

[Back To Index](#)

MUD CHAINS AND UNDERWEAR

PART ONE

by Carolyn Golledge

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Princess Leia Organa entered the massive, busy hangar bay and hunted about for familiar faces. She'd just been told Captain Solo's Wookiee partner had arrived back from off-world and was eager to greet him.

She spotted Luke Skywalker who was squatting on the deck, his constant companion Artoo-Detoo at his side as they checked their X-wing's systems. Shouting voices could be heard rising over the background din, one of them the distinctive growls and whuffs of a Wookiee. Leia noted Luke had heard too, he got to his feet to crane his head to watch what was going on further down the ranks of starships, close by Solo's battered freighter. Amused, he shook his head and chuckled. Leia walked over to stand at his back, now able to see the loudly arguing duo by The Falcon's ramp.

Solo and Chewbacca always made an interesting sight, and their odd friendship intrigued and warmed Leia. They were fiercely loyal to one another but inclined to argue about almost everything. The Wookiee folded his long, hairy arms across his mammoth chest, and leaned back slightly, an exasperated slant to his leathery lips as he eyed his smaller companion. Solo was waving a hand dramatically, indicating the Rebel Base surrounding them. Beyond the partially open steelcrete hangar doors, humid green-tinged air leaked in from the surrounding jungle. Another jungle world, Leia sighed. Admittedly such worlds made for excellent hiding places with all the life forms to confuse any sensors -- but still, just once, it would be nice to feel cool air on her face and see an open vista. This place made her feel claustrophobic, she could only wonder at how it must affect Skywalker, used as he was to the vast desert plains and wide sky of Tatooine.

They had arrived at this new base from Yavin some weeks ago, and were only now getting it back to any semblance of normality after the horrific explosion caused by saboteurs that had destroyed the storage section and killed several people. Solo had been trapped and injured along with several others, but had soon left his hospital bed to track down the murderers -- Luke too had played an important role in their capture.

Solo shook his head in an emphatic no and held out his forearm for inspection. So, the Wookiee was querying him on how his arm had healed. Han had only just this morning himself returned from The Medical Frigate where he had spent several days recuperating after surgery on that badly shattered limb. Leia winced in sympathy as she recalled how twisted, raw and bloodied that arm had looked when she'd first found him, half-buried in the rubble. Now, judging by the way he was waving it around so freely, and the fact it no longer was encased in a cast, it must be as good as new. Or she hoped so -- it would be a terrible thing to see a vital man like Solo crippled. Chewbacca must have been worried after being summoned by an emergency call from his trading mission off-world.

Chewbacca whuffed some abrupt answer and Luke laughed.

"What's so funny?" Leia asked curiously. Luke turned about to smile the sunny welcome that always made Leia feel instantly refreshed and happier. She returned the smile.

"Chewie insists that's the third time Han has broken that arm. Han says no, only twice. It was the other arm one time Chewie is counting."

Leia blinked and looked back to Solo. "Three times?"

"Yeah. Han told me this morning he knew Chewie would "carry on" like this so he had his counter-arguments all prepared." Luke's lips curved up and his blue eyes twinkled in memory. "He tried them all out on me. He says it's not his fault that we crazy Rebs keep getting him into trouble and whose idea was it to stay involved anyway?" Luke snorted, seeming to find that particularly amusing, but Leia could not share the sentiment. It always irked her more than a little the way Solo refused to swear any allegiance to the Rebellion and held to his mercenary tactics.

She looked again to see that the argument had diminished and Solo and Chewbacca were now examining some mechanical items Solo laid out on the ramp. Solo was saying, "Yeah, I got the valve. Well, Leia did." There was an odd pleased and almost boyish tone to his deep voice as he added, "She bought it to me in Sick Bay as a get well gift. How about that, huh?" The wookiee nodded and absently reached out a giant hand to pat

Solo's head. Han pulled away with a disgusted expression. "So, I checked the engines again just this morning --"

Leia stopped listening, wanting to mentally replay what he had said about her. She'd never before heard Solo use her name in so friendly and casual a fashion. And why do you care so much one way or the other? She shook off the odd thought as something else occurred to her. Eyebrows raised in revelation, she turned to ask Luke, "Wait a moment -- since when can you understand what Chewie is saying?"

It was Luke's turn to blink in surprise, he obviously hadn't fully realized what he had been doing. His mouth dropped open a little and furrowed lines pulled at his brows as he sought an explanation. "I don't know," he said slowly. "It just -- came to me. I've been around him longer than you. I guess I just -- got used to it."

Leia snorted skeptically. "Wookian is one of the most difficult of all languages for humans to decipher."

Avoiding examining the mystery any further, Luke bent to close his tool kit and tell Artoo they were finished for the morning. He straightened up again and wiped his hands on an already grimy rag he'd tucked into the waistband of his rebel fatigues. "Well," he mused as he caught Leia's patient and determined I-still-want-an-answer look, "You can tell a lot of what Chewie must be saying by Han's reaction."

"Not always." But she dropped the subject to chase down another thought. "I wonder how Solo hurt his arm those other times?"

"Ask him," Luke said in that innocent way of his, as if it was the easiest thing in the world to inquire about someone's personal details. "They're coming this way."

Leia looked up to see that indeed Solo and the Wookiee were closing on them, Solo swaggering in some manner that irritated Leia with the implication that he knew they had been talking about him. "Don't let them know we were talking about them," she said to Luke.

"Huh? Why not?"

"Just don't!" she hissed, then, noting Solo was in hearing range, she asked Luke casually, "So, do you want to be part of the supply mission to Minorit or not?"

"Sure," Luke said, his frown telling her he was still puzzled by her sudden change in topic, "Count me in."

"Count you in on what, Junior?" Solo asked cheerily. He nodded greeting to Leia and she returned it politely hoping he wouldn't start another argument between them. Things had been going well enough since the rather unusual party he'd thrown after the natives had begun worshipping he and Luke as gods. Leia sighed at the memory -- the man's ego was bad enough as it was!

Solo reached up and tugged on his wookiee friend's chest fur, and with an undeniably pleased grin, said, "Hey, look who's back!"

Leia shook her head, thinking, A wookiee is a little hard to miss in this company, Solo! But she smiled and reached a hand to pat Chewbacca's arm in warm welcome. "Hi, Chewie" she said, "Good to have you back. Maybe you can keep Captain Solo out of trouble for a while."

"Hey!" Solo's face instantly resolved into that indignantly injured innocence she was sure he must have had patented. "Who stopped the natives from trying to make pincushions of you all and got them back to their friendly selves? Not to mention found out who your saboteurs were? You want me to stay out of trouble -- improve Security!"

Leia nodded a touché to his point.

Chewie rumbled a question and Solo said, "Yeah, I said saboteurs. Told ya it wasn't my fault. I was only here to get that valve and the whole place exploded around me. That's how my arm got busted -- coulda happened to anyone."

Chewbacca whuffed a somehow pained sounding comment but conceded the point with another pat to Solo's head. Han shook him off. "Yeah, yeah, so I already told ya once -- you never believe me until I get witnesses!"

Leia had to bite back a smile.

Luke finally managed to get in an answer. "High Command wants us to reinforce and supply some people coming under attack from an Imperial allied warlord on Minorit," he explained, "We're trying to get them used to the idea of allying themselves formally with the Rebellion."

Solo frowned. "I didn't know there was a warlord at work on Minorit. How long has this been going on? Chewie and I were there, what, only two, three years back?" The Wookiee nodded confirmation of that estimate. "Nice, peaceable, place. Cold and wet though, most of the time."

"Well," Leia said determinedly. "If we can back them now they might help us out if we need them later. Or at least they'll allow us use of their land as a restaging depot should we need it."

"So," Solo's brows drew down, "let me get this straight. You and Luke no sooner get this Base started here and you get orders to move out to a war zone?"

"Not orders. They're asking for volunteers."

"Never volunteer," Solo told Luke and for some mysterious reason Chewbacca found that statement from Solo highly amusing. "Oh shuddup," The Corellian scowled up at him. Then to Luke he said, "Why would you want to go to Minorit?"

"I dunno," Luke shifted uncomfortably. "I was stuck on Tatooine all my life, I'd like to see other places."

Solo sighed. "Join the Imperial Navy, see the galaxy. Yeah, I know how that one goes."

"This isn't the Imperial navy," Leia said with a smile.

"I noticed," Solo said. Then to Luke asked, "I can't talk you outa this?" Luke shook his head. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning," Leia answered.

"That soon?"

"Well, we haven't found cargo transport yet -- but yes. They're under siege, starving and in desperate need of any supplies we can provide." Leia was a little annoyed with Solo's let it be attitude. "If we don't get to them fast there'll be no one left to save."

Solo eyed her with something like mischief in his green-brown eyes. "So, need a freighter? I happen to know where you can get hold of one on short notice."

* * *

Solo paused from his yelling at the loader-droids to look over his shoulder at Leia who was about to stride up the ramp into the Falcon. "I still don't like this!" he called to her.

Leia's mouth twisted into a sour smile. "And good morning to you too, Captain Solo." He sighed heavily and yelled some more at the droids. Leia paused, shook her head and muttered under her breath. She put down her carry-all and stepped off the ramp to speak with him. "No one is forcing you to take us," she said in a clipped, annoyed tone.

Solo planted his hands on his hips but did not turn away from his work. His shoulders heaved and she heard him give a skeptical snort. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. We could have gone with the troop carrier last night."

Solo finally turned to regard her and she saw one corner of his mouth lift in the manner that warned her he was trying to bait her. His hazel eyes caught the rising sunlight slanting in through the partly open hangar bay doors. The light was, as ever, tinted faintly green, reflecting the color of the ever-present, dangerous jungle. Leia noted distractedly that the touch of wary green exactly matched the deeper glints in Solo's intelligent eyes. Again, she wondered about him -- who was he really? Where had he come from? More than your average freighter captain.

"Royalty mixing with the peasants?" Solo mimicked a scandalized tone. "You'll give them heart failure."

Leia showed her teeth in an equally fake smile. "Nevertheless, you volunteered your services for this mission."

Solo took a step closer, his hands leaving his hips as his arms lifted and spread wide. She fought the urge to take a step away from him.

"Hey," he drawled, "like I said, me and Chewie have been to Minorit before. We made some friends -- I'd like to check on them and maybe sell some more of the cargo we've been hauling around." His eyes locked with hers. That unsettling, knowing intensity was back. The look that said I know you better than you know yourself. The look that always made her angry. Angry, and --- something else she didn't want to think about. His lips twitched in a smile, acknowledging the flicker of anger in her eyes. That damm, smug, victory smile! "And besides, my services are always on offer -- for a price."

Leia's toe tapped but she managed to stop herself from actually stamping in annoyance. "So Dodonna noticed. I don't know why he agreed to such an outrageous fee."

Solo's eyebrows lifted in question of that description. But he said mildly, "Maybe because I have the only non-military ship readily available

with the necessary cargo space." Leia threw up her hands and turned back to the ramp. This conversation was -- as usual-- pointless. "Or maybe," Solo continued with a trace of amusement, "because Dodonna's an idiot?"

Leia's back stiffened. "Dodonna is not an idiot. He's a decorated hero of the Clone Wars."

"Yeah. Right," Solo sneered. "Decorated." He sighed and his voice dropped even lower as he became abruptly serious, "When are you people going to learn that pompous fools like him are only interested in decoration? And they're willing to pay for it with other people's lives. Take that mess he engineered back at Yavin --"

"That was not a mess!"

"Oh? You lost almost all of your experienced X Wing pilots -- not to mention their ships."

"And saved the Base!" Leia snatched up her carry all. "If anyone is responsible for that 'mess' it's me. I bought back those plans."

She marched up the ramp and Solo shouted after her, "Well, blame me too! You'd never have got back without me and The Falcon!"

Disappearing through the hatch, Leia heard a younger, much cheerier voice ask, "Blame you for what?" Luke had arrived -- a little late as usual.

"Ahh, nothing, kid," Solo told him. Leia heard bootfalls on the ramp as they approached. "Hey! That goes in hold number four!" Solo tramped back down to the hangar bay deck. Chewbacca's rumbling growls and whuffs followed. The Wookiee must have answered Luke's question with typical wry humor because Skywalker laughed and Solo returned to mutter, "Very funny, Fuzz Face. Are you gonna stand around making jokes, or are you gonna check the bill of lading. You know these Rebs'll cheat us any chance they get."

"Hey!" Luke protested. Leia stuck her head out the hatch in time to see Solo grin and swipe at Luke's too long, unruly fair hair. Grinning in turn, Luke looked back up the ramp, his blue eyes lighting as he saw her. He trotted up to her side. Dodonna had decided not to risk X-Wing support of this mission. Leia had to admit Solo may be right there -- he'd argued loudly that X-Wings would make all the difference in providing cover fire. Leia frowned. But Dodonna's counter argument had validity too -- Minorit's war was only a minor scrape, the Imperials had not supplied troops or weapons, but only routine support so far. If the Alliance sent

X-Wings, even the two Solo suggested, the Empire would no doubt up the ante too. No, Dodonna was right. Best any Alliance contact be kept as discreet as possible. Provide humanitarian relief only, food and medicines -- what little they could spare -- and, most importantly, military expertise and morale boosting promise of open support should the Empire decide to openly back the warlord.

"This is great, isn't it?" Luke said, drawing level with her to bounce on his toes and survey the interior of The Falcon with relish. She looked at him inquiringly and he added, "Us together again. Just like old times."

Leia managed not to roll her eyes. Then as Luke waited for some response she thought to ask, "So, what did Chewie say?"

"About us coming along?"

"No. About --" she looked away, and waved a hand back down the ramp toward Solo. "Solo didn't answer your question, but Chewie did."

"Oh." Luke's eyes sparkled with amused memory. "He said you and Han had already started up again. Oh, and that you are two of a kind, and --" he trailed off.

"Two of a kind!" Leia spluttered indignantly. Luke nodded and smiled nervously then made to step past her. Leia grabbed his arm, "And what?"

"Umm, nothing really."

"Luke!"

He drew a breath and blurted out, "Chewie says you both take blame for things not your doing and avoid blame for other stuff."

"Other stuff?"

"He used some word I couldn't make out." Luke escaped to dump his carry all and explore the cockpit. Leia stared thoughtfully back down the ramp, then proceeded into the Falcon's main compartment.

* * *

"At least it's cooler here," Luke said.

He was standing by the Falcon's open cargo hold and he stepped up onto one of the off-loaded cargo bales to better admire the view. Solo had brought the ship down several miles behind the city, under cover of

night. It was now mid-morning. The chosen landing field was surrounded by heavily forested, low hills that clustered about the foot of a range of rugged, snow-capped mountains. A storm looked to be brewing up there amid faint rumbles of thunder and flickers of lightning. A cold breeze washed down from the icy peaks, carrying the scent of rain. Parrots chattered and squawked in overhanging branches above the low scrubby hedge that ran all the way round the field.

Watching his happy, curious and eager expression, Solo shook his head. "I didn't think heat would worry you -- being Tatooine bred."

"No," Luke corrected. "I don't like hot weather. Everyone back home used to tease me about it, said I didn't look like a native Tatooine either." The cheery expression vanished abruptly and Luke's blue eyes turned gray, flooded with some grim memory. He turned away and studied the view again, but was no longer seeing it.

Solo winced in sympathy. He had his own collection of bad memories. Needing distraction, he was pleased to hear Leia's quick, light bootheels on the ramp. She stood a moment at the bottom, took a deep breath, smiled and said, "At least it's cooler here."

Han snorted and he and Luke exchanged wry smiles. Leia frowned faintly, wondering at the amusement. "It'll be even colder in the mountains."

Han lifted his head in surprise. "Who says we're going up into the mountains?"

Leia flushed guiltily and avoided his eyes. "The main refugee settlement is up there in a high valley. They had to flee the city when it came under bombardment. That's where they need the medicines." She turned back, seeming to feel Solo's glare. She lifted her chin and said defiantly, "Well, we couldn't just land right on top of them -- we'd draw the enemy right to their door!"

"Fine," Han said. "So who's going to haul all this stuff all the way up those muddy herder trails? Not me." He folded his arms and leaned back against a ramp support strut. "Chewie and I never went beyond the city and it was cold and wet enough!"

"No one asked you --" Leia began but broke off as they were hailed from the tree line. A light flashed in the stormy gloom under the overhanging trees and a voice called. Leia replied, using a hand light and the prearranged pass word. An old, stocky, white-bearded man appeared. He was wearing a small, round, leather cap and a matching cloak and boots.

His trousers were made of some tattered purple material, wide and billowing about his lower legs as the wind caught it. He tugged on a lead rope connected to a line of several hauler beasts. Flat-nosed, shaggy, long-eared, but sturdy looking on their four stubby, powerful hooved legs, they looked like a cross between a gundark and much smaller, more mobile bantha.

Solo chuckled. "High tech transport your people have here, I see! You'll never pack all those bales on their backs."

"Thank you so much for pointing that out, Captain!" Leia snapped. Then she forced a friendlier expression and marched off to greet her contact.

Luke was eyeing Solo in typical disapproval.

"What?" Han said.

"It's medicines, Han. There are probably sick kids up there too. We can't just --"

"We?" That earned Solo a full out glare. He lifted a placating hand. "Take it easy. I'm going to let them borrow my float sled. Happy?"

Solo turned away from Luke's surprised and pleased smile only to meet Chewbacca's intent blue eyes. "All right, all right," he grumbled. "Help me unload the sled from the lower hold -- and save the commentary."

Busy with the newcomer, Leia didn't notice her cargo being transferred to the sled until Solo said immediately at her back, "Shall we get going, Your Royalness, or would you rather stand round and chat all day?"

"I am not --" Her expression altered from annoyance to delight so rapidly that even Luke, standing at Solo's side, grinned in reaction. "Where did you find that?" She touched a hand to the laden sled as if she thought it a mirage about to vanish before her eyes.

"Oh, I'm just full of surprises, " Solo winked.

Luke rolled his eyes and gave a heavy sigh.

The old man, whose name was Talros, left his animals to examine the miracle of the cargo sled floating seemingly without support. Then he muttered something in his native tongue and shook his head. He said in Standard, "My beasts would serve you better up in the high valleys.

Besides, the enemy have energy-tracer missiles. That thing's infra-red will draw 'em like tenbees to the sweetener."

Solo regarded the old man with wounded pride. "Do I look like an idiot? I've been a smuggler all my life -- I know about energy tracers!" He fell silent, glaring, his jaw set in a stubborn line but the old man, equally stubborn, did not back down.

"And?" Leia prompted.

Luke threw an exasperated look at Solo then answered. "The sled has an inbuilt jammer, sort of like the one on the Falcon, only a lot smaller." Without asking permission, he picked up the control box, gave a winning smile for the old man, and began moving away up slope, the sled following obediently.

Leia set to the task of explaining and, at the same time, urged Talros to move. Energy tracers or no, they were targets if they stayed too long here.

"Well, why didn't they say so up front?" the old man complained. But he simply shook his head, his white beard fluttering in the breeze. He ran a few paces, surprisingly lithe and fit for his evident age, caught up to Luke, and took some pleasure in telling him that he was heading for the wrong path through the trees. That settled, he returned to pick up the lead rope and get his beasts moving again.

Leia turned to Solo who was muttering under his breath and eyeing Skywalker in a mixture of disbelief and suppressed amusement.

"We should be back in three days," Leia told him. "You'd best not bring The Falcon back here." Solo raised his brows and she amended tersely, "To this exact spot, I mean. Try the other ridge to the east."

Solo looked heavenward as if seeking patience. "Chewie knows that -- and I have the communicator if we need to alter plans later. Come on, the kid'll get lost if we let him get any further ahead." He grabbed up his all-weather coat and strode off up the track.

Leia picked up her carry all and jogged to catch up with him. "You're coming with us?"

"That's my cargo sled."

Leia opened her mouth to ask further questions then thought better of it. She doubted Solo was doing this out of the goodness of his heart -- he

had said he had done business on this world before. He no doubt intended to make a profit somehow. That sled was carrying more than her bales of supplies, she'd wager.

They walked for several hours, always climbing, and the terrain became more and more difficult. The storm broke with lashing wind and rain that settled to an icy, steadily soaking downpour. Already steep and slippery with rocks and mud, the trail was further marred as tiny rivulets grew into rushing streams, eroding the footing and sometimes splashing about their ankles. Leia noted that even Solo, who had been his usual annoyingly vocal, teasing self, seemed to be affected by the foul weather, falling uncharacteristically grim and silent. In fact, sneaking glances at him over her shoulder, she had to admit to a certain amount of concern. Tension emanated from the man like a primed detonator. Even Luke had noticed, exchanging a shrug with her as she nodded toward Solo who, hampered by guiding the sled, was now trailing a little way behind them. Meantime, the old man and his hauler beasts were setting a good pace up front.

"He hasn't said a word for the last hour," Leia told Skywalker, "What's with him?"

Luke's sighing breath created a miniature fog in the increasingly, thin, chill air. "I don't know. Want me to go ask him?"

Leia's eyes widened. "No. Leave him be. I don't want to be anywhere near him when he finally explodes." She shook her head in annoyance and sent a stream of water cascading from the hood of her parka. "It's not like we forced him to come up here."

Luke nodded agreement, flicked a worried glance at Solo, then moved ahead of Leia as the muddied trail suddenly narrowed, taking another steep turn, and forcing them to go single file.

They climbed carefully, placing their feet on a series of uneven rocky ledges protruding from the mountain wall to their right like a very narrow, rickety staircase. The mountain wall closed on them, slick and treacherous, and to their left, a stream frothed and gushed some twenty feet down along a rough-walled, boulder-strewn ravine. Solo was having trouble directing the float sled whose laden cargo tended to snag on the over-hanging rock teeth. That tiny control remote couldn't be easy to manipulate either with gloved hands. Leia wondered about going back to assist him, but decided against it -- trying to turn about on this narrow track could only lead to disaster. In any case, there wasn't much she could do. It was taking all their concentration and energy to simply keep

plodding upward, grabbing for precarious hand holds when they couldn't trust the slippery footing. Ahead, reaching the crest, Talros was having no trouble at all. Leia couldn't see his expression but she had the feeling the old man was enjoying Solo's struggles with the sled, smugly certain that his animals could do a better job. Maybe he was right.

They rounded another turn to finally catch sight of the warlord's fortress far across the valley. Huddled snug and tight against a brooding, jagged cliff-face, the warlord's bastion snarled defiance. Its rain-slick, gray stone towers and encircling walls gleamed deceitful silver, lit by the brighter sky to the west where the storm had lifted to reveal a lowering, pale yellow, and sickly-looking sun. Just visible in clinging mist high above the fortress towers were the twin evil snouts of giant cannons mounted in solid rock, a part of the mountain itself. On the ramparts below a flag snapped in the wind, red and black and threatening, the colors of blood and darkness.

At her back, Solo finally caught up, a little breathless after a strenuous climb in which he'd had to continually double back to free the sled. He gasped, sounding more shocked than winded, then uttered a foul curse. Leia flinched at the unexpected break in his brooding silence.

Carefully, she turned about to see that he was staring at the same view across the valley, his eyes glowing with hard, flat anger. She hadn't really expected such an emotional reaction to the sight of the fortress. He took a stumbling step upward, his hand waving wildly and grabbing the remote. Predictably, the sled suddenly rolled to one side, snagged, then gave a whine, lost power completely and collapsed to sink into the clay mud of the trampled track. Even as she watched, it began to settle still deeper, forced down by its weighty cargo. Unbelievably enough, Solo, now standing stiff and stunned, still staring at the view from just below Leia, and apparently unaware of the disaster behind him, dropped the remote. That snapped him from his trance -- at least to a degree. He tore off his gloves and bent to retrieve it. Already rainwater was cascading over the bales strapped atop the sled. Some of those straps looked set to work free as the wind tugged at the covering cainvun.

"This place is cursed."

Solo's tone made Leia's skin crawl. There was none of the frustrated anger she'd expected. His voice was almost a monotone, but so thick with an undercurrent of hopelessness and despair that she barely recognized it. She took another wary step closer, wanting to get a good look at his face, shadowed now by the hood of his coat. His eyes flicked up to meet hers at the movement and she froze, gasping a quick breath of surprise.

Haunted. That was the only word to fit that drawn, gaunt expression. Lost, alone, completely --- empty. A hollow man. It shocked her to see him so.

"Han?"

"This place is cursed. We should never have come up here. I told him that. But he wouldn't listen."

Leia's shock deepened as Solo's voice quavered, trembling under a flood-tide of emotion. Evidently, he was struggling to hold back some nightmarish memory. And his eyes were blank, not seeing her, glazed with a film of tears. There may have been more tears on his face but it was impossible to tell in the rain. She shivered and it had nothing to do with the icy air.

"I told him. He wouldn't listen."

Leia realized he was talking to himself. She was seeing something rare and terrible in its intensity -- this was bedrock Solo, a man trapped in past tragedy, reliving it, possessed by it to the exclusion of all else.

She slid more than walked closer still, her arm outstretched, gloved hand reaching an instinctive offer of comfort. "Who?" she asked softly, hoping to bring him out of it. "Who wouldn't .."

The question, already muted by the hissing rain, was suddenly engulfed and buried beneath a roaring bellow of sound. Something hit her, swallowed her up in mud and water. Just beneath the crest, right at her side, the mountain wall had given way in a minor avalanche, rushing upon her in a slick wall of mud and stones. Behind it, a water fall burst forth as a hidden rainwater dam broke free. Her feet went out from under her and she yelled a curse, as much to hold back a scream of fear as to express anger. She was going over the side of the track, would fall down into the rushing, pounding, flooded ravine.

Then Solo's fist clamped about her wrist, locking painfully hard. She jolted to a sudden halt, wrenching her shoulder, her feet and legs dangling in empty air. She was blinded as water and mud poured over her head. She struggled and pulled herself a little higher, still unable to find purchase with her feet. She blinked her eyes clear and stared up into Solo's face. He was doubled over, on his knees, his right arm outstretched, taut and already shaking under her weight, further burdened by the carry pack on her back. Obviously, he had dropped the remote again and by now it was probably gone, washed over the side. His left arm was

anchored somehow, possibly wrapped under one of the cargo straps on the sled.

The mud slide still roared downward, tearing at her body, adding to the strain on Solo's arm. Luke and Talros, cut off on the other side of the crest at least until the slide ended, were unable to help. Her wrist hurt. The glove slipped off.

Solo grabbed urgently at her fingers, and they interlocked. She wondered how much longer his anchor would hold. Muddy sludge coated both their hands, greasing them as well as any lubricant. The pain in her wrist eased as that death-grip slipped a fraction. She jolted down, her feet scrabbling wildly, still finding nothing but open air. She was slipping inexorably from his grasp.

Their fingers broke apart and Leia fell. She landed with a breath-taking jolt on the slick, muddy side of the ravine, her backpack absorbing some of the impact, and was immediately swept further downslope by the continuing avalanche. Twisting and turning, she was carried along then toppled over the ravine edge and into the now mud-sluggish stream. Her hip struck hard against a boulder jutting up midstream, and she was able to grab on, struggling to hold herself there as the dragging current fought to pry her free. If it succeeded she would have no hope -- a waterfall roared and pounded not much farther down -- she'd be dashed to death on the rocks below.

Desperately, she looked up and about, checking the steep embankment and gauging the distance. Could she jump across there, find some purchase to haul herself clear of the mud-thick torrent? But her gaze was caught by sudden movement higher upslope. Thirty feet above her, Solo stood, tore off his coat and blaster belt, then hurled himself after her. He fell on his backside in the mud, but his was a controlled slide, and the worst of the avalanche was over. She winced as some rocks tore free then tumbled after him, grazing and cutting his face. But then he was at her side, his back wedged to the same boulder, booted feet planted immovably below the water. His arm curled about her waist just as she felt herself being torn away by the ferocious current. Already the muddy tide had risen and was washing over the top of the boulder, clearing mud and debris from about her.

She tilted her head to look at him and blinked in astonishment. Grinning maniacally, Solo's muddy face was painted by a broad band of white. It was the exact opposite of his earlier shattered desolation. Utterly joyous, alight with jubilant victory. He threw back his head and gave a whoop of elation, then laughed, turned to her and said, "I've got you!"

She eyed him somewhat warily, wondering at the mood swing, but her mouth twisted into a smile. His elation was completely and compellingly infectious. "You jumped in here after me?" she said disbelievingly.

"Yup."

Her smile became a grin. "You're crazy."

"Yup!" he repeated cheerfully.

Their eyes met and locked for one long moment of complete openness, raw and aching. And frightening. There was such a radiance in him, so much behind those alert, laughing, usually guarded eyes. So much more than she had imagined. Too much. She broke the silent communication at the same moment he too was forced to look away.

The muddy water was still climbing about them, up to Leia's shoulders now, she noted with some alarm. Solo's arm was still clamped tight about her waist. She reached out, stretched, but there was no way she could reach the further embankment. High above, she saw Luke and the old man staring open-mouthed down at them, then turning to find a rope, she hoped.

"What now?" she said to Solo as the tide climbed further toward her mouth.

He considered a moment, noted how rapidly the muddy water was gaining on them, and came to a quick decision. "Climb up on my shoulders," he had to shout to be heard above the echoing roar of the nearby falls. "Luke should have a rope to us by then. The old man's beasts can haul us out. Make him happy!"

She almost opened her mouth to comment but kept her lips pressed firmly together as watery mud splashed her chin.

Awkwardly, she twisted about in his arms until she faced him, her cheek pressed to his sodden but relatively warm, firm chest. It was an amazingly reassuring embrace despite the dangerous torrent roaring about them. She hooked her arms about his neck and lifted her head, then began to haul herself upward. Slowly she dragged free of the clinging, thick mud. Her hair brushed over his mouth, then her eyes, her lips. She paused a moment, felt his chest move beneath her as he inhaled quickly. No time for this, she told herself and gave one final heave. Her hips came free of the ooze and she popped upward faster than she'd expected. Solo's grasp shifted, by default grabbing at her buttocks. Her breasts were

pressed to his mouth now. He paused, and made no effort to boost her further.

"Solo!" she growled, and with a chuckle he obeyed, boosting her until she balanced at first precariously then steady on his shoulders, facing forward again. She looked up to the mountain trail and was pleased to find indeed Luke was getting set to throw a rope down to her while the old man steadied his animals.

Only Solo's strength and endurance kept them from being swept away. By the time Leia had managed to catch and secure the rope, and they had both been hauled back up the rough slope, scraping and bruising themselves further, they were near to hypothermia. Soaked through to the skin with icy slush, both shivered uncontrollably, shaking so convulsively that they were unable to stay on their feet but collapsed to sit sprawled on the muddy track. It was now a miniature stream in its own right. Leia wasn't sure which of them had been worse off -- she, sitting atop Solo's shoulders had been wet through and exposed to the wind and rain, but at least she was still wearing her, albeit sodden, coat. Solo, awash to his chest, had only his thin shirt for protection. She decided she may possibly have been colder, but he was most definitely the most exhausted. It had taken almost half an hour to secure the line, and all that time, Solo had struggled, fighting the powerful current and regularly battered by stones and debris carried downstream in the torrent. To top that he'd had her weight to bear and it could not have made it any easier to keep his balance. It was probably fortunate that her carry pack had been torn off in the fall and washed away over the waterfall.

Luke and Talros assisted them into a sheltering overhang, and there they sat shuddering, too cold for words. They were out of the wind and rain, but sitting in icy mud and water. Leia fought her twitching muscles to lean out a little and eye the sky. It was rapidly turning to full dark -- they couldn't stay here overnight, already the temperature was plummeting still further. Luke returned with blankets he had tugged free of the supply bales on the float pallet still bogged in the mud. He draped one each about her and Solo and they nodded their thanks, Han had also pulled his coat back on and reholstered his blaster.

"No use sitting here any longer," Talros said bluntly, "You'll freeze in those wet clothes. There's a shepherd's hut on a side track about half a mile from here. We'd best head for it, stay there overnight."

Han and Leia exchanged weary glances, and she noted he looked worse than she felt, his face bloodied where the rain had washed away some of

the mud. Staggering and stumbling they lurched to their feet. Talros urged Leia to get up on one of his hauler beasts, and with her legs threatening to give way, Leia obeyed. Solo opted out of riding, but did eventually admit to his exhaustion enough to accept Luke's supporting shoulder. The old man urged them on ahead, saying he would transfer as many of the bundles of supplies as possible to the beasts. The rest would have to stay where it was for the night at least -- Leia doubted greatly that anyone would find it up here tonight let alone have the means to remove it.

After what seemed an eternity of slogging along the ever gloomier track in growing darkness, teeming rain and howling wind, a tiny ramshackle hut emerged from hiding down in a somewhat sheltered dip in the road. It was so weather-worn and dilapidated it looked ready to be blown off the mountainside by the next gust of wind. But as they drew up and Luke tied off the beast to the porch railing, Leia realized it was more solid than it appeared and the wind had less bite down in the hollow.

Inside it was much warmer simply for being out of the rain. Luke remained outside while she and Solo stumbled in to examine their meager surroundings. There were no bunks, but a table and two benches, a small stool and a hearth awaited them, and that seemed luxury right now. Most of the mud was gone from their hair and clothing thanks to the driving rain storm, but their blankets too had been soaked through. Leia felt so completely drained of energy that she could not walk all the way to the bare hearth and start a fire. She collapsed on the nearest bench and sat staring blankly, telling herself she'd get up in a moment. But Solo crossed to a pile of timber and peat stacked ready in a corner and threw an armful onto the hearth bed, then struck a flame from some tool he produced from his utility belt. Leia was never so glad to see a fire in all her life. Her jaw was sore from constantly having to clench her teeth to stop their chattering gnawing a hole through her lips and tongue.

Solo squatted by the fire and they both sat eagerly absorbing the growing warmth. Or trying to -- Leia was sure the ice had gnawed into her very bones. She could feel the warmth licking at the frosty tendrils of her outer skin but it seemed like a faint hope of dethawing her -- like a single match put to an iceberg. She would swear she could never again be truly warm. The humid heat of the jungle world about which she had complained now seemed a wonderful fantasy.

The door banged open, startling both she and Solo from their hypothermic drowsiness. "I got the supplies stowed temporarily in the stable out back. Your friend's still out there looking for more blankets and such," Talros announced. He took one look at them both and his shaggy brows rose. "I'll put some tea on to boil -- you like to need it." He took

the tin kettle from its hook and disappeared outside again, presumably to get water from the over-flowing rain barrel by the porch post.

"T-tea!" Solo snorted disgustedly. "N -no w-way!" Much to Leia's surprise, he staggered to his feet, crossed the room, and he too exited the cabin back out into the icy air. Leia shrugged and turned back to staring hypnotically at the rising flames.

A moment later, the door banged open to let in yet another gust of icy wind -- it was not Solo. Luke smiled at Leia, pleased to see the fire burning warmly. "Feeling better?" he asked.

"I'll b-be f-fine," she stammered. He handed her a dry blanket and she tried clumsily to pull it about her shoulders. "Wh-where did H-Han go?"

"I thought he was with you," Luke frowned bewilderment as he noted that indeed they were the cabin's sole occupants. The storm screamed and thumped loudly, trying to tear tiles from the roof. "Han?" Luke called in puzzlement.

"He w-went back out a-g-gain."

Luke stared at her in disbelief. "He must have gone round the other side of the hut to the stable." He went to the door but just as he reached to open it, it popped open and Solo all but fell into his arms. The Corellian looked a bizarre sight, like something feral driven by the hunt into civilization -- if the rustic cabin could be called such.

"G-got it!" he said happily, and held aloft a coil-package wrapped bottle.

"You really are crazy," Leia muttered. She held out her hands to the warmth of the fire but it still seemed unable to penetrate the icy carapace making her shiver. Talros finally returned to set the kettle on the hook over the hearth fire and say apologetically, "Sorry I took so long -- but your friend there spooked my animals, tearing all the bales apart."

Solo gave the old man a wounded look. "I only moved them a l-little!" He flashed a smile and added, "Got the brandy."

"Brandy?" Talros' wrinkled face creased further with delight. "Well, in that case, you're forgiven."

Luke went outside yet again -- Leia was sure the room would never get warm with all the toing and froing-- and now returned staggering under the

weight of one of the Alliance supply bales. He produced more dry blankets and strung one of them across the room from a rope while Leia watch him curiously. "There you go!" he announced proudly, "Now you can have some privacy to get out of those wet clothes." He crossed to her side and offered a hand to help her to her feet. "There are some old uniform shirts we were giving to the refugees -- you can change. At least it'll be dry."

"Thanks," she said, impressed by his ingenuity. He had apparently noticed that her pack had been lost in the fall -- and all her change of clothing with it. They passed round the table where Solo sat trying determinedly to get the bottle open with fumbling, numb fingers. Leia shook her head at him and disappeared behind the screen and began laboriously peeling out of her icy wet, clinging clothes.

"You too," Luke said to Solo.

"No, I'm f-fine," he replied, sounding to Leia's ears oddly defensive. "The brandy'll f-fix me up."

"You can't stay in wet clothes all night!" Luke protested.

Talros too sounded concerned, and a little surprised by Solo's refusal. "Fever is epidemic in these parts, " he said gravely. "Stay wet and cold and you'll catch it fer sure."

Luke was even more puzzled. "Come on," he urged, sounding as though he thought Solo was no longer capable of thinking clearly, overcome by exhaustion. And that was probably true. Leia tugged on the old shirt, wrapped the blanket about herself for good measure, and stepped clear of the screen to watch the developing scene with curiosity. Solo's jaw was set in that familiar, stubborn line. "Take this blanket," Luke was saying, "See, Leia's finished. I'll help you with your boots."

Solo agreed to that much assistance at least -- his boots were a real struggle to remove, swollen tight and caked in mud. "Now go strip off," Luke said.

Solo leaned close and stage whispered, "I ain't wearing underwear! So, no peeking -- unless you want to live forever in envy."

Luke's face became suffused with amusement as he watched Solo disappear behind the screen. His eyes rounded and his lips pursed as he fought a grin. Finally, he managed to say reasonably blandly, "There might be some old uniforms in there that will fit--"

"No, thanks!" Solo called back.

Leia was too tired to be further bothered. She went to the fire to sit on the stool close to the warmth and accept the tin mug of steaming tea the old man was offering to her. "Thank you," she nodded and took a sip. At last, she was beginning to feel warm and wonderfully dry.

Luke came over to the fire side, grinning widely and trying not to laugh. Leia couldn't resist. "What was that all about?" she said. "Solo never struck me as the shy sort."

"No underwear!" Luke choked

"Well, so?" Leia shrugged, "Neither do I right now." Luke blushed and looked away, and she smiled.

Solo could be heard thumping about behind the screen, muttering curses. Luke glanced in that direction, looked back to Leia and rolled his eyes dramatically. She snorted back a giggle. She was beginning to feel ridiculously cheery and she knew it was a side-effect of near-freezing.

Solo took a long time, but finally emerged, looking both sheepish and defiant. He held his head high and strode toward them, looking to Leia's eyes like some comedian mimicking a pompous senator. He wore the blanket toga style, his lower shoulder and chest were bare at the front, but his back was completely covered by the all-weather coat he had put back on. It at least was water-proof and lined with soft, thermal material, and had been spared a dousing in the stream. Leia supposed she could see why he would be reluctant to abandon it. Her own coat was completely ruined, sodden and muddied inside and out. Still, Solo's sartorial style was more than a little comical with his legs bare from knees to toe. She noted he had very nice feet. She had to look away to the fire to stop from staring at them and hide her grin.

Solo padded barefoot to the fireside, stopping only to pick up the bottle Luke had finally gotten free of its packaging and left on the table top. "Not one w-word," he warned, his teeth still chattering a little and his hand juggling the bottle as he tried to lift a forefinger in threatening admonishment of their merriment. "Here, dump some of this into your tea."

He offered the bottle and Leia held out her mug. He topped it with the brandy then did the same for Luke and the old man. His own mug was straight brandy, doing without the tea. Then, eyeing the steam rising from their mugs, he changed his mind and mixed some hot water into the alcohol. He took a deep breath of the resulting aroma and sighed happily.

He dropped to sit cross-legged before the fire and lean back against the wall. He reminded Leia of nothing so much as a bedraggled boy arrived home after an adventurous day out fishing. Well, not a boy, she amended, taking in the lean, muscular legs and long, bare feet. The firelight made the most wonderful golden brown luster on his exposed flesh, especially that wonderful hollow at the join of shoulder and throat, the collar bone dissecting it in a line of power and strength. He had the most amazing throat -- the way it rose to sweep up into that cleanly chiseled jaw. And his eyes. She dared not meet those radiant, teasing eyes. She took a yawning breath, feeling her face burn, and decided she had had enough of the brandy. She shook her head as he offered it again.

"The best Corellian brandy of them all," he said, his voice slurred with exhaustion more than drink. His hand was a little unsteady as he made to top his own mug.

"Best make sure you don't spill any of it then." She dared look across at him, for once at eye-level with him. The effect of those knowing, hazel-green eyes lit by firelight was almost mesmerizing. With every leap of the flames, another fleck of gold gleamed from their liquid depths.

"This is the best," he repeated, pouring more for Luke and Talros, "It's Arghalan vintage."

"I'll take your word for it, son," Talros said, and Leia almost laughed at the surprise that painted Solo's face. He was older than she and Luke, and obviously hadn't been referred to as 'son' in a long while.

They sat in companionable silence, sipping at their steaming, brandied tea, watching the fire crackle and dance about logs and turf. Leia was relieved to note whoever had been here last had left more than enough for an all night fire. Luke produced ration bars from his own pack and they munched unenthusiastically despite hunger. The storm howled impotently about the rafters, the rain hissing against the tiles and rattling in the downpipe. All in all it was a very cosy feel, snug in here by the crackling fire while the storm rage outside. Drowsiness swept up over her in an impossibly heavy, soothing weight. Solo too, she noted was yawning repeatedly.

Finally, Luke got up, found more blankets from the supply bale, and spread them on the floor, cushioning them with straw he'd found stored as fodder for the hauler beasts. Leia was touched and pleased when he waved an arm and said, "Your bed is ready, Your Highness." She smiled and pressed her hand to his arm, then gratefully lowered herself to lie on her side, still watching the fire contentedly even as her eyelids drooped.

Luke moved off, and a little while later she heard him say, "Lie down before you fall over, Solo." He moved to take the mug from Solo's hand. Leia propped an eye open long enough to see that Solo had indeed fallen asleep where he sat. Luke shoved at him, and he went over on his side amid more blankets and straw, yawned once hugely, curled an arm under his head and fell asleep. Leia felt wonderfully warm and secure, the fire before her, and Solo's sprawled form guarding her flank and keeping any draft from reaching her through the worn slab-walls and rickety door.

Slowly, a voice penetrated Leia's comfortable sleepy cocoon, registering fear and pain. "No --no! Hold on!"

Groggily, Leia realized it was Solo's voice. She tensed, listening in horror. He was ensnared in one hell of a nightmare.

(It wasn't until years later, in a tent on her honeymoon on Corellia that Leia learned the details of what Solo saw in his sleep ---)

//////////Again, Solo's bare foot slid out from under him, finding it an impossible task to gain purchase on the slick, clay mud of the narrow mountain track. Immediately, the chains linking his ankles snapped taut, the iron cuff on the left digging deep into already abraded, bleeding and bruised flesh. The pressure eased suddenly as the other leg too gave way, and he fell hard, face down in the mud. At least his face was turned from the icy rain. He was so utterly exhausted that for a moment he considered not getting up. The overseer would beat him to death where he lay -- had already murdered other child slaves that way. Despite the horror of that fate, Han was tempted. Tempted as he had been so many times already in the unendurable months since ---- He bit down hard against the usual swell of grief. Cursed mentally the dreaded image -- His father, the last person in all the world who loved him, convulsing in death agonies as the blaster bolt tore the life from his heart. Murdered. Bound to a post and executed by traitors.

Searing pain jarred Han from the awful vision. Another blow rained down on his upper arm as the overseer prodded him with the stinger rod.

"Get up! You lazy cur!" The stocky, muscular and balding man's face was red with exposure to the elements and to rage. He landed a swinging kick with a booted foot to Han's ribs for emphasis. "I don't care if they want you alive! Pilots' lucky charm! Ace! Pah! You're nothing but a slave, low life scum like the rest! They can't keep you safe from me! I'll beat you bloody!"

Han would have laughed if he could -- no one was going to protect him -- as long as he breathed Acquila's superstitious mobsters would be satisfied. That was the only reason Han had not been killed along with his father -- Han had earned a reputation, deserved or not, for bringing luck in space battles. Luck! It was his father's skill that pulled those men out from potentially lethal attack -- and they turned on him, set him up out of fear of their jealous Overlord! To hell with all of them!

He spat mud and turned his head to leer up at his tormentor. His lips formed a curse, a defiant challenge, but before he could find breath to hurl the words, someone else stepped forward to stand between him and the overseer.

"Please, Han," a gentle, frightened voice implored, "Please, don't leave me alone." The slave boy was even younger than Han, not yet into puberty. They were all thin, more than half-starved, but Andar was a walking skeleton. His pallid flesh was pulled taut over his bony frame, and his liquid brown eyes were huge and pleading above gaunt cheekbones. He bent to grasp Han's arm, tugging a little, and the manacles at Han's wrists clinked as he propped himself up out of the muck. There was no strength in the boy's grip and Han levered himself painfully and awkwardly to his feet before the boy could make any real attempt to pull him up. The kid didn't need a ricked back to top his troubles.

"Take it easy, Andy," Han gasped. He threw a glare at the leering guard. "I ain't quitting."

The overseer's attention was distracted as someone else further down the track also slipped and fell. "Imbeciles! I swear we'd do better to buy a team of gundarks!" He stormed off downslope.

Han took the opportunity to make an obscene gesture at the man's back. Andy flashed an approving smile that looked too big for his bony, narrow face. "Your pack's twisted," he said. "Turn round and I'll straighten it for you."

"Thanks." Han heaved a weary sigh and stood examining the road ahead. Far down in the valley below, he could see the fortress to which they were trekking. Above one of its towers, a red and black pennon, Acquila's insignia, hung listless in the steady, soaking rain. Andar did his best to rearrange the terrible, dragging weight of the gem pack cutting into Han's shoulders. The damn thing forced him to bend almost double on the steeper sections -- that or risk being over-balanced and toppled backward down the track. Or worse -- sideways. Swallowing hard against dread, Han

dared to look to his left into the seemingly bottomless ravine. It was raging now with the stormwater run-off, cascading and pounding over boulders in huge sprays of white beneath clouds of mist. He'd been lucky he had not slid all the way over the lip of the track.

Chained as he was, he'd have no chance in that raging torrent. Without the chains he'd definitely have risked it, jumped, even if it was a good fifty feet down to a hell of water and stone. After all he didn't care all that much either way -- life or death, it was all the same to him. He was the last of his beloved family and now he dishonored their name by allowing himself to be held as a slave. Enslaved by his father's murderer. The stinging disgrace was a more telling burden than the carry pack of gems dug from Acquilla's mines. A suffocating weight, crushing his heart, draining his spirit. And if he survived as a beast of burden for another year or so, his reward would be to be sent down into the bowels of the mountain. Never to emerge.

Adult slaves worked down there, digging the gems by hand with primitive tools. Digging forever in near darkness and icy cold, never feeling the sun on their faces, not a breath of fresh air. Never to see the stars! Until finally death came to free them. That would be Han's fate too. But no, he had a plan, a burning fire of hope and rage, all that kept him moving, living. Somehow he would avenge his father, he'd make Acquilla pay! The self-named Freedom Fighter! A tyrant, bleeding people dry while claiming to be their protector! He would die slowly at Han's hand. Han would be satisfied to die in the attempt -- better to die with honor than live like this.

"Han?" Andy prompted worriedly. "Better keep moving -- he's coming back this way."

"OK, kid, OK." Han tried to find a smile. He lifted a heavily chained hand and wiped mud and rain from his face. "Lead on. Maybe we'll make it back before dark this time, huh?"

"Sure, Han!" The boy threw an eager grin back over his shoulder and set out again leading the way up the track. Rivulets of stormwater ran over his feet, splashing about his ankles. Thank the stars, Han was the only one in the gang forced to wear chains -- the penalty for never-ceasing escape attempts-- he didn't think he could hold back his rage if he had to watch Andy struggle with that additional handicap on this stars-forsaken trail to hell.

A little while later, they reached the crest and Andy called encouragingly, "It's downhill from here, and they might keep some bread for us."

"Yeah, right." Han forced another smile, then as the boy turned back, he rolled his eyes. Andar had been a slave all his short life. A piece of stale bread! That was the difference between a good and bad day in the poor sod's sorry world. Maybe -- just maybe -- If Han somehow survived his vengeance on Aquila, somehow found the will to go on living, alone. No, not alone -- not if he could somehow save Andy too. Show him what life could be like free, out among the stars. Teach him to pilot. maybe. Han snorted at his own fantasy. Dream on! Concentrate, you moron, or the next time you slip will be your last!

Ahead and slightly above, up the mountain wall, came a faint rumbling sound over the hissing rain. Han frowned, lifted his head, squinted into the dying light and the storm. The sound came again, louder this time, and a thrill of fear set his pulse leaping.

"Slide!" he yelled. Several slaves had already been killed in past treks in bad weather up here. The trick was to take cover under an overhang -- if you could. There was one a little way back behind him -- but --

Ahead, downslope, Andy seemed not to have heard. Han bellowed, "ANDY! Get up here! Slide!"

The boy turned, eyes showing white with fear in the storm-light. He broke into a stumbling run, his feet slipping a little as he tried to gain ground upslope. Han took a pace toward him, one eye watching the wall of earth and water plummeting downward. He secured himself, looping his chains about a rocky protrusion beneath the overhang, then reached out a hand. Andar strained toward him, Han's fist locked hard about a tiny, bony wrist.

Then, with a roar like a ship's engines igniting, the slide hit. Han hung on grimly as the chains cut deep, and was brushed only by the slide's uppermost edge. But Andy was not so strong, nor so lucky. The muddy cascade swept him off his feet, dragged him swiftly, clinging arm outstretched in Han's grasp, to the lip of the road. "Han!" he screamed.

Cursing, sobbing, Han hung on, teeth clenched over pain and desperation. Still the mud roared past. Andy's terrified face disappeared beneath it, but Han still had hold of his wrist. The boy's head surfaced for a brief moment, his mouth caked in mud, his eyes masked with mud, his teeth showing white in a rictus of absolute agony and terror. His shoulder must be set to tear from its socket as the slide dragged and tore at his fragile, dangling body.

"I've got you!" Han yelled breathlessly. "Just -- hang on!" Grunting with the effort, he struggled to pull the boy up. The worst of the slide was over now and there was not as much weight working against him. There was a sharp crack above the thunder of the fall as a boulder moved from its position at the side of the road. It gave way completely, releasing a miniature dam. The muddy water thundered down in a stinging, icy surge, engulfing Andy and Han both. Still, Han clung on, feeling his own wrist and shoulder sockets burning bright pain despite the cold. He was stretched as if on a rack and the chains linking his manacles were not making it any easier. The thin arm in his fist slipped a little, and he cursed desperately. His fingers and the boy's wrist both were slick with mud, greasing the grip impossibly.

"No!" Han begged, "No!"

But there was never a chance.

The watery thin, clay mud was as good as oil, lubricating his desperately clutching fist. In seconds, the arm, then the tiny hand, the fingers, slid through his hold, leaving him clutching at empty air.

Andy made not a sound as he fell.

Han lurched to his feet, unsure if he cared that he too might fall. He took a step closer, looked down, down, caught one faint glimpse of a small upturned face, a hurtling, frail, child's body. He didn't even hear the splash or see it. So tiny, so insignificant against the power and fury of the mountain and the storm.//////////

* * *

"No!" Han begged breathlessly. The single word broke on a sob of utter distress. "No!"

That sheer, heartbroken cry, the wracking despair tore at Leia's heart as no other sound could, reminding her painfully of her own plea to Tarkin as Alderaan was taken from her forever. So quickly, so irrevocably, gone. Oh yes, Leia well knew that sound.

"Easy, Han," she consoled, though her own throat was so constricted the word came out a husky whisper. "Easy, I'm here." She dragged a hand free of the warm blankets to reach out and squeeze his arm.

Exhausted, Solo never came fully awake. Or if he did, and he recognized her voice, her comforting touch, he was too embarrassed to acknowledge her. He drew a deep, shuddering breath, flung an arm up over

his face, rolled to his side, and slept on. Or feigned sleep. Leia lay awake long minutes, listening until finally she was sure the nightmare had left him. He knew of her loss, but refused to reveal the least hint of his own past. But she would never forget that despairing cry in the darkness -- it told her much.

Eventually, she too surrendered to weariness, strangely comforted by Solo's curled body close at her side and the crackling, warm radiance of the hearth fire, holding back the cold, empty night.

* * *

The sounds of Luke and the old man coming back in with fresh water for morning tea after apparently tending to the hauler beasts, woke Leia, and she watched with some amusement as Solo sat up abruptly, blinking in startlement. One hand went to where his blaster should have been holstered. Disoriented for a moment, and realizing he was half-naked, wrapped in the same blankets and bedding Leia seemed to be sharing, he looked ready to have heart-failure. His mouth parted and his hands lifted defensively in an automatic --"It's not my fault! And I didn't do anything!" gesture. Leia smiled and shook her head, catching a broad grin from Luke who had also caught the little scene. In the next breath, memory seemed to return in full and Solo's expression closed in self-consciousness. He got to his feet, holding the blanket about himself, as he went in search of his trousers. Luke had hung them over the rope screen close by the fire along with Leia's clothing, and they looked almost dry.

The four of them gathered again close by the glowing coals of the banked fire in the post-dawn chill and ate a meager breakfast of tea and more ration bars. Leia disappeared behind the screen to dress and found her earlier estimate had been wrong -- her clothing was really still quite damp -- she would do better to wear the same shirt she had slept in and so put it back on. But the new day promised to be blessedly sunny, the bright yellow orb rising above rolling hills below them in a cloudless, pastel blue sky. They came again to the bogged sled and Leia was surprised and pleased to discover that Solo had not lost the remote, but rather had had the presence of mind to toss it behind him atop the sled. It took some doing, but eventually, again with the aid of the hauler beasts, the float sled was pulled free of the mud. Solo soon found and repaired a short circuit, no doubt caused by the slightly acidic rain, and the sled hummed back to life. The old man declined Solo's offer to remove the supply bales he had strapped to the hauler beasts the night before. Leia noted Solo insisted on checking his own merchandise, making sure it was all there, minus the one crate of brandy mixed in with the supplies Luke and the old man had transported to the cabin.

Looking down again into the ravine where the torrent still roared, reminded Leia she had not thanked Solo for saving her life. But when she did so, all he said was, "Anytime," and turned away in what she could only describe as a brief return to that haunted look of sorrowful memory that had so marked his eyes yesterday.

The sun climbed higher over what became a brightly beautiful day, crisp and cool, invigoratingly fresh for a hike yet warm enough to slowly dry the last dampness out of Leia's fatigues. Solo's mood seemed to take its cue from the improving weather, and by the time they had stepped off the rutted mountain track and onto a better paved, proper road leading through the valley toward the first of a series of villages, he was back to his usual banter. Here at lower altitude, Leia noticed ever more flowers and new green buds of leaves on saplings and trees lining the road. Occasional birdsong cheered them, breaking what was otherwise becoming an unnatural silence.

The farmers' fields were bare and unplowed, not showing the least sign of preparation for planting. Nor was there much life about the homesteads, especially as they drew closer to the city boundaries where fighting had been at its fiercest. Today, thankfully, seemed quiet enough. But, ever-cautious, the old man again took them on a side path that wound through long grass and over stones and tiny streams toward the hills on the further side of the valley. As they began climbing steeply again, Leia turned and looked back. From up here she could clearly see the signs of destruction the city had endured -- more than half of it was in ruins. The wind came up, carrying with it the stench of death and totally annihilating any pretense at a pleasant stroll in spring verdure.

They turned again onto another trail that only Talros seemed able to make out. It grew ever rougher but thankfully not muddy, rather covered in dark red-brown rock and shale, lined now with thickly foliated, dark green conifers. The silence of the shadowy forest was more than a little unnerving. Solo produced a sensor to check for any large groups of people ahead. Finally, it emitted strident warning, but Talros only nodded and smiled and said, "Right, we're almost home. The stockade wall is around this next curve."

Sure enough they stepped out of the green shadow and pine scent to be met by a twenty foot high wall of timber poles and mud, over which towered guard boxes and a swirling temple steeple. It was coated with glassy tiles that gleamed a soft gold in the bright sunshine of the clearing. The wall disappeared both to right and left, curving away into forest on one hand, and beneath the lip of the hill on the other. It was

an extensive refugee settlement. Talros called the password and a smaller door in the wall beside twin massive gates opened to admit them.

end part 1

[Continue To Part 2](#)

[Back To Index](#)