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Marks Of Honor

by Carolyn Golledge

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"Hey! Be careful with that stuff , kid! " Han Solo warned. He watched as Luke Skywalker nodded acknowledgment and more carefully continued with his work. The two men had been working for the past three hours, stripping, cleaning and testing various engine parts from the Falcon. Chewbacca was still with the ship, doing some of the heavier dismantling, then carrying the pieces to his friends who worked within the engineering workshop on the far side of the Hoth hanger.

"These Adrin plugs look clean now, Han," Luke called. "I think, " he added doubtfully as he examined the one he had just lifted from the bowl of dilute acid.

Solo crossed to Skywalker's side. "Yeah, that one's okay," he said. "We'll take those out, too. Give me the gloves, huh? I want to start on this stuff ." He indicated the tiny bolts he had removed from the heavy casing that sat on the icy floor. "Ya gotta watch these real close. They only need a few seconds each."

"Han? Luke? Are you in there?" a woman's voice called from the doorway.

"Oh, great, " Solo muttered. "Her Worshipfulness has come to visit the peasants."

Luke gave Solo a reproachful look. "Can't you be nice to her for once?" He went to the door.

Solo stared after him, eyes all shocked innocence. "Hey! I'm always nice!" He gave Leia a smirk as she entered the room. "Want somethin', Your

Highnessness? I'm kinda busy. All dirty, too." He indicated his once white shirt which was now now covered with grease.

Leia sighed, shook her head, and refrained from asking him if he'd ever heard of coveralls. "As a matter of fact, " she said tersely, ignoring the mischief in his eyes," I was wondering how the repairs are coming. The Council wants to ask how much it's going to cost them this time."

"This time!" Solo repeated in an injured tone. "'This time!?' Hey! The Falcon's taken a lot of damage for you and your precious Alliance, sweetheart! A little gratitude wouldn't kill those high and mighty ones you mix with."

"Well, " Leia began, "we do appreciate..."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Solo cut her off. He noticed Luke watching him with something like pleading in his eyes. Immediately, he decided to get Leia all steamed again. The kid hated it whenever they had one of their slinging matches. "Why is it always 'we'?" he began. He took a step closer to her, smiling crookedly as he saw her blush. "Come on, sweetheart, admit it. You like what you see." He spread his arms. Luke sighed heavily, closed his eyes and slumped back against the wall..

Leia smiled coldly up at the Corellian. "You're having delusions of grandeur again, flyboy." She turned to go. "I can see I'm wasting my time here."

"Oh, hey, don't go away mad, " Solo called. "I'll apologize."

Leia stopped but didn't turn around. "You?! Apologize!? Ha!"

"No, really," Han continued. "I'll apologize." She began turning toward him. "If you admit what I said is true."

"Why, you conceited..." Leia began. She came to an abrupt halt as the icy ground trembled and she slipped. Solo caught her and she immediately pulled free, almost falling again.

"You should be more careful," he teased. "The earth always moves when ice melts. Someday it'll happen to you."

Leia turned scarlet with embarrassment and rage, then abruptly kicked Solo's shin. He grabbed at his leg and hopped about, rubbing at it with an exaggerated display of pain. Even Skywalker had to grin at little at that.

The ground shook again, harder this time, and, off balance, Solo fell backwards, bumping the workbench as he went down. The bowl of dilute acid

tipped and slipped, splashing onto Solo's back and shoulders. He let out an agonized cry and scrambled to his feet.

"Han!" Leia and Luke shouted, moving to help him.

"Don't touch me!" Solo warned, his voice hoarse with pain, "you'll burn yourselves." Even as he spoke, he was hurrying, stumbling toward the mechanic's washroom. He tore clumsily at the catches on his shirt, wanting to remove it before the acid could bite deeper.

Luke hurried after him. Leia lifted her wrist Ron to her lips and calmly called for a medic. She located the first aid kit then followed. She found Skywalker pounding on a shower stall door. Leia heard the sound of running water from within.

"Come on, Han! " Luke called. "Open up!"

"He's locked the door?! " Leia asked in disbelief. Skywalker nodded. Leia took a step closer and called, "Han, open this door!"

"Go away," came the weak reply.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Leia retorted. "Let us in! We've got to get this Burn-Aid on your back! "

There was no reply. Luke and Leia exchanged worried glances, wondering if the man had collapsed. Leia made a decision. "Luke, break the door in."

She shook her head, took aim and landed a hefty kick on the lock. Luke copied her and the door flew open. Solo was standing under a torrent of water, hands braced on the walls, facing them, the remnants of his shirt a sodden heap at his feet. His hair was dark and wet, plastered against a stark white face. "Why, Your Highness," he said, struggling for a casual tone, "I had no idea you were in such a hurry."

"Shut up and turn around," she said in both anger and concern.

Leia's jaw dropped. "Turn around," she repeated, thinking he couldn't have heard.

"I said no!" Solo repeated flatly. His knees wobbled but when Luke made to catch him he suddenly straightened. "I mean it," he continued. "Go away. I can handle this. Just leave the aid kit."

Leia dropped her hands in utter exasperation- . "I don't believe this!"

"You called for a medic, Your Highness?" a man said behind her.

Leia let out a relieved breath. She turned to face Medical Officer Graysen. "Yes. Captain Solo has acid burns on his back." The medic's eyes widened in concern. Leia added sarcastically, "But he can handle it."

Graysen came forward, reaching toward the Corellian, but Solo warned, "Leave me alone. Chewie'll be here any minute ... and he ... can..." The words trailed off as Solo swayed, then crumpled into a faint.

Skywalker and Graysen caught him as he fell, catching him about the waist to avoid touching the burns. He hung face forward over their cradling arms, giving Leia a full view of his back. She gasped. "Oh, gods! Those scars! What happened to him?"

Puzzled, Luke looked quickly from her to Solo's back., then reacted with equal shock. He barely noticed the burns high on the shoulders. The old scars were much worse. Solo's back was crisscrossed with a network of fine white lines, so extensive that they left very little of the flesh unmarked. Luke's stomach churned, and an image came to him of his dead aunt and uncle. But this had been deliberate, prolonged torture.

"He's been whipped, " Graysen said in a sickened tone. "Or, more accurately by the looks of it, flayed. Help me lower him onto the stretcher. The burns don't look too bad. If we get him to..."

"Han?" Chewbacca bellowed from the workroom. "Where are you ?"

"He's in here, Chewie! " Luke called. He eased Solo face down onto the padded stretcher." There's been an accident. "

Chewbacca came to a halt in the doorway, shocked as he took in the scene before him. He hurried to his friend's side. "How bad?"

"Acid burns, " the medic said. "Not too deep. He should be okay."

"Chewie ... ?" Solo said groggily. He tried to push himself up but grimaced in pain. "Get me ... outa ... here."

"You need bacta treatment, Solo, " Graysen insisted. "Ready, Luke?" he asked as he lifted one end of the stretcher.

"I can walk!" Solo protested, struggling again.

"Put him down a minute," Graysen ordered. He pressed a hypo-infuser to Solo's throat and the man slumped back limply, sound asleep. "He'll damage himself if he keeps fighting us," the medic explained. "He's in shock."

Solo's friends waited anxiously outside his hospital room, hurrying to their feet whenever any medical personnel emerged from within. Finally, the doctor came to them, a tired smile on his face telling them before his words that Solo would recover.

"Can we see him?" Luke asked.

Graysen nodded permission. "It would be a good idea if you could take turns sitting with him for the few hours. I don't want to have to tie him down. He keeps trying to leave."

Chewbacca growled something and Graysen looked to Luke and Leia for translation. "He says he's had the same problem with him in the past," Luke smiled. "Don't worry. He knows how to handle him."

"I'm glad someone does!" Graysen muttered. "Try to convince him to lie very still. The bacta will take better if he doesn't move around. I know he's uncomfortable, but it can't be helped. He's lucky. That was quick thinking getting under the shower. It saved him from serious injury. Oh," he added as the trio headed for the door. "He's very groggy. I gave him a sedative."

Leia grabbed at the Wookiee's arm before he could enter Solo's room. "Why didn't he want us to see ... ?"

Chewbacca's blue eyes clouded. "He considers it a mark of shame. According to the Corellian Honor Code, death is preferable to a life of slavery. "

"Slavery?" Leia whispered in horror, but Chewbacca had already moved away. She followed him into the dimly lit room and saw Solo lying face down on a bunk by the wall, a sheet drawn up to his waist, bacta strips covering his back and shoulders.

"Chewie?" Solo asked weakly. "About time you got here. Help me up."

Chewbacca's growl was emphatically negative. "Okay! Okay!" Solo mumbled. "You don't have to threaten me. It's just damn hard to breathe with your face buried in a pillow."

"You've got to stay still," Luke explained, "or the bacta --"

"Won't take," Solo finished sourly. "Is there an echo in here? I heard it all before, kid!" He peered up at him, only then noticing Leia's presence. "What's she doin' here?"

Leia came closer to the bed. "Han," she said, "I'm so sorry. If I hadn't kicked you --"

"Oh, will you forget it!" Solo snapped.

Leia flushed. "Very well, Captain. I was just trying to apologize. I'll leave you to your rest."

"Hey!" Solo called contritely. She stopped and looked down at him. Bleary-eyed, he held her gaze for a few seconds, fighting the effects of the sedative. "Look, I just..." He shifted in bed, stifling a curse at the pain, then continued, "I don't want you to feel.... It wasn't your fault. Okay?"

Leia smiled softly. "I understand. Thankyou." She couldn't be sure, but it seemed for a moment that Solo's pale face was brightened by a by a very unusual blush. The sedative must have mellowed him out. His eyelids drooped and he yawned, close to sleep. Leia decided that she'd never get a better chance to pry information out of him. She didn't mean to intrude on his privacy but the evidence of that awful scarring added to her realization that there was much to Solo's past that would explain his cynicism, his mistrust, and his abrupt flashes of temper.

"Rest, cub," Chewbacca gave Solo's head one gentle pat. "I will get back to those parts before someone walks off with them."

"I'll help you, Chewie," Luke offered. "Take it easy, huh, Han?"

"Sure, sure," Solo muttered, eyes closed as he drifted toward sleep. He heard them leave then the sound as someone pulled a chair close to his bed. He looked up to find Leia Organa sitting by him. "Whaddya think you're doin'?" he scowled.

"Doctor's orders. Someone must stay with you to make sure you don't try to escape."

"Very funny!" Solo grumbled. "I don't need a nursemaid."

"Yes. You made that very clear back at the hanger." Leia paused, reached out then resisted the urge to smooth a wrinkle from the sheet. "Han, why? Why wouldn't you let us help you?"

He stared straight ahead, ignoring her and the question so long that she believed he would never answer. Then he said flatly, "I can look after myself."

"Oh, right!" Leia exclaimed, then bit back her anger. "We saw the ... we saw your back. There was no need for you to try to hide that from us. "

Despite the pain it obviously caused, Solo turned his head away from her. "Go away," he said. "I want to sleep."

"No, dammit! Chewie told us about the Corellian Honor Code and how you feel about..."

Solo turned back to her, his eyes bright with anger. "That's none of your business!"

Leia blushed and looked down at her tightly clasped hands. "You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything." She stood. "If you're really going to sleep, I'll leave you." She turned to the door.

"Leia," he said softly. "Wait. Please. "

She stood rigidly, not wanting to turn about, not wanting him to read from her eyes how much his use of her name had touched her. "Yes?"

He sighed heavily. "We've known each other for what -- two years now?"

"Two and a half," she corrected, her back still turned to him.

"Right," he said sarcastically. "It's been so much fun! " She took a step closer to the door. "Aww, c'mon! I meant we've been through a lot of scrapes together, that's all.." He paused, then added quietly, "I guess that gives you the right to make it your business."

She turned slowly about, looking so intently into his eyes that he dropped his gaze to the sheets. "There's nothing much to tell," he said. "It happened on Kessel. Chewie got me out. I didn't know him then, but he knew me. That part's kinda complicated. Anyway, you saw what they ... what happened. I killed a guard ... a Wookiee. Do you know how they use Wookiees there?"

"Yes, " Leia said quietly, glad he wasn't watching her face, couldn't see the sickened reaction to the images filling her mind. "How old were you?"

"Eighteen, " he replied, some of the usual cutting edge back in his voice. "In their eyes, I had it coming. I owe Chewie. He got me outa that hellhole, fixed me up. Saved my life when the Imps caught up with me after I left the ship. "That's

when the wounds got infected, so it was too late for bacta. So, now you know. Okay? No big deal."

Leia shook her head. "If it's no big deal then why the secret? Those are marks of honor, not shame."

Solo lifted his eyes to hers. "Corellians ain't slaves."

Anger flared in Leia's dark eyes. "Oh, I see - That's only for us mere mortals, is it? At least now I know where your conceit comes from! "

Solo blinked in surprise, then smiled slowly . "Now, now, Your Worshipfulness. Ya gotta watch that temper of yours. It goes off every time I remind you of my natural superiority."

"Your what!" she spluttered. "Why I ought to --"

"Kick me while I'm down, Your Holiness?" he suggested softly.

"Oooh! Why do I even try? You're insufferable! " She headed for the door. "Heal soon, laserbrain! I want to hit you again!"

"I'll look forward to that!" Solo called as the door hissed shut behind her. He smiled, then finished softly, "Leia."

END

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