiee answered as he reached for the lantern.

"Wait!" Solo said suddenly. "Don't light that!"

"Why not?"

"What's that? Over there. Here, feel where I'm pointing. Right. Now look. Right there."

"I can't see anything."

"No, well I guess you wouldn't," Solo admitted. He had forgotten the wookiee's limited vision in poor light. "I swear there's a crack or somethin' in the roof over there. I can see a dim light comin' through."

"Han," the wookiee sounded sceptical. "You probably have a concussion."

"Oh shut up and go check it out, will ya! If light's leakin' through there then air will be too. That honker of yours should be able to sniff it out."

The wookiee obeyed, moving to the indicated spot and sniffing for all he was worth. He made a sound of disgust. "You're right! There's an air current here all right. It stinks."

"Great!" Solo exclaimed. "Now start digging!"

"With my bare hands? That's solid rock, Solo."

"You don't know that for sure," Solo argued. "Maybe it's a seam or something. That explosion could have weakened it. Here, if I take this lantern to bits you can use the pieces to scrape with."

Chewbacca snorted, impressed as always by Solo's adaptability. "And what are you going to be doing while I'm working?"

Solo grinned, feeling cheerful for the first time in what seemed ages. "Oh, I figure I'll take a nap. Call me when you get through."

Dutifully, Chewbacca scraped away and Solo watched and offered occasional words of encouragement, including plans for what they'd do to Gethrak when they caught up with him. There were three more explosions, minor by comparison to the first, but sounding closer, and Solo was sure he heard cannon fire once or twice. Solo made no complaint but his leg throbbed mercilessly, eventually making him groggy with pain. He fell silent, listening to the rhythmic sounds as Chewbacca dug and chopped away at the seam which gradually widened so that a dull beam of light fell in shaft through the cavern.

The next Solo knew, Chewbacca was gently shaking him awake. "How are you feeling?" he asked softly as he offered Solo some water.

"Gratefully, Han swallowed, then answered, "I'm okay."

The wookiee's huge hand lifted to rest on Solo's brow. "You have a fever. It's time I got you out of here and into a hospital."

"Yes mother!"

Ignoring the taunt, Chewbacca turned and pointed to the place he had been working. "There's the exit."

Where once had been a narrow crack now was a hole five feet or so in diameter. Solo cheered. "Hey, you did great pal! C'mon help me up."

The wookiee wrapped a powerful arm about Solo's waist, careful to avoid placing pressure upon the ribs as he all but carried him to the opening.

"Ready?" he asked. Solo nodded and he boosted him up.

Solo had a hard time of it wriggling and heaving over the pain of cracked ribs, but he made it. "It's all clear up here, Chewie," he reported. "Not much room though. Some kind of pipe. Stinks like hell. Must be a drain."

Chewbacca had considerably more trouble squeezing through and once up in the drain, there wasn't room for him to stand. It was slow, painful going as Solo was unable to either crawl or slide on his stomach. Finally the wookiee hauled him along on his back. Eventually, Chewbacca spotted what looked like an entrance in the roof above which was approached by a short ladder and covered with a hinged lid. "Let's hope there's no one up there when I push this thing open," he rumbled to Solo. Han lay panting and exhausted, waiting, and finally the wookiee called, "It's no use, the groove is designed for a human hand. You'll have to try it."

Solo groaned, then nodded weary agreement. He edged past the wookiee, then laboriously heaved himself up the three rungs of the ladder until he could reach the latch. Lifting his arms above his head was agonising, as was the effort to push upward. The cover finally gave and a flood of putrid water and garbage came raining down. Drenched, stinking and miserable, Solo glared down at the wookiee. "You knew that was coming, didn't you?!"

The wookiee gave an embarrassed shrug. "Can you make it the rest of the way or do you want me to go first and haul you out?"

"I can make it! I can make it!" Solo snapped. He disappeared through the hatch then called down, "C'mon up. You'll love it. It smells even better up here? I think we hit the main sewer canal."

The wookiee gave a mournful honk and followed. "Well at least now we can stand up," he said as he emerged into the broad canal.

"Speak for yourself," Solo answered tiredly. "My leg's killin' me!"

Chewbacca made no return comment. He simply bent down and heaved his friend up carefully, taking most of his weight. Time dragged as they trudged through the foul-smelling underground passage. There were more frequent explosions now, still closer, and they made toward the sounds. Finally they found a side tunnel that sloped up into the daylight and opened out into a small courtyard. There was a battle in progress on its far side, defenders trying to prevent attackers breaching the wall. There was a lot of smoke and confusion, but a figure in uniform suddenly appeared on the rampart, a blaster in one hand, and an Alliance flag in the other. He urged his troops to follow him and was promptly felled by fire from within the castle.

Solo cursed. "How many times have I told those idiots to give up the hero tactics! C'mon Chewie, we're gonna have to give 'em a hand."

"Solo," the wookiee protested. "You can barely stand. Wait here. I'll find some weapons and we can attack from shelter."

"Yeah, okay," Solo agreed readily. He sat behind cover, watching as the wookiee shuffled away, keeping close to the wall and on the lookout for fallen weapons. There was another blast and a hole appeared in the far wall. The battle suddenly intensified as Alliance troops charged in, taking heavy casualties in the process. The defenders retreated, coming closer to Solo's position. A young Alliance soldier let out a battle cry very familiar to Solo's ear - the Corellian battle challenge. The youngster had lost a friend and was seeking vengeance, but all he got was a shoulder wound. He toppled and fell, rolling forward down a pile of rubble to lie exposed and moaning only yards from Solo's hiding spot. It wouldn't be long before someone noticed him and finished him off.

Cursing fluently, Solo scabbled forward, grabbed at the youngster's coat and began hauling, urging him to help as much as he could. Under cover again, he took up the boy's weapon and began firing on the defenders who fell unsuspecting of attack from their rear. The Alliance began to make ground, as, to Solo's flank, Chewbacca also began shooting. Solo was enjoying taking toll of the slavers, when a sickeningly familiar voice announced from behind him, "That's enough, Solo. Drop your weapon or I'll blow your head off."

Cautiously, Solo looked back. Sure enough Gethrak had a disruptor rifle aimed squarely at him. Solo let the blaster fall and raised his hands, his eyes relaying a blazing message as to what he'd do to the Imperial given even half a chance. "I should kill you now," Gethrak continued. "But I need a passport out of here, and you're it. Get to your feet."

Solo didn't move. "I'm sort of having a problem with that right now."

"Ah yes, the wookiee made a mess of your ankle. I remember how much the Overseers enjoyed that. They were very impressed by your performance yesterday. I intend giving you to them in return for passage on one of their ships and refuge on their homeworld. This battle is covering their escape. We must hurry or we'll miss them. Myall, get him up! Leave your weapon here, I don't want Solo snatching it."

The king's guardsmen moved to Solo's side and none too gently heaved him up. "Good," Gethrak nodded. "Move ahead. You know the way, Myall. We're going to leave via the castle, Solo. There's a tunnel that leads ..."

His words were cut short by a bellow of rage from Chewbacca. The wookiee had spotted them and was moving toward them, fangs bared in absolute fury. Gethrak moved with fear-induced speed to come up on Solo's unsupported side. He cocked one elbow under the Corellian's chin and placed the bore of the rifle to his prisoner's temple. The wookiee's enraged charge came to an abrupt halt. He stood shaking and snarling, but his eyes anxious for Solo's safety. "Back off or he's dead!" Gethrak warned. "Understand me, wookiee? I'll kill him!"

Chewbacca stood uncertainly, watching as Myall and the Imperial began dragging Solo toward the castle. A sudden, deafening cannon blast hit the side wall as the Alliance decided on an outflanking tactic. Rubble rained down, the ground shook and Myall stumbled. Solo pushed and they both went down. Solo rolled hard against the Imperial's legs and brought him down too. The rifle was jarred free of the man's grasp and Solo dove for it. Gethrak grabbed cruelly at Solo's bandaged ankle, hauling him away from the prize and drawing a scream of agony from the Corellian's lips. But Chewbacca had been given all the time he needed. Solo heard the killing rage in the wookiee's growl. Gethrak's eyes widened with terror as he turned about and saw the snarling expression that had earlier seemed the prelude to Solo's death. Almost berserk with hatred, Chewbacca knew his target this time. He grabbed the whimpering Imperial by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall, then began slowly crushing him. Solo wanted revenge as much as anyone but somehow the sight still sickened him, bringing back memories he was sure would fill his nightmares for some time to come.

The same memories must have returned to Chewbacca because he too suddenly lost all interest in torturing his victim. He held the Imperial clear of the wall, and Gethrak had time to beg for mercy.

"We'll show you more mercy than you've ever shown any of your captives," Solo said simply. He watched as Chewbacca reached out an immense fist, closed it upon the Imperial's throat, and quickly and cleanly snapped his neck. "It was a better death than he deserved," Solo commented. "C'mon let's tie this other one up and get back to the fight!"

Myall still lay semi-conscious where he had fallen. Chewbacca tied him securely, then helped Solo back to his feet, both of them claiming rifles.

"Han! Chewie!" a delighted voice called to them over the receding sounds of battle. The Alliance had won. There was only the mopping up left. The two escapees looked up to see Skywalker running toward them from amongst the ruins of the wall, a huge grin decorating his boyish face. The grin faded as he drew level with them and took in Solo's condition. The Corellian was dressed only in trousers, and seemed to be covered from head to toe with bruising and abrasions hidden beneath a coating of filth. His left leg was raised from the ground, the ankle strapped in a tattered splint. "Sands!" Luke exclaimed. "What happened to you!?"

"Everything," Solo said concisely.

"Sure looks that way," Luke observed. "Leia is not going to be happy." He came closer, intending to lend a shoulder in support, then drew back. "'Struth! What is that smell!?"

"Do you mind?" Solo replied offendedly. "It's been a rough day. I could use a bath."

Skywalker snorted. "You could use a bacta tank!" He turned and shouted, "Medic!"

"Ahh shit, kid," Solo complained. "Why did ya have to go and do that? I just want to get back to Leia. How is she?"

"Oh," Luke said somewhat evasively. "She's fine."

"Fine!! Fine??!!" Solo exclaimed in alarm. "What the hell does that mean? She's not ... y'know ... she hasn't ... started yet or anything, has she?"

He was interrupted as the medical team arrived and promptly had Chewbacca arrange him on the provided stretcher. "I promised her!" Solo pleaded. "Luke, tell me!"

Skywalker smiled down at his injured friend. "She's still pregnant, if that's what you're raving about .. but she's been hitting the panic button about you the same way you just did about her. She refused to stay home."

"She what!?" Solo pushed away the medic who was attempting to inject him with painkillers. "Then where the hell is she?"

"Up there." Luke pointed to the sky. "In orbit on the Medgate. At least we managed to stop her from coming down here to rescue you herself. She said we were ... errrrr ... ohh!" Luke groaned suddenly, doubled over and clutched at his middle.

"Kid!! Kid!???" Solo pleaded. "What is it?!"

Slowly, Skywalker straightened up. His face was pale and his blue eyes round with surprise. "It's the baby," he said simply.

"The b, b, ... the baby what??!" Solo demanded. He tried to get up but the medics held him back. He wanted to shake more information from the Jedi.

"The baby," Luke repeated dazedly. "It's coming."

"Now!!?" Solo exclaimed. Luke nodded. Solo swore, then he turned to the medics and said, "Get me to the hospital on the double."

The young medic sighed and shook his head. "That's what we've been trying to do, sir," he said with admirable restraint. They moved off in procession, Solo on one stretcher, the wounded Corellian youngster on the other, Chewbacca and

Luke flanking them. Solo's eyes never left the Jedi. "Has she had another one?" he asked.

"No," Luke replied warily, not sure he wanted to share this experience with his sister. He was desperately searching for some way to block out his natural bond with her. "She's fine now."

"The first contractions can be as much as an hour apart," the medic informed them. "Solo, that leg is in a bad way. you will need an operation."

"No, oh no! No way!" Solo refused. "Not now! I promised Leia I was gonna be there when the baby comes and I will!"

"But you can't even walk!" Chewbacca protested.

Solo turned pleading eyes to the medic. "You can take care of that, can't ya?"

"Sir," the medic sighed again. "That ankle needs to be cleaned and set under anaesthesia. And then there's your ribs. We don't know ..."

"To hell with all that!" Solo pointed a despairing finger at Skywalker as the Jedi doubled over once more. "That baby's coming now!! Just give me a shot or something so I won't feel this damned foot! That's all I need! And make sure it keeps me awake too!"

"Sir ..."

"That is a direct order, Lieutenant!"

And so it was that Solo managed to hobble into the delivery room. He had washed and changed quickly, getting rid of the dirt at least, but there were still bruises and that smell that no amount of soap seemed able to entirely smother. Leia was lying on the delivery table, dressed in a simple white gown, the lower half of her body hidden by tented sheets. "What is that awful smell?" she complained.

Solo grinned shakily as he came up to her. "Me."

"Han!" she cried. "Thank God! I was so worried! Are you all right? You look awful! You found Chewie?"

Solo nodded, his throat felt as though it had swollen shut and tears burned in his eyes. "Told ya I'd get back in time. How do you feel!"

"I'm f ... f... fine!" The word became a wail as Leia squeezed her eyes shut against another contraction. She fought the pain, listening to Jara's soft words of encouragement, then she looked back at Solo and smiled. "Everything will be all right now that you're here and soon our baby will be too."

Solo nodded, unable to speak. He hated seeing her hurting like this and he felt so helpless. All he could do was hold her hand, kiss her and stroke her forehead.

"Are you sure everything went okay down there?" Leia asked suspiciously. "Chewie wasn't hurt?" Solo shook his head. "Well talk to me, damnit!" she demanded. Then, surprised, she noticed the tears trickling down his cheeks. "Han! You're crying! What's wrong?!"

Jara leaned toward Solo and whispered, "Don't upset her now!"

He forced a smile. "Nothin'." He said with a shrug. She glared at him, not accepting that, and he swallowed against the lump in his throat and admitted, "It's just that I love you so much, I wish you didn't have to hurt like this."

"Oh Han," she said softly, wiping the moisture from his cheek. "You really are a big sook, you know that?"

Solo sniffed and smiled. "That's what I told Chewie when ..."

"You told Chewie that you're ...!" Leia began but was cut short as Pain hit her again. She squeezed hard on Solo's hand and from that moment on had no time for words. She worked hard, pushing and relaxing as the doctor instructed, and finally the contractions peaked. Shortly afterward, dizzy and weak, she heard a baby's cry.

"Han! Han!" she called and he was there, placing the tiny squirming figure on her breast. She looked up to find his eyes shining with the joy of the miracle he had witnessed.

"It's a girl, Leia," he said softly. "Our little daughter, Elisan."

Some minutes later, as Leia was returned to her room and the baby taken to the nursery for examination, Solo collapsed and was rushed to emergency surgery.

"Han Solo! If you ever, ever dare to pull a stunt like that again, I'll, I'll ..."
Leia Organa's tirade trailed off as she tried to think of suitable punishment. She

sat in her wheelchair and stared, speechless with fury, at her husband who lay propped up by a mound of pillows in the hospital bed before her.

"Aww, c'mon, Leia," he pleaded. "I had a promise to keep."

Leia made some spluttering, choking sounds then somehow managed to find her voice. "Oh, I see! A promise! Right!" she dropped her hands defeatedly to her sides. "You were bleeding internally, you idiot! They told you that, didn't they!?!"

"Ahh, well." Solo mumbled. "Not really. They didn't know when I ..."

"You didn't let them examine you, did you!" Leia's expression became even more incredulous. "You should have gone straight to surgery! Solo, you never cease to amaze me!"

Suddenly the whole situation struck Solo as hilarious. Here was his pint-sized wife, new mother, bawling him out from her wheelchair - and she looked so cute. He decided she should know that, so he interrupted her ranting, she was back to the damage done to his ankle now. "Leia, Leia, Leia."

"What!!?" she snapped.

"You're so cute when you're mad!"

"Oooohhh!!!" Leia picked up a spare pillow and threw it at him.

"Hey!" Solo said in an injured tone. "Take it easy, will ya!? I'm a sick man. Ask anybody."

"Oh, you're sick all right!" Leia retorted. "But in the mind, not the body!"

Solo could only grin. He was enjoying this. "C'mere."

"Why?" Leia responded huffily. She folded her arms and turned from him.

"I wanna tell ya somethin' sorta personal."

"Well all right," she surrendered, her anger fading. She got out of her wheelchair and sat beside him. He lifted an arm as if to embrace her, but instead slid his hand down the front of her robe.

"Childbirth has done wonders for your bra size, Your Highness!" he teased.

"Is that all you can think of!?"

"Yep!" Solo smirked. "Hey! It's been a long time!"

Leia's lips softened into a smile as he continued to caress her. She leaned forward and kissed him. "True, then again it has been sort of ..."

"Sort of what?" Solo asked suspiciously.

"Restful." Leia giggled.

Solo's jaw dropped. "Restful!?? Restful!? You call ..."

The protest was cut short by a knock at the door. "Is it safe to come in now?" Skywalker called. "There's a visitor here for you."

"I ain't in the mood to talk to no big brass!" Solo growled. "I'm a sick man, y'know!"

"Oh that's too bad," Luke said teasingly as he came into the room. In his arms he carried a tiny, swaddled bundle of baby. "This little girl really was keen to say hello to her daddy. Of course, if you're too sick ..."

"Skywalker!!" Solo threatened. Grinning broadly at his joke, the Jedi turned about and carried the baby to Solo. Carefully, he lowered her into her father's arms. Solo cradled his daughter and looked down at her in absolute wonderment. "Isn't she beautiful! Look at these tiny fingers!"

"Beautiful like her mother," Luke agreed, then teased, "Lucky she doesn't look like you."

"Ha. Ha." Solo threw the Jedi a token glare, then looked back to the baby, unable to stop looking at her.

Leia smiled softly as she looked from one man to the other. She turned about as she heard footsteps and saw Chewbacca at the door. "Come in, Chewie!" she called. "Come and see how a baby can turn grown men into so much mush."

Somewhat nervously, the wookiee approached the bed. He had one hand behind his back. "I have something for you, Little Cub," he crooned. He placed the toy bantha by the baby's side.

"The bantha!" Solo said. "Are you sure you can sleep nights without it?"

Luke snorted and Chewbacca threw him a warning look. "I have some news too," the wookiee continued, ignoring Solo's comment. "The Overseers have agreed to sign a treaty and we have King Tiresett in custody."

"Ha!" Solo commented sceptically. "The Overseers ain't gonna give up that easy! And what do Tiresett's people think about the Alliance barging in and taking over their world?"

"Actually, they love it!" Chewbacca replied. "Apparently Tiresett was not the most benevolent of dictators."

"Well, that I can believe! But there's still the problem of the Overseers. Have we got everyone back yet?"

"All present and accounted for," Leia confirmed. "Now all we have to do is keep an eye on them to see it doesn't happen again."

"Oh no!" Solo objected. "Not us, anyhow! We're taking a long holiday, ain't that right, Elisan! Just you, me, your mother and your furry uncle here ... not the short one." Luke growled at him and Solo laughed, "Only kiddin' Luke. Come along if ya want."

"Sounds good about now," Skywalker replied. "Where did you have in mind?"

"Kassykk sound okay to you Leia?" Solo asked, turning to her.

"Perfect," she smiled.

"Okay!" Solo cheered. "So how's about sealing it with a kiss!"

And they did.

THE END

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