

[Back To Part 1](#)

[Back To Index](#)

MUD, CHAINS, AND UNDERWEAR
by Carolyn Golledge

PART 2

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Inside was a dizzying clutter, noise and odors rising from a milling group of penned animals. Raggedly dressed people hurried on various errands. Canines barked, hens squawked, and over it all hauler beasts could be heard lowing and children crying. There were makeshift crude shelters in abundance, most leaning up against the inner stockade wall, and none seeming fit to have given adequate shelter against the past day's storm. The smell of sickness hung in the air over the fresh scent of animal manure. People gathered to gawk at them, then applaud when they saw the supplies on the float sled and beasts. Talros nodded happily to them all, but urged them to keep back so he could guide his important guests to the command center of the encampment. This was close to the base of the minaret, and Leia realized the newly-growing settlement had apparently sprung up about what had once been some kind of religious monastery or hermitage.

"Your commander is in yonder building, Highness," Talros indicated. They left Luke and Solo to begin unpacking supplies, while Talros led the way up a small flight of wooden steps that gave onto a colonnade and another higher staircase. At the top was a verandah giving access through large, open, carved wood doors to a room in which Alliance military personnel could be seen working at desks or coming and going with new orders. Leia spotted the man she wanted and crossed to his side, smiling in delight as he turned about and caught sight of her. A smile lit his face in return and he held his arms wide to embrace her in what was far from a formal military greeting.

Leia cared not a whit for protocol -- it was so good to greet this man who had been her father's good friend, and was like a dearly beloved uncle to her.

"It is good to see you arrived safe," Colonel Carlin Rieekan greeted. "We were worried when you did not get in last night -- but the storm no doubt slowed you on the mountain. You found shelter all right then?"

"Yes, " Leia nodded. She indicated her somewhat unusual, mud-stained attire. "But I did meet with a slight accident."

He frowned and held her at arm's length to better examine her.

"Nothing serious," she assured. "Just -- got me a little wet! And I lost my pack. Fortunately the supplies are all safe. Come outside, I'll show you. Hopefully, these medicines should help the people here-- and we have some food and clothing too."

They went back out into the sunshine of the verandah, and down the stairs to the colonnade. At its end, Luke, Solo and Talros were already busy under the supervision of a medic and a lieutenant hastily directing the removal of the medical bales to the nearby small infirmary. "You know Talros," Leia said, taking a step forward as she made introductions, "But you must meet Commander Luke Skywalker, the young man in Alliance fatigues, and the other is --"

"Elkieran!"

Rieekan sounded shocked, his voice no more than husky whisper.

Leia turned back to see him leaning against the stair banister, his face drained of color, his eyes round and wide with disbelief.

"Carlin? What is it? You look as if you've seen a ghost." Leia scanned the crowd in the courtyard but could not see anyone that could fit the given name.

"A ghost -- yes," Rieekan said. He drew a deep breath and was steadier as she turned back to eye him somewhat worriedly. "Who is the man with Skywalker? He's Corellian, isn't he? He's wearing the Bloodstripe. For a moment there, he looked so much like another Corellian I once knew -- and he too, wore -- what a coincidence!"

"That's Captain Han Solo," she said. "A Free Trader, or-- to use his preferred term, a mercenary and part-time smuggler."

"Ahh!" Rieekan said. "The two young men who rescued you from the Death Star."

"Yes. Han reminds you of someone? He is Corellian -- but -- Solo is not a Corelli Clan name, correct?"

"No," Rieekan said slowly, his gaze was drawn almost hypnotically back to Solo, "No, it's definitely not a Clan name."

"So," Leia prompted both curiously and impatiently, knowing the private moment would be all too brief, "Who does he remind you of?"

"I-- I'm not sure. I don't think I should say. Not yet."

Luke had spotted them and was waving urgently at Leia, indicating he needed her presence as some of the civilians seemed intent on helping themselves to the supplies. She took a step toward him, adding absently to Rieekan, "Perhaps you should ask Solo if he knows of your friend."

Following her, Rieekan sighed heavily. "He couldn't -- not now. My friend is dead -- murdered by Acquila. It would have to be," he considered for a moment, then said with mild surprise, "well over ten years ago."

Leia paused and twisted about to meet his eyes in surprise. "Oh? I wonder --"

"What?" Rieekan too came to a halt and smiled fondly at her pensive look.

"Solo was acting -- rather oddly yesterday up on the mountain. In a very grim mood, not at all like him. He looked as if he was recalling something very -- nasty." Leia's eyes widened as the clue fell into place. "Yes, of course! He was staring at the banner flying over the warlord's fortress."

It was Rieekan's turn to send his brows climbing. "Really? You think he recognized it? It's the same insignia that Acquilla once used. Warlord Narsylas claims to be distantly related -- though why he would think that an honor beats me." He and Leia turned in tandem to again eye Solo thoughtfully. They walked down the remaining steps and Rieekan shook hands first with Luke as Leia repeated the introduction for his benefit. Then Solo came round the float sled, and she said, "Captain Han Solo, meet Colonel Carlin Rieekan."

Solo's brows rows as he noted Rieekan was wearing a Corellian Clan insignia. Then he frowned and looked suddenly wary.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain." Rieekan offered his hand.

Han took it and said, "Just call me Solo. I'm not much of one for rank."

Leia watched curiously as the two men locked gazes. "Interesting blaster rig you have there." Rieekan said at last. Solo's frown deepened.

"It's common enough design," he said.

"Yes, in some parts of Corellia," Rieekan agreed. Then he changed the subject and looked back to Leia, as if scalded by Solo's stern frown. He had to swallow hard and clear his throat before he could speak and Leia watched him in puzzlement. Finally, he said, "Leia and I were just exchanging notes about Warlord history. The banner this local fellow is flying is familiar to us from another time, some years back." He flicked a glance to Solo and asked, "Have you ever seen it before?"

Solo's eyes glinted dangerously as if he sensed he were being tested. "I've seen it around. I do a lot of business on a lot of different worlds and running munitions is profitable."

"Good," Rieekan said firmly, and there was dawning respect in his eyes that only seemed to make Solo all the more uncomfortable. That was not the reaction he usually got to that claim. "Then you can be of real assistance to us -- to the Alliance -- you must have quite a treasury of contacts that could prove useful to us."

Solo shrugged. "Maybe. I came along this time to sell some merchandise the locals have brought from me before -- the villagers that is -- not --" He waved a hand negligently toward the opposing valley wall where the warlord's fortress was lost in the mist. "There was no warlord here three years ago."

"Hey, wait, no, you can't just!" Luke could be heard calling from the other side of the sled. He and the young lieutenant emerged to plead with Rieekan who moved off to take charge. He settled the clamoring mob, promising them fair distribution -- all food would immediately go to the communal kitchens. They seemed to accept his word on the matter, and watching them go, he slumped back in weary relief. Again, he cast a strange, almost wondering glance at Solo who shouldered a bale, then dumped it atop the growing pile by the kitchen doors.

Watching Rieekan, Leia was a little worried by his pale and spooked expression. "When was the last time you got any sleep?" she asked. "I can take over here."

"You guessed," Rieekan said with a wry smile. He rubbed a hand over his jaw in a gesture of fatigue. "It's been a while." Leia lifted an eyebrow. "Two days," he admitted.

"Go!" she ordered. "Your lieutenant and I can sort this out."

Overhearing as he returned to the sled, Solo drawled, "Already giving orders, Your Highnessness?" He threw a teasing glance to Rieekan and offered, "Ya gotta watch her on that."

Leia rolled her eyes and shook her head, but Rieekan drew another sharp breath, his eyes again flaring with that odd look of recognition. He forced a smile for Solo's joke. He took Leia's arm and drew her aside to whisper, "I swear, he's so like my old friend it's uncanny! He used to tease his wife in exactly that same tone of voice."

Leia frowned. "I think you need some sleep."

He chuckled. "And you don't sound much different from the tone she would take with him! Ahh, those were good days -- despite the Clone Wars! All right, all right --" he lifted his hands defensively. "I'll go take a nap. My Intelligence Officer is due back later tonight -- best if I have my brain online again, huh? But first --"

He walked back to Luke and Solo and said, "I almost forgot -- I must be tired!" They watched him curiously and he explained, "I want to thank you both-- not just for your assistance with the transporting of these supplies -- but on a personal matter. My sincere gratitude for rescuing Leia from the Death Star."

Luke blushed and stammered some mumbled response, but Solo said, "Hey, all we did was get her out of her cell -- she started giving us orders two seconds later." He waited for Leia to give him the expected glare, then grinned and added, "And I doubt we'd have made it out again otherwise."

Leia felt her jaw drop in utter surprise. Then she hurriedly remembered herself as Solo winked.

Rieekan chuckled. "Well, I thank you nonetheless. It is a great pleasure to meet you both and thank you at last. With men such as yourselves to aid the Rebellion, we will see victory yet."

"Don't look at me," Solo slouched back against the sled and folded his arms. "I'm only in this for the money."

Rieekan simply raised a single, eloquently amused eyebrow and held Solo's gaze a moment.

Leia was surprised anew to see Solo break that testing gaze first.

They spent the remainder of the afternoon working industriously to store supplies or help with distribution. The visit to the Infirmary was harrowing. Maimed and ill men, women, and children lay on bare pallets on the wooden floor. Many had not so much as a blanket. The medics hurried to dispense badly needed medicines. Leia was somewhat mellowed to see Solo himself tucking blankets about some of the children and magically producing sweets from his pockets, those obviously unpacked from his own private stores. She met his gaze once, by the bed of a young babe who was not going to live. The depth of empathic grief she saw in his eyes completely belied his earlier stinging claims to mercenary interests. The man was quite an enigma.

An hour after sunset they had to admit to exhaustion -- well, all barring Rieekan who had emerged sometime earlier from his nap looking much refreshed. Leia, Han and Luke gathered about a smaller campfire in the main covered courtyard where everyone seemed to meet for meals -- there being no room inside the old monastery for so many people. Not to mention there had been very little food available to dispense in any case. They enjoyed bowls of hot stew made up of the dry grains and vegetables and protein cubes they had supplied. Many refugees stopped by to give heartfelt thanks, and even Solo seemed unable to come up with teasing rejoinders, but was much subdued. He disappeared a while after eating and returned with a small crate from his private stock of liquor. He sat down again, placing it nearby, and said not a word.

Later, when Rieekan arrived to greet them during a lull in his other duties, Solo stood and offered the crate to him as a gift. "Corellian brandy," he said simply. He dropped his gaze to his feet as Rieekan's face lit with pure delight. "We're the only two Corellians here -- that I know of -- and, ah, we should be celebrating."

"Yes, indeed we should. I thank you for your gift and your remembrance."

"Celebrating?" Leia asked as Rieekan turned and smiled at her, sharing his pleasure in the gift.

"It's a very special night back on Corellia -- Remembrance Night," Rieekan explained softly, his eyes again going to Solo's face. Han was still examining his boots. "Clansmen always get together with their families and honor their dead."

Well," Solo lifted his head, his jaw set and his eyes burning with some hard, anguished emotion Leia could not quite define and which he was trying valiantly to conceal. "I'm not a clansmen. But I thought you --" he trailed off, leaving the thought unspoken. Rieekan certainly must have lost family in the battle against The Empire.

"Still," Rieekan said, "I'd be honored to share Remembrance night with you, Captain Solo. My thanks." Rieekan stooped, opened the crate and took out a bottle. Han picked up his tin mug from which he'd been drinking kalin, and offered it for filling.

"Come on, Luke, Your Royalness," he invited with more cheer in his tone, "You're in this too."

They exchanged glances. "We're not Corellian," Luke said.

Han shrugged. Rieekan said, "Good friends are remembered too, no matter where they come from. All are expected to tell stories of days gone by and make the Honor Salute."

"Honor Salute?" Luke's eyes were wide and fascinated.

"Just a toast to those gone," Han said softly.

"And what Honor Salute will you make, Solo?" Rieekan inquired intently.

"None for me. You do it."

"No. That would not be traditional. He who bears the gifts must make a Salute, traditionally, the first.'

"Then," Solo lifted his head and took a deep breath. He regarded the faces watching him over the firelight. The firelight seemed somehow

nostalgic for him, adding more to the moment. "Fine," he said at last. "If you insist."

"Oh, and I do," Rieekan maintained that oddly intent tone and it set Leia's flesh prickling with hints of things hidden. Of deeds of valor unspoken.

Suddenly, Solo relaxed, the tension leaving him so abruptly as to make him appear a different man all together. He smiled and threw an arm about Luke's shoulders, pulled him closer. "We're all supposed to drink from my mug first and stand in a circle with our arms around each other." Then to Leia he said almost shyly, "Your Highnessness?" He offered his other arm and, nodding and smiling, she accepted, ducking into his embrace. Rieekan closed the circle, one arm about her and the other about Luke.

"Here's to families lost --" Solo said solemnly. He paused, swallowed hard and added, "-- and found." His grasp tightened about his companions' shoulders. He swallowed from the mug, then offered it to Luke and said, "Now you make The Salute."

Luke's blue eyes shone brighter with what Leia realized was a proud film of tears. "To Beru and Owen." He took a hefty gulp of the brandy then coughed a little and Han patted him on the back.

Luke passed the mug back to Han who gave it to Leia. She gathered herself and said as firmly as her quavering voice allowed, "To Alderaan." She was suddenly very glad of the supporting arms about her. She added more softly. "For Bail Organa and Ben Kenobi."

She completed the circle by handing the mug to Rieekan. He eyed them all a long moment, then said, "To the old generation long gone, and to the new. May their hearts be ever true." He swallowed and gave the cup back to Solo who nodded appreciation of his chosen Salute. Solo offered the mug and Rieekan refilled it. Han turned to the fire, raised the mug to the starry sky, closed his eyes and bowed his head. Rieekan did the same, and Luke and Leia copied them, saying whatever silent prayers they needed.

"Stand back a little," Solo warned, lowering the full cup. They did so, and he threw the brandy, mug and all into the fire. The flames leapt higher in a brilliant burst of light and sparks, lifting to the bejeweled night sky.

Luke and Leia looked a little surprised, and Rieekan said, "It's a symbol of giving of yourself to those you love. Your strength adds to theirs to make their souls burn brighter -- wherever they are now."

Solo sat down a little unsteadily and put a hand to his eyes. Rieekan eyed him a moment, then found more mugs, filled them and passed one each to Solo, Luke and Leia. "Drink up," he said. "And remember."

Leia only sipped at hers, and realized Rieekan too was not drinking heavily, needing to return soon to his duties. They sat and chatted a while, Rieekan telling of his plans for the Rebellion's hoped-for allegiance with Minorit. Then he too stood and regretfully took his leave, thanking Solo for The Remembrance Night celebration.

"I really like this tradition," Luke said. "It's good to have a time to remember. Can you tell me more about how it works? I mean, the brandy and the fire and all?"

Solo answering, did not look away from the flames. Again Leia noted the gold flecks that leapt in those hazel depths. "Our Salutes are held in the brandy. The flames carry them up to the Realm of the Souls of Honor."

"Oh," Luke said simply. "I like that. I hope my aunt and uncle can -- well, you know."

Han nodded. He sat silent for a long moment, then said somewhat abruptly, "I'm beat. Gonna get some sleep." He got to his feet and headed back toward the float pallet stored by the wall. He apparently intended bedding down there with his merchandise and a sleep roll given him by the rebel staff.

Leia watched him thoughtfully. Then she too said good night and made her way inside to the quarters assigned to her at one end of the command center rooms. Luke would bed down in the barracks with the other rebel troops.

* * *

Leia was brought abruptly awake around midnight as an enormous explosion rocked the encampment. A burst of light filled her room, followed immediately by the reflected gold-red of leaping flames. Screams filled the air along with the smell of smoke. They were under attack. But, oddly, there was no further bombardment. Puzzled, Leia dressed quickly and went out to offer what help she could -- she had no truly official line of command here as she had supposedly been due to leave the next day. She descended the stair into the main courtyard to be met by Solo and Skywalker, both still pulling on jackets and weapons.

"What the hell?" Solo was saying. "I'm sure that was cannon fire -- but --"

"Yes," Leia too frowned puzzlement. "Just the one shot."

"Looks like it hit the east section of the camp between the temple and the stockade wall," Luke said, craning his neck and standing on tiptoe to observe the fire glow over the heads of running military personnel heading in that direction. The civilians, for the most part, terrified, were fleeing into the courtyard. Some looked set to demand exit from the camp all together. All in all it added to the general mayhem.

Leia grabbed at one officer and asked how she could help. He replied that several buildings in the older part of the camp had been destroyed, including the religious center sheltering many of the children. Solo swore. Neither he nor Leia and Luke needed to be asked to help rescue the survivors. They followed their guide, and were given what digging implements were available and set to work. Smoke and flames licked about the destruction, and a fire team did its best to direct hoses that seemed not to have much water pressure. The medics worked to triage the wounded, the lesser injured were left lying in the open on stretchers and given what attention could be spared -- which was not much at all. Leia left off digging to go aid the wounded, knowing her training would be of more use there. Terrified and bloodied children sat screaming and shaking, shocked and staring adults doing their best to soothe them.

"I thought the temple was supposed to be a neutral zone respected by both sides in this civil war?" Leia wrapped a bandage about a little girl's arm as she spoke to the medic who was bending over someone else hauled from the burning rubble.

"It was," he said bitterly. He sighed and looked up to her, his face lined and drawn with weariness and blackened by ash. "Maybe it was a stray shell from the bombardment of the city."

Rieekan suddenly emerged from the chaos immediately at their back. He had overheard. "No, sorry, Ken. This was deliberate terror tactics. We just received an ultimatum -- Warlord Narsylias wants all Rebellion assistance to cease immediately. He's giving us one day to get off world."

"Or?" Leia asked.

Rieekan heaved a sorrowful sigh and waved an arm about him, indicating the suffering caused by that one short cannon blast. "Tomorrow night, he won't stop."

* * *

Some time after dawn, Leia took the chance to wash and change into a clean uniform shirt. Rieekan had called an emergency meeting of his officers as well as the local community leaders. She walked down the colonnade to the briefing room, and was not surprised to see Solo there. He was leaning up against the wall, just inside the door, trying to impart the impression of only casual involvement. His stance may have looked idly curious, but his eyes burned furious need for vengeance -- he and Luke had rescued several small children from beneath a section of collapsed temple roof. One of those children had died shortly after. Luke had been mildly concussed by a falling beam as he dragged one victim clear. He was down at the Aid Center now, being treated for a gash to his shoulder and a monumental headache.

"So, that's it," Rieekan was saying. "We have less than twelve hours to find a means to fight back -- or -- evacuate. If we leave -- we take the wounded and the children with us -- somehow."

Solo took a pace into the room. "I could get some of 'em out in The Falcon," he offered. "My co-pilot can have my ship here in minutes after I send a coded signal." Heads swiveled and chairs scraped as several officers and civilians turned about to regard him.

"Thank you, Captain," Rieekan said. "We may need to call upon your transport -- but --"

"But that's no real answer to your problem," Solo finished for him.

"Right," Rieekan met his gaze across the small, crowded room. "Warlord Narsylas will still murder any of these people who try to stand up to him -- and if we abandon them now --" He shrugged.

Lieutenant Barrens concluded, "We can hardly expect them to back us if we need their support for our ships through this sector when the Empire makes a push out here." Rieekan nodded somber agreement of the summation.

Solo came closer to study several local maps spread on the table in the center of the room -- apparently these people's technology had not advanced to holo maps, nor even vid-maps. "There's your real problem." Solo's forefinger stabbed down at the symbol, red and black, marking the warlord's fortress with its twin cannons overlooking the valley. "Get rid of those cannons and he has nothing to back his threat."

Rieekan sighed. "Yes. The local resistance fighters have tried several times to destroy them -- and lost good people. We thought of bringing in air support -- but if we do that -- we bring The Empire in here too, and the whole situation escalates beyond our means to control it. If Tie-Fighters and bombers get into the act -- well, the carnage here tonight will look nothing by comparison."

Leia came to Solo's side to also study the map. "Sending troops up that ravine would be suicide," she commented.

"Near enough," Barrens agreed from the other side of the table.

"Who did you say is the resident warlord?" Solo asked.

"Emil Narsylias," the Lieutenant replied.

Solo's eyes flared and his jaw set. "Right then. I have a plan that should work. I can get in there, they know me."

"They do?"

"Well, they know of me. I've traded with their people before -- Chewie and I were here years back. We sold a lot of stuff to the locals in the city as well as to the aristocrats from the fortress. They'll tell this warlord that I can supply whatever he needs. He'll talk to me."

"And then?"

"After I get in, I ask to see the cannons up close." Solo shrugged at their skeptical looks. "Hey, they want munitions, I'll need to inspect the thing -- gotta get the right size spare parts."

The local civilian leader, a dark-haired woman, frowned. "Bringing more munitions in here is not what --"

Rieekan waved a hand, indicating that was not an issue. "There'll be no more arms build up." He met Solo's gaze again and said, "You get close to the cannons, and?"

"Destroy them."

The woman snorted. "How? With what? They'll search you before they let you anywhere near their inner citadel."

Solo simply said, "I know what I'm doing. Told ya, I got a plan. Gather round and listen up. It all comes back to my float sled -- it has a built in shield. If we take that and use it to mask the detonator --"

Leia listened carefully as Solo went into the details of the method by which enough explosive could be smuggled in and placed close to the cannons. He would sell several barrels of brandy -- but one would contain liquid explosives and a detonator and timer, carefully hidden beneath an outer layer of brandy in the same barrel in case anyone should demand a sample from it too.

"All right," the woman admitted. "Maybe you could get the explosives past their security scan -- but I still don't understand how you're going to get it anywhere near the cannons. They're on the top level -- only accessed via lift tubes from the fortress below."

Solo looked unperturbed. "I use my native charm," he smiled at her. She looked singularly unimpressed. "Trust me," he said. "I know the type -- they'll want to carry the party with them when we go on up to look over the cannons."

"It could work," Rieekan said. He sighed. "Certainly, it's our only chance of retaliation before tomorrow night."

"I suppose you'll be wanting payment?" Lieutenant Barrens said somewhat sneeringly.

Solo seemed to take no insult. "Naturally. We can work out the details later." The officer snorted sourly and looked away but said nothing. Leia was surprised to find herself annoyed enough by Barren's attitude that she was ready to defend Solo -- mercenary motive or not, he was still putting his life on the line for them. "One condition," the Corellian continued. "I go in alone. I know them and I know trader talk. They'll be suspicious of anyone else. They know I don't work with anyone other than my co-pilot."

"Fair enough," Rieekan said. "It's agreed then?" The civilian leader nodded. "Good luck." Rieekan held out a hand to Solo to seal the deal Corellian fashion.

"I have a question," Leia put in as the meeting broke up, leaving the three of them standing apart from the others. She eyed Solo shrewdly.

"Yes, Your Highnessness?" Solo looked to her curiously.

"What's your plan for getting out?"

Solo snorted a laugh. "They'll have to let me back out if they want me to buy munitions for them. The timer will do the rest."

"And they'll trust you?"

"My reputation precedes me. They know I'm only in it for the money. And I didn't find any here." He looked back to Rieekan. "Can your people provide some kind of protective coating for the timer and detonator sensors in contact with the brandy? That stuff can be corrosive."

"Well," Rieekan smiled, "That explains the way my stomach feels this morning."

Solo chuckled. "And my head."

"I'm not sure," Rieekan said seriously. "But I know someone who can work on that problem for you."

Rieekan assigned other tasks, including the, hopefully temporary, evacuation of all the civilians capable of leaving. The room gradually emptied as everyone else went about their assigned duties.

"I still don't like it," Leia said. "What if something goes wrong? Shouldn't we have a back up plan?"

"Such as?" Rieekan eyed her.

"I have an idea -- but it's best Captain Solo doesn't know the details."

"Oh?" he raised a brow at her.

"We'll only need the back up if they find out what you're up to and/or suspect you're really working for us. In which case --"

"Ahh. The joy of interrogation." Solo nodded. "Good thinking." He picked up the sketched design for his explosive device and turned for the door, presumably to meet with the local engineering officer about the protective coating for the timer. "OK, Your Royalness, I'll leave you to figure the details of the rescue plan. But you won't need it." He winked at her over his shoulder. "I'm the best."

"I hope you're right," she said softly, watching as he disappeared out into the morning sunlight..

* * *

Solo set off close to midday, his float sled again laden with barrels of brandy and other luxury items and secured on the back of a hired hover-truck. Leia watched from the ramparts through macrobinoculars as he headed down the road toward the city. There he would contact one of the Warlord's liaisons. "I have a bad feeling about this," she said heavily to herself. She put down the macrobinoculars and went down to visit Luke in the infirmary.

She was pleased to be told instead that the doctor had passed him as fit for light duties and she could find him getting some food in the courtyard kitchen. There she filled him in on Solo's plan and repeated her feelings of misgivings.

"Yeah," Luke sighed and pushed away his bowl of stew. "Me too. Run through it again with me. The timer is placed where?"

She explained and Luke started making sketches of his own. When she got to the part that explained that the sensor leads would have to at some point contact the brandy, Luke muttered a curse. "What?" she asked.

"I know that brand of timer," Luke said. "We used them on the farm to trigger the vaporators. One of my pals, as a joke, once put alcohol in the tube lining -- trying to get me into trouble with my uncle -- make him think I was smuggling in liquor from town."

"And?"

"The timer failed. It never went off and we lost all that day's taking of water."

Leia felt her face drain of blood. "If I know Solo, he'll do something rash -- go back in there and trigger it manually, or something. And by then it'll be too late anyway." She looked back to the Fortress. "We have to warn him."

"No," Luke said thoughtfully, "if I can get in there -- I know how to correct the fault with the timer. I just need to inject a counter-agent into the barrel."

Leia's eyes lit. "The back up plan! That will get us in there -- then -- you do your stuff, and we all get out safe and sound."

"You have a back up plan?"

"Always. It works like this -- come on, no time to lose -- I'll tell you as I get ready."

"You mean we," Luke corrected.

"You're still shaky. Can't you just tell me what to do with the timer?"

"No. It's tricky. There are variables. I'd need to look at it myself."

Leia sighed. "All right. But I have the final call on an abort."

"Fine by me," Luke's lips twitched. "But I can't guarantee Solo will go along."

Leia was greatly relieved when her back up plan for getting into the fortress proved workable. Dressed as local farm peasants, and provided with the surrounding camp's total gathered supply of eggs, bread, cheese and other goods, she and Luke arranged to meet with one of Narsylias' men. They told him they were lovers, desperate to get off world, away from their disproving parents. Could Narsylias possibly arrange working passage off-world in return for a supply of fresh food and some important counter-intelligence? The man, a tall, thin, supercilious sort in a gaudy uniform, luckily enough was one of Narsylias' personal armsmen. He agreed and took them up to the fortress then down into the kitchens. There they found the head cook very unhappy and arguing with the rest of her staff.. "And exactly how am I expected to produce a celebration spread on such short notice? They want fancy snacks to go with their new brandy and impress this trader fellow, let them wait!"

"Now, now, Stera," their armsman guide replied. "It just so happens I found some locals trying to sell a whole wagon load of produce to us just an hour ago."

She frowned and looked over Luke and Leia with a penetrating eye. "To us? The villagers have been hoarding whatever they can hide from us."

"These two are more interested in passage off world. They're lovers," Armsman Hopwer snickered. "Want to run away from home they do."

"I don't have time to hear the whole tale!" She snapped. "Where's the food?"

"Right here."

Leia and Luke offloaded their very welcome supplies. Then Leia dared to speak up, using Standard as she had told Hopwer that she had studied it so as to make her way in the worlds away from home. "You promised -- I get to talk to the Overlord about passage on one of ships for me and Kel."

"Oh , all right," Hopwer snarled. "I suppose he might not have you shot when I tell him you provided all this food. But you better have more information for him too. Come on. And bring that fresh cheese and bread with you."

He led the way through a maze of sparse underground rooms to a bank of lift tubes. They rose and exited onto a large gray, permacrete platform opening out on the far side to a magnificent view over the surrounding countryside. The same view over which hung the monstrous barrels of the twin cannons. Their mountings rose in a solid block from a munitions pit at the center of the platform. There, apparently moving from studying the weapons to admiring the view, Solo and the man Leia recognized as Narsylias, climbed out of the pit via some stairs. At the top they joined two more officers and another armsman. Backs turned to the new arrivals, Solo and the warlord continued on to lean on the waist-high railing of a balcony overhanging the sheer cliff face. The two younger officers followed, laughing merrily at some joke. All were swilling brandy as if there were no tomorrow. Two barrels were stacked by the cannon, and another crate lay open on a tressel table set in the middle of the platform. Other than that item, the table was forlornly empty. A cold breeze swirled up the mountainside to set the patterned table cloth flapping.

"Well, hurry up," Hopwer urged. "Go spread some of that food on the table before you ask any favors."

She and Luke obeyed, and Narsylias, a rather portly sort with a black mustache and thinning thatch of brown hair, turned to watch. "At last! Food!" He looked back to Solo. "Let's discuss this over dinner, shall we, Solo? You can continue your inspection in between courses."

"Fine by me," Solo drawled. He turned away from the railing. "Climbing all over that cannon has given me --" His jaw dropped as he caught sight of Luke and Leia, still at work laying food on the table.

"Yes, I know," the Warlord filled the gap. "A lot of steps. But, as you say, good for the appetite."

"Right." Han recovered his smile and looked away from them with some difficulty. "I can use the exercise, too much time ship-bound, you know."

"Yes." His host waved an arm and Solo perforce proceeded him to the table. He mouthed "What the hell!?" to Leia and she mouthed back "Wait."

"You were at the refugee base last night my sources tell me?" Narsylias settled at the table and his officers followed suit. Luke moved to pour brandy into their goblets.

"Yes," Solo said. He cast a bewildered and annoyed look at Luke as he moved to top up Solo's brandy. "Waste of time. No money there. Oh, they wanted weapons sure enough -- but I never saw any proof they could pay!"

That set the warlord and his men laughing again.

"Now's your chance," Hopwer whispered to Leia. "He's in a good mood. Go ask him."

"I -- I don't think I dare," she said. "The man with him -- he's a trader from off-world?"

"Yes, yes."

"Could we please ask him first? After all, if he won't take us it won't make any difference."

Hopwer considered, then seemed to think better of interrupting his master's meal. "I suppose that might be best," he said slowly. "Wait till the pilot leaves the table again."

Leia nodded agreement, waved Luke to her side, and stood back. Finally, Solo made some excuse to go check on the cannon fittings and make notes in his vocorder. Leia and Luke trailed after him.

Far enough from the table not to be overheard, Solo swung on them angrily and demanded in a heated whisper, "What the hell are you doing here? The back up plan was only if --"

"Something has gone wrong," Leia said. "You just don't know it yet. Luke can explain."

Luke dared Solo's angry gaze and held out the bread roll into which he had stuffed the tiny vial containing the counter agent.

He broke it open as he spoke, explaining, "So, without this, the timer won't react to the signal when you trigger it. Go ahead, try."

Solo bent to pretend to examine the bolt sizes of the lower mounting. He pressed a hand to the heel of his boot, then checked his vocorder which had been set to collect the signal from the timer activation. He cursed. "Nothing! What now?"

"I have to get this stuff into the barrel with the explosives -- which one is it?"

Solo indicated the foremost barrel of the entire shipment stacked where they had not noticed previously, down at the further end of the platform on the other side of the cannon housing. "But if you go anywhere near it -- they'll be all over you like fleas on a bantha. I'll do it."

"No," Luke insisted. "I have to do it. If the counter agent doesn't work -- and it might not -- I'll have to reset the timer manually. And I'm the only one knows how."

"Dammit." Solo sighed. "OK. I'll create a diversion. But it might be more -- elaborate than I plan -- be ready to run for it."

"Now, why doesn't that surprise me," Leia said.

Solo gave her a wry smile. "You stick with the kid, Your Worship -- I mean, now the two of you are lovers and all." He winked, obviously enjoying Luke's blush.

He strolled back to the party. The armsman approached him to ask, "Have those two completed their business with you? They really should not be up here."

"Not quite," Solo said. "They're considering my terms. Give 'em a moment to decide."

"Very well."

Solo approached the table, checked the brandy level in the flagon, and said, "I think we need a refill here -- this one's about out."

"Let my armsman do that," Narsylas protested.

"The shipment is security coded to my palm print. I haven't deactivated it yet." Solo crossed to the brandy barrel he'd removed from

its crate, adjusted the controls, filled the flagon, and returned to the table. He had palmed his fire starter and left it burning beneath the open barrel mouth. When the alcohol fumes reached it there should be a minor bang and small fire to draw everyone's attention away from the farther end of the platform. Just long enough for Luke to do his thing. Then, hopefully, they could all get the hell out of here.

But that wasn't the way it worked.

The armsman, apparently at a signal from Narsylias, went to check if the palm-scanner had indeed been decoded. As he bent to try it, the toe of his boot caught the burner still hidden from sight beneath the barrel. It skidded across the floor and fell into the munitions pit surrounding the cannon foundation. There, several boxes had been left opened for Solo's inspection. Radiant heat met volatile fuels and explosives with predictable results.

The first container went up with a tremendous explosion, raining pieces of metal casing across the upper platform where Narsylias and his officers were settling to dinner. Solo had just gotten up again to go check what the armsman was up to and see if his burner was still in position. A small piece of flying debris caught him a stunning blow to the head and he staggered to his knees. The first explosion triggered a much more violent series of explosions. The armsman took the full brunt of it and was killed outright. Most of the flying shrapnel missed Solo but took out everyone else in the room. The concussion hurled Solo across the floor and slammed him into the now overturned table, rendering him unconscious. He lay in a tangled heap of bodies with the other fallen men. No one moved. The fire in the pit ran out of fuel and stopped exploding as failsafes slammed shut. Silence reigned only briefly before alarms rang out.

At the farther end of the platform, Luke and Leia were unhurt but more than a little astonished. They stared at the chaos for several seconds.

"Fix that timer!" Leia snapped. "I'll cover the lift entry." She ran to Solo's sprawled form, checked that he was still breathing and noted blood trickling from a deep gash on his brow. She snatched up his blaster as the alarms became ever more strident, calling Narsylias' men to battle. She fired a stun bolt into one of the officers who was groaning and looked set to shake himself back to consciousness.

Across the platform to the rear, the lift tube indicator lights were already flashing green, showing reinforcements on the way up. One blaster wouldn't stop them all. Leia turned about, searching desperately for inspiration and soon found it. One of the munitions cases, carried up

to the platform earlier for some reason, miraculously enough had not been pelted with any of the fiery debris. Leia hauled it clear, pushed it close to the lift door and waited, taking cover with a still unconscious Solo behind the overturned table.

The doors hissed open and she fired a blast into the box. The resulting explosion took out not only all the troopers emerging, but also managed to wreck the entire lift tube. Maybe that hadn't been so wise -- they still needed a way out of here before the complex went up as Solo's device finally triggered. She ran over to the railing about the outer platform and examined the drop down the mountainside -- it might be possible to exit that way -- with the proper rappelling gear -- and everyone conscious. Unfortunately, she didn't have the former, and Solo was not the latter.

"Damm!" she cursed. She went back to Solo, worried as he still lay unmoving. She found a table napkin and sat by him, holding it to his gashed brow as she studied her surroundings for alternative means of escape. There had to be fire stairs around here surely. But even if there were -- and they could get Solo mobile -- they'd never get through all the opposition no doubt teeming below.

Clattering footsteps drew her attention and Luke arrived at her side, breathless and eyeing Solo with concern. "Some diversion!"

"Did the counter-agent work?" He nodded. "What did you set the timer for?"

"Twenty minutes. Now what? How do we get out?"

"Same old, same old," Solo muttered, surprising them both as he still had not moved, nor opened his eyes. "No plan for getting out." Leia jerked the napkin from his bloodied brow and he winced -- it was still bleeding profusely.

"Are you all right?" Luke asked.

"Do I look all right?" Solo propped himself up and sat swaying dizzily. He mopped blood from his eyes with his shirt sleeve, then noticed the smoking, destroyed ruin of the lift tube well and his brows rose. He turned painfully to give Leia a look, realizing she had used his blaster. "Looks like you just cut off our only way out." His mouth twitched with ironic amusement, obviously enjoying throwing her words back at her.

She shrugged. "Better that than have all the Warlord's army in here. At least we'll take the cannons with us."

Solo frowned. "I don't have a death wish, Your Worship. I have another way out."

"Well, why didn't you say so before?"

"You never asked."

Luke interrupted. "They're probably on their way up the fire stairs right now -- can you two please leave this for later!"

"Right." Solo lifted his left arm, then squinted dazedly at his blood-soaked sleeve. "Damm. I can't see too good." He already looked close to passing out again. "Can one of you get my wrist chron off?"

Leia decided not to ask questions, but did as he wanted. "Now what?"

"There's a small indentation on the back lower right corner. Press it."

"Will this go bang too?" she said sourly.

"Not exactly," he smirked. "Not right away."

"Oh, fine." She pressed. A tiny button popped out of the upper edge of the chron close to the alarm set.

"Do you see another button -- it should have --"

"Yes. I see it."

"Press that one too."

Leia sighed but did so. A pinging emitted from the chrono.

"What's that mean?" Luke said when Leia resisted the urge to ask.

"You'll see." Solo groaned and lay back down. "Give it a few minutes."

"That timer is ticking down over there, Solo," Leia reminded him.

"Trust me," he said, then added absently. "My head hurts."

"Mine is beginning to," Leia growled. "Come on, Luke. Solo has obviously suffered brain damage. Help me look around and see if we can find some kind of climbing gear. We'll have to go over the side."

"Oh, no. I knew you were going to say that!" Luke threw a nervous glance at the vertiginous view of the valley beyond the railed edge of the platform. "It's a long way down, and they'll be waiting for us -- if they don't take pot shots at us before then."

"One thing at a time," Leia said.

"Count me out," Solo called. "I don't feel up to outdoor activities."

Ignoring him, Luke and Leia started searching. They were about half way through and had found no more than a few coiled ropes, when a sudden roaring echoed from the eastern horizon and rapidly grew louder.

The Falcon emerged from behind the mountain with a dazzling burst of thrusters against the sunset-painted sky. She swooped down like the bird of prey for which she was named, thrusters firing again as she came to a steady halt and hovered immediately in view of the platform.

"Good ol', Chewie!" Solo lifted his comlink to his lips. "Be right with ya, Fuzz Face."

Luke and Leia gaped only a moment before turning to assist him to his feet. "Why didn't you tell us?" Leia demanded.

"What?" he blinked groggily at her. "And spoil your fun?"

"Ooh -- sometimes you can be so, so ---!" Leia spluttered and only just controlled the urge to thump him. He rounded his out-of-focus eyes innocently at her and she was tempted to let go of his arm and watch him drop.

But, as it turned out, it was more than tricky enough getting him safely aboard the Falcon. They had to jump to her upper hull, falling about ten feet from the projecting balcony, and Solo was far from at his best. Luckily, the Falcon was too big a target to miss. He hit home safely enough, but slammed hard into the metallic surface, hitting his head again, and promptly lost consciousness. Luke and Leia managed to drag him into the open upper hatch, relieved to get inside away from the beginning small arms fire from the lower fortress.

"We're in, Chewie!" Luke called into the nearest intercom pick-up. "Take us back to the camp -- Han's hurt."

An alarmed and angry wookiee howl reverberated noisily in the confined space below the hatch.

"No -- it's not bad and nothing's broken." Luke added fervently under his breath, "I hope." Then called more loudly. "He should be fine, just needs some patching up."

Already Chewbacca was angling the Falcon out over the valley, her belly guns spitting angry retaliation at the small arms fire deflecting harmlessly from her shields. Luke and Leia struggled on the unsteady deck, but got Solo up between them and half-carried, half-dragged him to his bunk. They lay him back, and Leia had to admit she was worried at the way he looked, so pale in contrast to the blood oozing from the gash on his temple. Luke found a first aid kit and carried it to her, but she could feel the Falcon already settling for a landing.

Leia left Luke to tend Solo and hurried forward to the main hatch. It swung open and the ramp lowered, its running lights revealing the bare field behind the camp stockade. The sky was rapidly growing dark as the sun disappeared completely behind the mountains, and she could see a string of lights competing with the Falcon's glare and rocking unevenly as they were carried by running figures hurrying out to them. Rieekan was leading the way, his expression anxious -- night was swallowing them up and for all he knew at any moment the monstrous cannons would begin their bombardment.

Leia met him at the foot of the ramp and tried to find a smile for his concern. "It's all right," she told him, aware more people had pulled up behind him and were breathlessly listening for her announcement. "We succeeded -- thanks to Solo and Luke. The bomb is in place and should be ready to go off right about --"

The darkening sky and the field below were suddenly lit by a brilliant flash followed almost immediately by an ear-splitting boom. It resounded, echoing again and again from across the valley and the ground shook and trembled with the aftershock. Smaller explosions could be heard in the wake of the main blast -- the lower cavern munitions supplies going up.

"Now." Leia finished happily.

Rieekan grinned in absolute delight. He spun about to join the others viewing the burning mountaintop across the valley. The twin cannon barrels could be seen slowly toppling against a spectacular backdrop of soaring flames and secondary explosions, then they crashed end-over-end down the cliff face, leaving behind them no more than a gutted ruin belching fire.

"Yes!" Rieekan cried elatedly, "You did it!" He swung back to grab her up in a hug and whirl her about in a short, gleeful dance of victory. Her

smile broke free despite her continuing concern for Solo. Whoops and cries erupted about them and were soon joined by the sound of the entire refugee camp shouting their relief, beginning celebrations that no doubt would last all night.

Rieekan finally stopped and glanced up the ramp in puzzlement. "Where are your friends?" He caught her suddenly serious expression and said, "Oh, no!" All the delight drained from his face, leaving him white and haggard-looking in the reflected light.

"They're alive," Leia hastily reassured. "Solo was hurt. He's unconscious -- but I think, I hope, it's not serious. Come on, he's in his cabin, I left Luke tending him."

Rieekan paused before following her to give urgent orders via his communicator, calling for a medic. In Solo's cabin they were greatly relieved to find the pilot awake and arguing with his wookiee friend. "And I tell ya, I don't need a doctor!"

Rieekan drew a gasping breath and froze in his tracks. Leia turned back to frown at him. He was staring in wide-eyed amazement at Chewbacca. The Wookiee too had turned and locked gazes with him. There was some odd, silent communication between the two of them, that Leia was too distracted to decipher.

"It's all right, Carlin," she reassured. "Surely you've seen a Wookiee before? Meet Solo's co-pilot, Chewbacca."

"Oh, yes," he said faintly. He held out his hand and added, "It is a very great pleasure to meet you, Chewbacca."

In the background, Luke was saying as patiently as rising temper would allow, "Han, you have a severe concussion at the least. It won't hurt to get a doctor to --"

"Wait a second," Solo gave a grunt of pain as he tried to sit up and swing his legs from the bunk. "Rieekan's here?"

Chewbacca moved faster than Leia would have thought possible to roar at Solo who immediately winced and lay back. "I already got a headache, thanks, Fuzz Face," he said. Chewbacca whuffed something else, his blue eyes flashing threateningly. Solo swallowed hard, then lifted his chin and said, "All right, all right! I'll let the doctor take a look at it. Now what's with the cannons? Did we --"

"The cannons are now so much rubble at the bottom of the valley," Leia told him.

"Yes!" Solo closed a fist and grinned. He sat up again. "Celebration time!"

The medic chose just that moment to appear and Solo groaned and slumped further back in dismay. The young doctor however, took that for a sign of collapse and he urged, "Give me some room here. I need to get that bleeding stopped."

Everyone turned to obey, but Solo managed amazing strength as he yelled, "Chewie!!! What's with you and Rieekan?"

The wookiee turned back, leaving Rieekan to shake Skywalker's arm in celebration and offer congratulations. Leia was on her way out the door and heard Chewbacca say something very softly to the Corellian. She was slightly irritated not to be able to understand his words, realizing that Luke was too pre-occupied with Rieekan to do her translating for her. She waited what seemed a long moment for Solo's response.

"Someone you heard about from The Clone Wars, huh?" He snorted. "I didn't think Rieekan was that old." Chewbacca, obeying the medic and turning to exit the cabin again, whuffed something else in his more usual tone, and Solo called after him, "I am not a cocky cub!"

Leia snorted amusement and shook her head, assuming Chewbacca had just compared Rieekan and Solo as young pilots. Yes, the image fitted. She went to join an impromptu party in the Falcon's rec room.

Long minutes later, the medic joined them to be met by a chorus of, "How is he?"

"Concussion. I've sealed the wound. He'll be fine --" There was group sigh of relief. The medic, however, looked somewhat frazzled and more than a little afraid of the towering Wookiee who pinned him with an intent gaze. "If someone can convince him to rest! I slipped him a relaxant along with the pain meds. The brain scan showed no damage --it's safe enough to let him sleep. But someone should check on him regularly. Call me again if you need me -- but, I have to get back to my other patients."

Chewbacca honked what must have been a thank you and a promise to make Solo behave. The medic went a little white and took a step back as the

Wookiee followed that up by hurrying off to verify Solo had been cared for, and in the process all but knocking the medical man aside.

"Oh, no. You can't leave before you take a swallow of this fine brandy," Rieekan said mock sternly, grabbing at the doctor's arm. "Tonight everyone has a victory drink -- on Solo!" He poured for the doctor who drank happily enough. Rieekan raised his own newly filled tankard then turned to throw a salute in the direction of Solo's cabin. He sat back down and said to Leia, "Solo is a good man. Very much like the friend I once knew. A natural leader. I hope we can keep him with the Rebellion, his experience would be invaluable."

"I just hope we can keep him alive," Leia muttered. "He'd so damn impulsive!"

"Reminds me of someone else I know." Rieekan winked at her, then lifted his brandy again, this time in salute to her.

END

[Back To Index](#)