

[Back To Index](#)

Mountain Rescue

by Judy Ebberley

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Han Solo took a deep reviving breath as the Falcon made the jump into hyperspace. This was where he truly belonged. He propped his feet up onto the panel and having made certain his partner was not in sight he reached up and began to massage his throbbing temples.

Since leaving Derra VI he had been plagued with a nagging headache. It had started as a vague feeling of unease and grown to the point where he was now experiencing stabbing pains behind the eyes. Glancing across at his empty co-pilot's seat a wry grin surfaced. Keeping that fact from Chewie had been difficult, but what he didn't need was a mothering Wookiee hovering over him. Closing his aching eyes he attempted to will the pain away.

An anxious rumble alerted him to the fact that his partner had returned and caught him. "I got a bit of a headache, is all. " Han confessed in response to the query of what was wrong? "I'll go take a couple of tablets." He levered himself to his feet. "Keep an eye on things will ya?"

He'd only got half way to his cabin when a surge of vicious pain struck he stumbled, grabbed for the bulkheads, missed and crumpled to the deck.

Solo came round to find him self lying on the med.-couch. Stripped to bare essentials and being wired up for a full scan by a solicitous

Wookiee. His attempts to sit up were met with a fierce scowl and a terse command to keep still.

Solo's attempts at reassurance -- "I just missed my footing and tripped." -- were met with a highly skeptical snort.

Resigned to the inevitable, Han settled back and let the scanner finish its work.

As Chewbacca completed his medical scan, Han propped himself back up on his elbows craning his neck to catch a glimpse of the scan print out. "See," he crowed as the first negative test results rolled down the screen. "I told ya. Nothing wrong with me."

* You mean, nothing wrong with you apart from your lack of brain cells. * Chewie rebuked, pushing his captain back onto the couch. * It hasn't finished yet. *

"The way you go on about my brain, or lack of it, some people might get the idea you think I ain't too bright," Han grunted

Ignoring this complaint the Wookiee continued his work "Well?" Solo demanded as the final diagnosis came up.

* It couldn't pin point what is wrong. * Solo's joy at this news was short lived as Chewbacca fixed him with a firm eye and continued * But it recommends, and we will be taking up that recommendation, * he growled. Giving the pilot no chance to argue the point, * that you visit the med. center when we return to base. *

Solo swore under his breath, but a partial reprieve was better than nothing. "Okay," he capitulated "when we get back I'll go an' see Berlin." Chewie growled a question. "Yeah, I promise. But till then." A warning finger waved at the Wookiee. "I don't want to hear anymore about my health, you got that?"

* I could get in touch with him now. That would make more sense, * Chewie worried ignoring Solo's demand for an amnesty.

"You want to waste your time go right ahead." Solo began unhooking the various wires and monitoring devices. There was nothing Berlin could do to him from this distance, anyway, and by the time they got back to base he might have persuaded Chewie that he didn't need medical attention; there was always a first time for everything.

Giving a rueful chuckle, he watched as the Wookiee moved purposefully out into the corridor. Then as he remembered something, he sat up sharply. "Shit! Chewie, wait, I."

A furious howl reverberated around the ship as Chewbacca found the long distance transmitters had been turned off.

"Damn it." Han protested holding his head with his hands as the Kashyykian's bulk refilled the entrance to his cabin.

Folding his arms across his massive chest, Chewie demanded to know if Han had been responsible for turning off the transmitter?

Rather than answer Solo moaned piteously "Quiet down will ya. My head hurts."

*That may not be the only part of your anatomy to be hurting if you don't answer my question. *

"Lighten up a little," Han implored. Wishing his headache would go away and take his disapproving partner with him, as the Wookiee favored him with his most exasperated frown. "I only switched it off after we left Derra VI. No harm done. Look I'll go and re-connect it now."

* I have already done so. I have also sent a message to the rebel base to let them know we are on our way back and that we have re-established contact. *

Solo cocked his head to one side; his acute hearing informing him that someone hadn't wasted any time in using the reconnected link. He stomped off towards the cockpit, grateful that the interruption had freed him at least temporarily from the presence of his partner.

The incoming message was from Luke Skywalker. Needing to talk to him urgently. Han programmed in the response code doing his best to ignore Chewie's growl as he looked over his captain's shoulder to read the message.

"Okay," he muttered guiltily "so you were right. Jeez I hate it when you rub my nose in it. Hey kid!" he added as Skywalker's anxious face filled the screen.

"Han, thank the maker. I've been trying to get in touch with you for two days."

"Uh, yeah we had a bit of a problem with the transmitter." Chewie snorted loudly. Han spared him a hurt look before returning his attention to the screen as Luke added "I even tried to contact you through the force."

"So that's what was causin' my headaches." The Corellian muttered softly.

It spoke volumes for the state of anxiety Luke was in that he didn't seize on Solo's unwitting acknowledgement that he had experienced some kind of contact through a force link. "Han, Its Leia. She went off to Felizin and we haven't heard from her, since she landed. It's not like her, the High Command are getting really anxious. You're near there aren't you? You could land and check things out. She may be in trouble."

"Felizin is a back-water world kid. There ain't anything there to let you get into trouble. What's her highnessness doing there anyway?"

"She was attempting to make contact with a rebel cell." The much older features of Blair Kaldrain replaced the Tatooinian's face. "Solo, I have to warn you one of the reasons Leia went in was the reports we'd had on Imperial incursions in the area. If you are prepared to check things out for us, I'll forward her landing co-ordinates and the name of the place she was supposed to be staying at."

"Yeah okay general I'll take a look for you. It ain't that far out of our way." He ignored the Wookiee's raised eyebrows at his words. Preferring not to admit that they would have to double back on themselves to get to Felizin. He didn't want anyone thinking he was putting himself out for the princess. "Send me the co-ordinates. I'll be in touch as soon as I know something. Solo out."

He flicked off the switch already turning to the nav computer to program in the change of flight plan. Then risked a quick glance over at his silent co-pilot "Go ahead," he challenged "say it and get it over with."

*Say what? *

Han rolled his eyes "You were right I was wrong. It's my fault, I told ya so, you choose. Damn it," he muttered abstractedly "can't we coax any more power out of these engines?" his grip on the yoke was so tight that even through the pilot's gloves he habitually wore his muscles could be seen standing out in his hands.

Chewie shook his head at him refraining from commenting on the fact that Han wasn't supposed to care about the princess and went back to studying his own instrumentation. It wouldn't help his anxious captain or himself if he were to point out his behavior was giving the lie to his words. An angry Corellian was one thing an angry guilty feeling Corellian was something else entirely.

The Falcon swooped low over the planet surface giving the two pilots an excellent view of the wide flat, fertile plains that covered much of the surface. They could see the droid operated harvesters at work among the scattered farming communities. The valleys were surrounded by a mountain range. The lower levels of which were covered in thick forests. Above them snow covered peaks protruded into the sky.

Fleizin's main spaceport when they reached it was anything but high tech. The docking bays were not even shielded to basic safety levels. This was mainly because the sort of traffic that frequented the port was low-level agri-freighters. Ships that were more noted for their bulk than speed or power. Solo's snort of disgust spoke eloquently of his feelings.

"What a dump. What do the Imps want with this place? There ain't nothing' here but hick farmers."

* Even storm troopers have to eat. * Chewie pointed out. * A place like this with no defense is ripe to be plucked by the Empire. *

"Yeah I suppose so. I'm going to look around see if I can pick anything up." He made his way to the main hatch as he spoke but was delayed by a Wookiee paw. "I'll be careful." He promised.

* Make sure you are. *

"Yes mother!" Han ducked reflexively as Chewie swung an arm at his head. He was still chuckling as he stepped off the ramp.

"Chewie, CHEWIE!" Solo's concerned voice was heard as the main hatch flew up. "There was no sign of her, damn it what has she got herself into now. Frigging alliance should know better than to send her out here on her own. I'm going straight to the cockpit. We better get in touch with Kaldrain and find out if he's got any more information." Han continued his diatribe against the missing princess, his words confirming his real anxiety for her safety. "Then I'll have a look around the port. Are you listening to me?"

* You sound troubled. * Chewie rumbled after him.

"Damned right I'm troubled. They expect too much of her damn it, ain't it enough that she lost everything on Alderaan. Don't they know what they're asking of her? She should never have come here alone."

* I thought you didn't care about her. *

"I never said that." Han denied hotly. "Hell even her high and mightiness deserves some support. Not even Leia Organa can do everything on her own ya know. So she drives me to distraction sometimes with her recruiting speeches. I still wouldn't want her to get into trouble. If I could prevent it."

"Well I'm glad to hear it!"

Solo spun on his heel. "What the hell are you doin' here?"

"Waiting for you." Leia replied sweetly.

Chewbacca gave up trying to referee the shouting match between the two humans and went off to the galley to prepare the evening meal.

He bared his fangs into the Wookiee equivalent of a smile. When Han had realized the little princess was not only safe and sound on board the Falcon but had overheard him admitting to worrying about her. He had lost his temper big time!

Leia was been unable to resist a little teasing over the words, which confirmed his real feelings so clearly. She should have known better, the Wookiee acknowledged. Especially as she needed his cooperation. Because now the Corellian was intent on giving the word obdurate new meaning. The princess had her work cut out if she was to get him to agree to accompany her up to the rebel outpost. Chewie was hopeful that, Solo would give way eventually, because, despite his callous exterior he had a soft heart and he was aware that what Leia was asking him to do was the right thing. But he also knew he wouldn't make it easy for the princess.

He cocked his head to one side listening. Angry voices drifted out to him.

"I didn't ask for you by name fly-boy!" The tone was accusative.
"Listen, sister."

Chewie sighed, while the Wookiee could appreciate his captain's annoyance with his present situation; Han never enjoyed being backed into a corner. He could also see that it wasn't really Leia's fault that Solo, found himself in that particular corner. She was not to know that it would be the Falcon that would be sent to investigate her silence.

Considering they were such a short-lived species this particular pair of humans wasted much of their time disagreeing with each other. He would give them another half time part and if they hadn't calmed down by then he was going to bang some heads together.

"I ain't goin' anywhere?" Han hoisted his feet up onto the games-table, successfully hiding the map Leia had been studying.

She closed her eyes for a second and tried to stay calm. Solo was being as awkward and as irritating as only he could be. She looked up to see the Wookiee watching her from the doorway. His smile seemed to indicate he was sympathetic to her needs. "Chewie, can't you talk some sense into him."

*I have tried over the years little princess, but it's difficult. There are so few brain cells to work with. * Han's indignant glare bounced off an impervious Wookiee hide.

"Maybe you'd like to work for someone else." Han muttered sour-faced. "Co-pilots like you are two a credit, ya know, an' most of em," he added pointedly "don't shed all over the place."

Chewie didn't look in the least bit intimidated by his captain's threats. Merely suggesting that Han should try not to make himself look any more foolish than he already had. They were wasting time, he knew Han would help, the little princess knew he would help so why did he have to be so stubborn. Han pointedly turned his back on his partner.

Grinning at the Corellian's reaction to this rebuke Chewie asked the princess. *Who is left to contact? *

"Marisa Faligi and her grand daughter." Leia responded. Relieved that the Wookiee was taking the time to speak slowly and clearly to her so she could understand him. When he and Han began one of their rapid fire exchanges she tended to miss out on what was being said. "They live up in the mountains and to reach them we will have to go in on foot. They moved up there some months ago so that Marisa could continue her work on translating some ancient documents in peace. She said the main agri-base was too noisy and her granddaughter has become very withdrawn after the

death of her parents. Marisa is probably unaware of the present situation, we can't leave them up there without giving them the opportunity to evacuate."

Solo muttered something under his breath.

Chewbacca growled a comment at him and Han threw his partner a sour look. "Oh shut up."

Chewie wasn't about to be put off. His blue eyed gaze fixed itself on the pilot's face. Han bit off another comment as he took in the partner's expression. It was the one Chewie habitually wore when he thought Han should do something he didn't want to do.

Damn Wookiee trying to make him feel guilty. He glowered up at his co-pilot. Well it wasn't goin' to work this time.

Han's sigh was loud and long suffering. The biting cold was cutting through his thigh length quilted jacket. He was wet, tired and hungry. Spacers' boots were proving to be less than ideal for scrambling up and down the sides of steep slippery ravines. He had already slid half way down the side of the first hill, from the plateau where they had left the Falcon. Now he was faced with an even steeper climb. Shrugging his backpack into a more comfortable position he grabbed hold of an overhanging branch and used it to help him start his ascent. Ahead of him the princess was scrambling nimbly upwards. She must be related to a mountain goat he decided.

When she looked back to see how he was faring, he made a face at her, waving her onwards.

He didn't need her watching his less than expert attempts at rock climbing.

Further ahead even than the princess Chewbacca was making his way up through the trees, the big lug was obviously enjoying him self.

Impervious to cold and damp the Wookiee was in his natural element. His body was capable of self-regulating it's temperature. Even the rain couldn't penetrate his thick glossy pelt. All he had to do was shake the droplets off at the end of the day.

Han shook his own head; the hood of his jacket kept catching on the overhanging branches. It felt as if the rain was running in rivulets, down the back of his neck.

They stopped briefly around the middle of the afternoon for food. Solo hugged his mug of steaming soup gratefully and asked how much further they had to go.

"I doubt we will make it to the homestead before night fall." Leia informed him, "we aren't making the sort of progress I'd hoped for and the weather isn't helping any. We may have to camp out tonight."

Han's reply to this news was less than ecstatic

Leia threw him an irritated frown. "Well if you had listened to our advice you wouldn't be struggling so much. You should have worn climbing boots."

"I should've stopped on the Falcon." Solo flexed his legs trying to restore circulation.

Chewbacca prodded his captain into movement. Keen to avoid another argument. *It should get a little easier once we get out above the tree line. *

Easier going, but twice as cold Solo sniffed as the wind whipped around the trio as they made their way across an open plateau. It was turning bitterly cold and the cloud formations chasing across the sky looked particularly threatening. They were going to have to find shelter soon.

* I think this will do. * Chewie had completed a quick inspection of the cave. It was at least dry and would give them shelter from the wind. He turned to look at his two human companions they were standing in the entrance Leia resting on a boulder; Solo leaning against the rock wall both looked exhausted. So tired in fact that they had even stopped arguing with each other.

Hustling the pair into the shelter of the cave, the Wookiee began setting up the survival tent. Until this was finished he instructed them to try and keep warm.

"Easier said than done!" Solo grumbled trying to stop his teeth from chattering. "Damn but this place is cold. Come 'ere princess. Let me do that."

Leia held out her hands that she had been trying to rub together to restore their circulation. Solo took them between his own large callused

palms and began to rub them briskly. Tears sparked in her eyes making him pause briefly, but she smiled at him to continue.

"Don't stop. That's so much better, thank you. I don't remember ever having been so cold. I'm beginning to think you were right, not even the Empire are going to come this far up here."

"You must be tired!"

"Oh?" she questioned warily. "Why?"

Han's grin was gloriously wicked. "Why admitting I might be right about something!"

She shook her head at him pretending exasperation before returning to watch the seemingly inexhaustible Wookiee continue his preparations for their night camp. "Shouldn't we be helping him?"

"You can try." Solo's smile turned wry. "But I learnt a long time ago that it don't pay to interrupt a Wookiee in a situation like this. All we'll get is the puny humans lecture!

And I heard that enough today already. You feeling any warmer now?"

Leia realized that her hands were still tucked in Solo's own and pulled them away, stuffing them back into her gloves. "Yes, thank you. I " she looked as if she was going to add something else but their conversation was interrupted by Chewie's announcement that they could move into the shelter now while he prepared some supper.

By the time they had finished eating the shelter was a little warmer and the heat was making them all drowsy. Solo tried arguing over who would keep watch but Chewbacca was determined they should all get some rest. He had set up a warning beacon that would wake them if anyone or anything entered the area, that would have to suffice he growled.

"Yeah Okay!" Han yawned and wrapped the thermo-sheet more tightly around his shoulders. It was going to get a hell'va lot colder before morning. Chewie rumbled a suggestion at him. "Uh I don't think so."

Would he rather freeze?

"No!" Han threw a sheepish look over at the princess before shifting across the small shelter to tuck himself into the waiting arm of his partner. Chewie cocked an eye at the princess offering her a similar

position. Rather than refuse, Leia snuggled in as well. Too grateful for the additional warmth offered by the Kashyykian to be embarrassed by her close proximity to the rogue Corellian. Expecting him to make some smart comment she raised her head to look at him and realized he was already asleep, sighing she closed her own eyes and was soon asleep as well.

Daylight brought some relief. The weather had improved and their progress was good. By mid morning they had reached the wooded area that Leia had been told contained the homestead of Marisa and her granddaughter.

They proceeded more cautiously now having been warned that Marisa Faligi didn't take too kindly to visits from strangers.

Having completed a full circuit of the main compound, Solo shrugged his shoulders "No one seems to be home! You sure she ain't made her own way down the mountain?"

Chewbacca raised his head, sniffing.

* They are somewhere near, they must have heard our approach. Stay where you are I will look around. *

Leia chuckled at Solo's sour expression at this instruction. " He's beginning to get delusions of grandeur." He informed her, typically ignoring his partner's advice and strolling off towards the edge of the compound.

"That's quite far enough."

Han spun round to find himself being covered by an ancient looking blaster rifle, being held by an equally elderly woman her gray hair caught up in the single long braid that was common amongst her people.

"Raise your hands." Waiting until Han had complied with her order before continuing. "What do you want here?" she asked turning her attention to the princess who had come up along side him.

Taking advantage of her inattention Han made a grab at the blast rifle.

His forward movement was arrested as the blaster swung down until it was aimed at the center of his chest "Now listen lady I."

"Han!" Leia shushed him with her hand. "My name is Leia Organa, this," She indicated the glowering Corellian "Is Captain Han Solo, and the being behind you," she indicated to the rear of the woman "is Chewbacca."

A menacing growl was sufficient indication that Leia was not just trying to distract her. Baring his teeth the Wookiee reached down and plucked the rifle from Marisa Faligi's suddenly nerveless hands.

"Thanks pal."

The princess went over to a shaky Marisa helping her to a container and encouraging her to sit down. She handed back the blaster rifle, and smiled reassuringly. "We have a message for you. Maybe it would be better if we went inside to talk."

The woman looked her over speculatively. "Leia Organa, the Organa who was in the Imperial Senate?"

"Yes" Leia acknowledged "until Palpatine decided to disband it and Grand Moff Tarkin tried out the death star on Alderaan."

"Aye I heard about that. Even out here something's get through. You are welcome Leia Organa. I assume you have some information from the alliance."

The house was spartan in the extreme. More space being given over to the research area than any other; it comprised of a small food preparation section a sleeping room and a fresher.

"Nice place!" Solo's snide comment aimed at his partner as he shook himself out of his thick outer jacket, earned him a quelling frown from Leia, which as usual he ignored

"Sit down." Marisa cleared a space for them at the central table. "Well you better tell me what is going on, it must be something important to bring you all the way up here."

Leia nodded "it is. The empire is moving in on Felizin, I'm afraid. They are intending to settle a large garrison in the central plain area, and I fear that may only be the beginning. They have ordered a planet wide radio silence, in the last few days stopping all messages going in or out. This was the only way we had of getting in touch with you. I've already arranged repatriation for the others. I know you are a long way off the beaten track up here," she added seeing the woman about to break in. "but your work may make you a target."

The Felitizian looked thoughtful. "I had hoped they wouldn't bother with the likes of me. But I have prepared for the worst as well."

"What is it you're translating?" Solo asked. Interested despite himself.

"Scrolls from before the Clone Wars. They hold information on the Jedi knighthood."

"Jedi" Leia and Han chorused.

"Yes!" the woman confirmed. Surprised by their level of interest.

"They could be really useful to Luke." Solo nodded agreement with the princess's words. The kid was struggling with his studies. So few people had information on the Jedi knighthood. And while Han would still declare himself a skeptic as far as the force went he had, had too many experiences involving Skywalker; including the force call he'd received on the Falcon, for him to pretend there was nothing in it. If these documents could help him Han was going to do all he could to see they got back to him safely. Eyeing the number of volumes with dismay he added silently no matter how difficult that proved to be.

Marisa caught his glance, and sought to allay his fears. "It's alright captain I'm not expecting to take all of them with me. I've transferred as much of it as possible to holodisk. Only two volumes," she indicated the documents on the workbench, "are left. If I'd had a little longer I would have completed those as well. We can't take them with us I'm afraid, they are too fragile. Pity, still," she paused and glanced around the room "if we have to leave, we have to leave. No point in prolonging the agony. We will destroy them with the other documents. Must we go tomorrow? Can't I have a few more days?"

Leia shook her head. "I'm sorry we can't give you more time. The longer we delay, the more danger we will all be in. The alliance will do their best to see you have everything you need to set up in a new location." She attempted to assure her. "And we will take as much of your work as we can with us."

"Thank you," the woman took a deep breath and looked around the room that had been her home. With an effort she shook off her mood "What will be will be." She smiled, " now I expect you could do with a meal. We can talk more afterwards."

"Let me help." Leia followed the older woman to the food area. Chewbacca went back outside to see if there was anything out there that would need to be destroyed if it could not be salvaged.

"You mind if I take a look at this?" Solo called after her, indicating the ancient holo-copier on the workbench.

"Help yourself. It's a bit of an antique I'm afraid." The woman left him to inspect the holo-copier, while she continued with meal preparation.

A cursory glance told the pilot it was old and very slow. Taking his tool set from his utility belt Han began to examine the power cell.

Just settling to his work he felt himself being watched. He looked up and found a young girl clutching a furry toy peeping out at him.

"Nice day."

The Bantha toy nodded. Encouraged Han continued "My name's Han Solo." he offered, "Do you have a name?"

"Braghitia" a small voice informed him.

"That's a very pretty name." Han told the toy "I bet your owner is very pretty as well." A soft giggle encouraged him to continue with his dialogue. "I like pretty ladies. I got a pretty lady with me, you want to meet her," the toy nodded. "She's a real princess."

"Really?"

"Really. She don't like me though." Han's expression was comically mournful "She's always shouting at me." He put a hand down next to the toy and a much smaller hand came up and patted his sympathetically.

On the other side of the small room Leia stood watching him a smile on her face. The sight of Han Solo holding an apparently serious conversation with a stuffed toy was a spectacle she intended to treasure. Next to her the girl's grandmother watched also, holding her breath in hope that the Corellian pilot might have broken the wall of silence the girl had surrounded herself with since the death of her mother and father.

"Only when he needs to be shouted at." Leia called to the toy.

Han looked up surprised. "See what I mean?" He lamented.

Leia threw him an exasperated look. Solo winked. "She looks real mad, Belle. I think she's going to shout at me again. Maybe if you talked to her you could get her to stop."

Unable to resist such an appeal the little girl stood up, prepared to protect her new friend. She was about four standard years old Han guessed, thin, dark skinned with a pair of huge haunted eyes and long hair plaited into a single band. "She doesn't look mad." She scolded the Corellian "But she is pretty. Is she really a princess?"

"She certainly is." Han assured her "Princess Leia Organa, this very pretty lady is "Han paused the young girl added "Belle. Faligi."

"Belle Falligi, and this." Solo finished with a flourish. "Is Braghitia."

Leia took the outstretched hand in her own. "Pleased to meet you Belle."

"Pleased to meet you too."

"Belle, come and help me with the table." Her grandmother called from the food area. She looked over the head of her grand daughter as the little girl skipped back to her side and mouthed silently to the Corellian thank you, he shrugged off her thanks and prepared to turn back to his work.

"You know I never believed you when you said you had a way with females." Leia teased "But I was wrong."

Solo grimaced, at her words but relaxed into a smile as she added "Seriously, that was well done and very nice of you." She tipped her head to one side to get a better view of his face " Marisa says the child has hardly spoken at all since her parents death. Talking to you may be the first step on the road to her recovery."

"She's a cute kid" Han agreed "deserves somethin' better than this life, that's for sure. I'll go and see what's keeping Chewie. Don't want him barging in here and frightening Belle"

Leia let him go, deciding not to point out to him that the girl must have already seen the Wookiee. She knew Han was made extremely uncomfortable by praise and didn't know how to respond to it.

Far from being afraid Belle was not in the least intimidated by the giant Kashyykian, when he was officially introduced to her before dinner. "Is he your friend as well?" she asked Solo.

"Yeah." Han patted his partner's chest; "he can be useful sometimes. Chewbacca of Kashyyk meet Belle Falligi."

Chewie carefully took the girls outstretched hand in his and growled a friendly greeting at her.

After they'd eaten Belle was sent to bed. She demanded to be tucked in by her new friend. Solo obliged and received a wet kiss on the cheek in return. Ignoring the amused glances Leia and Chewie exchanged he turned back to the business in hand, demanding to know about weight distribution of their back packs.

They had to make some fairly harsh choices on what could be taken down the mountain and what would have to be left behind.

Careful packing and distributing of the holo-micros and essential clothing and food left little room for personal effects. A small holo of her daughter and her husband were all that Marisa had set aside to take with her. Her only regret being that she would be unable to complete her work.

By common agreement the foursome turned in early, knowing they would have two hard days travelling ahead of them.

Soft noises woke Leia Organa. She lay quietly for a few seconds gathering her thoughts and remembering where she was. She checked her chronometer she had been sleeping for less than two time parts. Carefully propping herself up on her elbow she looked in the direction that the noise was coming from. Seated at the workbench was Solo.

"What are you doing?"

Concentrating hard, on his self-imposed task, Solo jumped at the soft voice in his ear.

"Jeez," he whispered as his heart returned to its chest cavity. "What you trying to do, frighten me to death!"

Leia glanced down at the neat pile of copied disks. Han was obviously engaged in copying the last two volumes of Marisa's research.

"How long have you been working on this?" she scolded.

Rather than answer Han responded with a request for a drink.

"I'll get you one." Leia allowed herself to be diverted from her questioning and slipped into the food preparation area. A smile appearing on her face as she did so. Why was this self styled mercenary spending part of his night copying ancient documents? If she asked he'd no doubt try to come up with some plausible excuse for his behavior. Instead of admitting that he was intent on collecting every scrap of information which could be useful to Luke.

"You better appreciate this kid." Han growled to himself unconsciously echoing the princess's thoughts. "I can't believe I'm doin' this!"

Can't you his conscience mocked him isn't one of the reasons you're doing this standing behind you now. Solo accepted the drink Leia offered, and sipped it gratefully.

"Can I help?"

"You could box up those finished disks," Han yawned "then you should get some more sleep. I'll just finish this chapter, then I'm going to turn in."

"Promise?"

"Yeah, go on I know I can't finish it all unless I work all night and I need sleep as well as you. I ain't stupid. Good night princess."

"Good night." Leia responded returning to her sleep roll, and drifting off again.

"Shush!" Belle put a finger to her mouth to encourage silence and pointed towards the workbench. The last of the copied disks still clutched in his fist Han Solo lay fast asleep.

Gently Leia pried the disk free and added it to the others she had already stacked. Somehow he'd managed to finish all of the copying, how much longer he'd worked after she'd got his drink she could only guess at.

Not wanting to wake him until she had to she took Belle's hand and walked outside. There they found Chewbacca already dismantling some of the machinery that they would have to destroy.

* Is the cub still sleeping? *

"Yes. He must have been up most of the night completing that work. What makes him do things like this Chewie?"

The Wookiee chuckled * It is what he is. *

His grin widened at her next question. "Why does he try so hard to pretend he doesn't care?" Leia persisted.

*He would rather be seen as a mercenary than be thought vulnerable. You should understand that little princess. *

Leia acknowledged his words with a nod and a wry smile. The Wookiee was a very astute observer of people, she reminded herself. And he wouldn't have stayed with the Corellian all these years if Han's character was anything like the persona he had assumed to protect himself.

The longer she knew him, and the more she was privileged to catch a glimpse of the real Han Solo the more she wanted to know about him. He was one of the most fascinating, irritating,

"Mornin'" Han stood in the entrance to the building, rubbing his eyes and yawning. Scuffy looking men she completed to herself taking in his tousled condition she had ever met "Why didn't you wake me?"

"You need all the beauty sleep you can get."

Solo was about to come up with a smart retort but was distracted by Belle. He fielded her as she threw herself into his arms. "Are we going to your ship today?" she demanded as he staggered under her weight.

"Yeah, sweetheart, we're going to start out as soon as we've eaten, but remember what your nana told you," he warned as he placed her back on her feet. "It's along walk and we may have to spend a night on the trail."

Her smile slipped a little at the thought of the walking but a gentle rumble from the Wookiee reassured her somewhat. When she got tired he told her he would carry her for awhile.

"Hey," Solo managed a very creditable pout.

The sight of which made both Belle and Leia giggle. "Who's goin' to help me if you're carryin' her?"

The Wookiee shrugged * You will just have to manage on your own for once. *

Their small caravan set off shortly afterwards. Chewbacca in the lead as before carrying the heaviest of their gear, followed by Leia and Marisa both with well-filled packs of food and clothing. With them was Belle who had her own small pack, which contained her most precious possessions. It was too small to accommodate her favorite stuffed toy however and she had been fearful that Braghitia would have to be left behind.

Solo solved this dilemma by stuffing the Bantha toy into his jacket. So that only its head could be seen peeping out as he struggled into his own heavily weighted backpack and brought up the rear of the group. Leia and Chewie exchanged smiles at this further example of his kindness and by common consent didn't tease him about it.

A fact for which Han was profoundly grateful

With Marisa's local knowledge they made better time despite their added burdens. The woman knew several hidden trails that helped to cut down their travelling.

Some of the paths they followed were narrow and steep-sided and the recent bad weather had caused certain of them to crumble dangerously. Risky though this quicker route was the attractions outweighed the hazards. Using these tracks meant that they could reach the Falcon within a day, thereby sparing them the ordeal of another night on the trail.

As they reached a sharp corner of a precipitous path they found the trail had been almost completely washed away. Shedding their packs Han and Chewbacca inspected the way ahead. Deciding that they could traverse it with safety as long as they were cautious the Wookiee stepped over the gap. Han passed over the packs one by one and then helped first Marisa and then Belle over to the safe embrace of Chewbacca. As Leia moved into place the edge of the path began to break away, she slipped and only rapid-fire reactions from the Corellian lifting and throwing her into his partner's arms stopped her from falling through the ever widening gap. Scrambling for a foothold on the rapidly disintegrating path Han almost made it to safety as well, but as he made to make the jump he felt the ground fall out completely from under him.

The others could do nothing but watch as he tumbled downwards into the ravine below.

For a second shock held them all motionless then Leia took hold of herself. "Chewie," she ordered. "Get the rope."

The Wookiee tied the rope around her diminutive waist, without argument * Be careful little princess. * He warned.

"I will," Leia looked down on the motionless figure of Han Solo. From this distance it was impossible to tell how badly hurt he was. "I have my com link as soon as I get down there I'll tell you how he is," she reassured him.

Chewie nodded patting her arm then helping her lower herself over the side of the ravine.

Cautiously feeling for hand and foot holds she made her way down the slope. The surface of the rock face was slippery and shale broke off showering the body below her with dust and debris. About half way down her foot slipped, unable to stop herself she rebounded into the rock scrambled for purchase and found herself dangling helplessly in mid-air. Thankful for Chewbacca's firm hold on the rope, she managed to grab a branch and haul herself back to the rock face.

*Princess! *

Leia took a deep breath and steadied herself against the rock. "I'm okay." she called out in response to Chewie's concerned howl. "I'm continuing on down now. It looks a bit easier from here." Which was a lie but the anxious watchers on top of the ledge didn't know that and Leia wasn't about to tell them. Looking down she could just make out the floor of the ravine. Han still hadn't moved. "Don't you dare be badly hurt." She threatened the body Blinking to get rid of the tears that had formed. Annoying, aggravating and provoking, as he might be Han Solo was important to her. Maybe it was because he was all of those things, because he never did what she expected, always managed to surprise her. He teased and tormented her as no other man had ever done. Was prepared to argue with her on any subject refused to cooperate with her by joining the rebellion, yet stayed with them taking on the most dangerous missions. Supporting them in their wildest schemes and still continued to deny his involvement. Well, irksome as he undoubtedly was she intended to ensure he stayed with them long enough for her to change his mind for him for the good of the rebellion of course!

As soon as her feet hit the ground she loosened the rope and ran to Han's side. Her first task was to check his breathing and pulse. Reassured, she called up to the anxious trio on the cliff side to let them know his condition.

Before attempting to turn him onto his back she ran her hands over his arms and legs checking for breaks.

"Hey, your worship what will people say." A groggy voice protested.

Leia started then let out a sigh of relief, if he could still use that smart mouth of his, she told herself. He couldn't be too seriously hurt.

"I was only checking to see if you had fractured any limbs." She admonished.

"No need to be embarrassed princess, I was enjoying it."

"Oh shut up." Leia snapped at him. "Can you turn over for me?"

"Sure." Han rolled to the side and attempted to sit upright. Every bone and muscle in his body protested this action but he ignored them struggling until he was sitting propped up against a large boulder and he could see the princess's anxious face more clearly. "You could at least look as if you're pleased to see me alive?" He joked weakly.

She scrutinized him carefully, ignoring his knowing smirk as she once again ran her hands over his legs and arms. "You don't seem to have broken anything." She told him finally. "You must have landed on your head. And we all know there's nothing in there to damage."

"Nice!" Solo retorted while silently thinking she might be right, because he was having difficulty focussing on her face. Mild concussion he concluded, swallowing down the nausea that was threatening to swamp him. And from the stabbing pain in his chest probably a couple'a cracked ribs. Could've been a lot worse.

He craned his neck to look up at the rock face and silently thanked whatever deity had protected him in his fall. Shaking his head he wondered again at Leia Organa's tenacity. He for one would not have relished climbing down that sheer rock face. "You shouldn't have come down here after me. You could have got yourself killed." As usual his concern for her sounded like criticism.

The princess who was turning the rope into a sling threw him an exasperated frown. "You wouldn't be down here if you hadn't saved my life by pushing me to safety, you idiot."

I'm only repaying your rescue with one of my own. It makes a change for me to save you. Here," she handed him the stuffed Bantha toy that had helped break his fall, "We hadn't better go back without this. Belle is distraught enough."

Her com link beeped, "Yes, he seems okay, Chewie. I'll give two tugs on the rope once I have him safely secured." Han made a face at her as she added. "He's a bit groggy, you'll probably have to do most of the work. Yes," she chuckled at the Wookiee's comments "like normal, I know."

"Okay, Chewie, lift away." Han tugged on the rope as a signal and felt his weight being taken by the Wookiee's hands on the rope. Slowly he began his ascent, grateful that he didn't have to try and climb out unaided. Making an effort he tried to use his legs to help with the upward movement but in truth his ascension owed far more to the sheer brute strength of the Wookiee than his own efforts.

Willing hands pulled him up over the lip of the cliff and he lay for a few moments like a beached Nareen Whale. Chewbacca rumbled anxiously. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just cold and a bit battered." He gave his partner a reassuring grin. "I remembered what you taught me back on Kashyyk pal, and just relaxed as I started to fall.

It must've worked 'cause I'm more or less still in one piece. Stop starin' at me, I'm fine. Let's get that rope down to the princess."

Having ordered his captain to stay put. The Wookiee had heard the phrase 'I'm fine' too many times to put much store in it. Chewie threw down the rope and rapidly hauled the princess up to join them. Grateful for the respite from his expected interrogation Han did as he was told for once. Shock was setting in, along with the cold and exhaustion he was finding it difficult to concentrate on what was being said to him.

"Han are you alright?" A small hand was slipped into his.

"Sure sweetheart," Han made himself open his eyes and smile at the little girl kneeling next to him.

"Does that hurt?" she pointed at a cut on his cheek.

"Nah!" he reassured her. "Here you better look after Braghita for a little while," seeking to distract her he offered the child the toy.

"She's had enough excitement for today I reckon."

Belle inspected her returned Bantha toy carefully. "She's very dirty."

"Yeah," Han agreed "But she's done something no other Bantha has ever done."

"Oh?"

"She's the first ever Bantha to fly."

The Corellian's tone was completely serious. Which made Marisa and Leia who had just been hauled up to the ledge in time to hear his words exchange smiles.

"She's still very dirty though." Belle sounded disappointed.

"You'll have to give her a bath when we get to the Falcon." The princess patted her head, cocking her own head to one side to check Solo over. "And she isn't the only one who needs one by the look of it!"

Han smirked raising his eyebrows at her suggestively. "You offering your services your highnessness?"

Leia colored under his gaze but wasn't about to let him get away with that one. "I might!"

She turned to the Wookiee before Solo could come up with another smart-mouthed remark. "Do you still have that old fire hose on the Falcon, Chewie?"

Not only did they still have it Chewbacca replied, baring his teeth in a Wookiee grin. But he'd be more than willing to wield it if the little princess wanted to use the hull scraper on his captain's hide.

"You're a real pair of comedians."

Han grumbled forcing himself upright and reaching carefully for his backpack. "Come on lets get outta here."

By the time the Falcon came into sight it was late afternoon. All of them were pleased to see the ship apparently untouched in the forest clearing Right where Han had brought her down. Not ones to take chances however, Han and Chewie left the women at the edge of the clearing while they reconnoitered the area then approached the ship.

Han slapped his hand on the locking device with a sigh of relief; his abused body was throbbing and aching. Every step in the last two hours had been agonizing.

Chewie noted the gray face and general air of exhaustion and suggested Han stay on board and try to reach the alliance. While he went back and collected the others and their baggage. Solo nodded weary agreement with this plan. Grabbing hold of the bulkhead crash handle for support and fixing his bleary eyes on the cockpit door he dragged himself towards it.

Some ten-time parts later he swore at his totally unresponsive board. Every frequency was being jammed or monitored by Imperials. By now the officials back at the base would be going crazy.

There had to be some way they could get in touch with them and let them know their mission was successfully accomplished and their precious princess was on her way home. An unwelcome idea intruded into Solo's dark thoughts and wouldn't be dispelled. If Luke had reached him before, through the force and Han still didn't want to believe he had, maybe he could return the compliment. No, he decided dabbling in all this force nonsense was not something he wanted to get involved with. He sat for awhile longer before swearing softly. "Damn you kid." He cursed the absent Skywalker "Before I met you I wouldn't even be thinkin' these crazy thoughts, let alone contemplating using them."

Still the rational part of his mind pointed out. If it didn't work he would know for sure that it had just been coincidence that his headaches had synchronized with Luke trying to contact him through the force and if it did? He shook his head; he didn't want to think about that possibility just yet. Closing his eyes he tried to visualize Luke back on the base. After all he'd been through in the last few days he decided a wry smile lighting his tired features at the very least he owed the kid a headache.

Solo blinked, realized he must have passed out and tried to focus on the face that was floating over his head. The shaggy visage that eventually swam into focus was comfortingly familiar; as were his surroundings. He was also pleasantly warm although he had been divested of his clothing and was now covered in little more than a thin sheet.

* Lie still, * A concerned Wookiee rumbled at him as he struggled to sit upright. * I haven't finished applying this tension bandage yet. *

"We ought to get off planet." Han argued trying to push Chewie's paws away.

* We are, I took us up a full time part ago. You slept right through it. *

Relief flooded through the Corellian. Han allowed his head to fall back into his pillows as he heard the hum of his ship. Hyper space which meant they were safe for the time being.

Han relaxed and let the Wookiee's nimble fingers do their work. "Are Marisa and Belle okay?"

* They are fine, in much better shape than you are. Why didn't you tell us you had cracked ribs? *

Han almost shrugged remembered just in time not to, and decided to change the topic of conversation. "How'd I get back here?"

* While I settled Marisa and Belle on board the little princess came looking for you. She found you unconscious in the cockpit. I carried you back here. The med-scan I took was as before apart from the fact that you had suffered multiple cuts, bruises and contusions as well as a pair of cracked ribs. What made you pass out this time?*

"I dunno." Han had no intention of admitting he'd been dabbling in the force.

In that case, Chewie began tucking the covers firmly around the spacer. * I think it would be wise for you to remain here until I can get you to the sick bay on the base.*

" But there ain't nothin' wrong with me!"

* There must be something causing you to collapse the way you have. I am taking no chances. You,* a furry finger was waved admonishingly in Solo's direction * are staying put.*

Han slapped the finger aside; tugged at the covers and made to get up.

The Wookiee growled a warning.

"You wouldn't?"

* Try me*

Solo folded his arms across his chest, winced at the pain this caused and hastily uncrossed them again scowling fiercely at the grin this brought to the Wookiee's face. Having no desire to be literally tied to his bunk for the rest of the flight back to base he wheedled. "Look, if I can prove to ya that I'm not going to pass out on you again will you let me up? There's a really good explanation, pal. I just would sooner not have to tell anyone. It's kinda embarassin'" Chewie cocked his head to one side giving his captain tacit approval to continue. "The reason I passed out was I was tryin' to contact Luke."

* But the Imperials have jammed all of the frequencies? *

"I know." Solo shifted restlessly acutely uncomfortable with what he was admitting to. "I wasn't using the transmitters."

Chewbacca's lips twitched "This isn't funny." Han protested "You know I don't believe in all that force mumbo-jumbo the kid is always spouting. But he managed to reach me, somehow after we left Derra. Even with the transmitter off-line. That's what was causing the headaches. So I thought it wouldn't hurt to see if I could do the same. Let them know back at base that Leia was safe."

* You used the force? *

Solo squirmed, "I didn't know it'd work so damn well!" he protested feebly. "There was this explosion of feelings in my head. That's when I must've passed out again. Believe me I ain't goin' to be tryin' it again in a hurry, it hurts too much. So now you know the truth. Can I get up?"

* But you profess not to believe in the force? * The Wookiee persisted. *How could you use something you don't believe in?*

Han was giving a very good impression of a man who was being pushed to the edge of his forbearance. "Look I'm never going to admit this to anyone else but maybe there is more to Luke's hocus-pocus than I thought. But don't go telling him that. "

The Wookiee grinned. * I won't need to.* He stepped away from the bunk and to the pilots horror he found that he and Chewie were not alone as he had thought. The huge bulk of his co-pilot had successfully blocked his view of the rest of the cabin, standing just behind the Wookiee listening in intently to their conversation was Leia Organa. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough." Leia interjected her voice full of barely concealed amusement. "Han Solo force user." Han winced at her words. "Well, well. Who would have thought it? Luke is going to love this. Hokey religions indeed!"

"Come on princess," Han tried his most appealing smile. She had him over a barrel and he knew it. "Give me a break. I'll never live something like this down"

Leia let him sweat for a few more moments. Here was the perfect opportunity to get Solo over a barrel, except she decided, she couldn't do it. The pilot had come after her at the request of a friend. Against his better judgment he had accompanied her up the mountain to rescue Marisa and Belle. He'd spent a night copying documents that he thought would be useful to Luke and risked his own life to save hers on the mountain pass. Leaning forward she patted his arm comfortingly. "It goes against the grain fly-boy but just this once I might keep quiet."

Solo's incipient sigh of relief was stifled as she added impishly "but how are you going to persuade Luke to cooperate?" Solo's horror stricken countenance confirmed her thoughts that he hadn't thought of that particular scenario. "He's probably broadcast your performance all over the base by now." Han flopped back into his pillows, his eyes covered by his arm. "What's wrong?" Leia asked concerned by his sudden pallor.

The only answer was a moan, as Han Solo, discovered he had all the makings of another truly, hellacious headache.

end

[Back To Index](#)