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## Operation Antidote

Part Two

by [Carolyn Golledge](#)

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The tech's coveralls Luke had provided as disguises for Solo and Leia were fine for him but far too large for her. She'd rolled up the cuffs of the sleeves but the pants legs kept falling about her heels and tripping her. As she stumbled yet again, and almost lost hold of the repulsorlift sled controls, a nearby Hargeevan stepped hurriedly out of the way, his hand covering his nose. The man crossed to the other side of the narrow Darginal City backstreet that wound about the industrial sector bordering the harbor-front.

Have these coveralls ever had a wash?" Leia complained as she checked the straps keeping Artoo securely covered on the sled as she followed after the tall Corellian. "They smell like someone died in them."

"Gripe, gripe," Solo muttered, pausing to check the corner that gave admittance to an alley-way. So the kid couldn't find any jewel-encrusted cloaks or flowing gowns. You're mixing with the peasantry now, Your Highnessness."

"Will you please quit calling me that? Leia said with no real hope of compliance. She tried to remember to breathe through her mouth. Maybe I can get used to the smell - maybe - but you'll have some problems carrying me when I trip and break a leg! Something in my size would have been nice."

"It's not my fault you're so short, Solo said unsympathetically. Besides, you need all that stumbling. The way you usually walk with your nose stuck in the air anyone'd know right off you're one of the high and mighty."

"I do not walk with..."

"Shh..." Solo cut her off as he halted by a doorway. C'mon. This is the place. Get that repulsorsled in here. Our little droid friend's

going to do some very fancy slicing."

So far so good, Leia thought, following him inside. The local populace, generally unaccustomed to the sight of repulsorlifts and non-humans, hadn't been too much unsettled, assuming the two figures in coveralls were strangers delivering some piece of technical equipment from off-world to Darginall's industrial center. And such was indeed the cover-story she and Solo had devised during their journey here. Leia had done her best to dissuade the man from accompanying her on what could be a suicide mission -- for him at least, but Solo had insisted he would come alone if need be.

They had no trouble getting by various bored supervisors inside the communicator factory - Leia had to admit Solo was a genius at producing fake IDs and work orders. They unloaded Artoo in an empty sales office and she watched as Solo's deft hands expertly worked to check for the correct connector. Despite all her protesting, Leia could feel only intensely grateful and relieved that Solo was here to help with things she'd have only been guessing at.

"C'mon, Brain-Barrel," Solo waved at the droid who rolled forward, computer-coupler extended. "Do your stuff."

This factory supplied the garrison with repairs and replacements for much of its high-tech equipment. Artoo beeped and chattered to himself as he found his way past one security code after another.

Leia prayed for success - if they could tap into Sovrynsky's files and locate the poison formula here and now, they could be off-world again within the hour and Patrina would be saved. But the little droid's cheerful beeping gradually altered to worried- sounding whines. Finally Artoo fell silent completely and removed his link to the computer.

"Well?" Leia prompted impatiently from where she stood guard watching the outer offices. She turned about as she heard Solo mutter a foul curse.

"No go," he said wearily. 'Our little friend got by all the security codes fine, but..."

"No poison file?" Leia finished glumly.

"Fraid not, Your Worship. There is some good news however - my charming former acquaintance, Colonel Harrin Sovrynsky, has been demoted. He's being shipped out tomorrow on the same transport that's bringing in his replacement.' Dismayed by their failed slicing, Leia merely shrugged. Solo sighed. "Come on, we gotta get outa here before someone gets suspicious."

When they were safely outside again, Leia asked, "So what do we do now?"

"Not we, Princess." Solo turned and gave her a pleading glance as she drew breath to argue. "No more, I shouldn't have allowed you to come this far -- it's my fight with Sovrynsky. He, Patrina and I go way back -- unfortunately."

Leia shook her head and then had to adjust the cap covering her braided hair. "Your logic defies all explanation, Fly Boy. If Sovrynsky hates you so much, then you're the one who shouldn't be here."

"Okay, okay," Solo muttered, "we haven't got time to go over all this again. I take it this means you're going to Plan B? She nodded. He cursed. "I've been meaning to tell you something, Your Regalness, but I didn't want to wound your delicate sensibilities."

"Ha!" Leia snorted and smiled wryly, glad as always of Solo's ability to break the tension. "That never stopped you before!"

"True," his lips twitched with amusement but he was deadly serious as he added, 'Plan B is as loopy as a mynock's flight-path. It'll never work."

Leia patted his arm - a gesture she knew he disliked as much as she did him calling her by royal titles. "You just hate it because you're not part of it."

"No," he said softly, holding her gaze, "I hate it because it could get you killed."

She dared his intent eyes. "I could have been on Alderaan when --" she shrugged and found she had to look away. "And you could have been killed when you were here last time..." He drew breath to say something, and she grudgingly admitted, "Yes, and so could I...that's why they call it a war."

Solo let out the breath he'd been holding in a long, weary sigh. "If we do this, we do it together or not at all. I'll admit Plan B has some very nice fringe benefits."

'Yeah, I suppose," she agreed, glad he was willing to let the subject go. For a moment there she'd been certain he was going to repeat Barran's theory about her having a death wish. "We do get to return the favor and give Sovrynsky a dose of interrogation."

"Right. So, when we get our hands on the slimy creep we bring him back to the ship?"

"Only if I can't get him to talk immediately."

Solo's dark eyes took on a feral gleam as she looked up at him again. "Oh, I'm sure I can give him plenty of inducement to co-operate."

They continued on toward a cross-street, busy with change of shift workers. Solo studied the traffic flow. Most of the vehicles were

outmoded ground cars. The Imperial military had the bulk of the - available airspeeders in Darginall City. "I hope I can find a hire-car for us, he said, or it'll be a long walk. And Patrina doesn't have the time to spare."

Leia squeezed his arm so that he looked down at her. "Promise me that if Plan B fails, you won't try to break into the garrison." He made to shake his head and she squeezed harder. "Please! They'll have you arrested the moment some trooper recognizes you as their number one escaped prisoner."

Solo gently pried her fingers away from his wrist. "Take it easy. I know you're right. And neither of us should have to go anywhere near the garrison. I told you before Patrina got worse, she gave me a lot of inside info on Sovrynsky's habits. I can find him outside of the garrison walls."

"I hope you're right, Han," Leia said softly. "we've got to be back at the ship by tomorrow morning at the latest."

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It was Season-Turn on Hargeeva, rust-colored leaves were torn loose from skeletal branches whipped by the howling wind. The storm had rushed down on Darginall City just as the last light left the sky. Leia hunkered down into her oversized coveralls; the alleyway in which she and Solo hid did little to shield them from the cold wind. It must be close to midnight now. Had Sovrynsky decided not to visit his lover after all?

A brilliant burst of light suddenly illuminated the alley and Leia saw Solo squint in reflex, his hand going to the butt of the blaster hidden beneath his long coat. A loud rumble of thunder followed, then a torrential downpour of icy rain.

"Oh great," Solo ushered her along and they hurried across the narrow alley into the shelter of an overhanging safety exit ladder that gave access to Sovrynsky's lover's apartment.

Muddied leaves rustled about Leia's boots and a scavenging rodent scuttled back into its hole. At the joint of wall and pavement there were several broken planks exposing wall-struts and a deeper darkness that must be a basement. This was far from a prestigious part of town. "Apartment" was too fancy a word for the squalid quarters surrounding the safety exit ladder two floors up.

Amid all the lightning flashes, Leia almost missed the lights of the airspeeder until they steadied and filled the outer street. Darkness returned as the engine was turned off and there was a hiss of hydraulics as the passenger door came open. Leia didn't need visual verification to know it was Sovrynsky who entered the building. According to the information Patrina had supplied to Solo, he was right on time. Leia checked her chrono - she and Solo would wait just long enough to catch Sovrynsky off guard.

Solo moved to watch the room above but had to hurry back into hiding as he heard footsteps approaching the alley-mouth. There was a gleam of white-armor as two stormtroopers appeared, one coming forward to check the safety exit ladder. Cursing silently, Solo released his hand-hold on the broken wall-planks and dropped down into the narrow basement opening by the rodent's nest.

Leia followed his lead and felt tiny sharp fangs sink into her boot. One of the animals squealed and bolted up and out, almost tripping the stormtrooper who was peering up at the safety exit ladder.

The trooper kicked at it, and called disgustedly to his partner, 'Vermin-infested stink-hole! There's no-one back here t'see nuthin'. C'mon, let's go. He wants privacy, he can have it!"

The troopers left, and a while later the airspeeder lifted off and disappeared into the rain-dark sky. Leia hoped Sovrynsky had told them not to return for him before dawn. Huddled in their dank-smelling hiding place, she and Solo waited, then cautiously began climbing the safety exit ladder.

They were only half-way there when they heard upraised, angry voices, one male, the other female. Then came a sharp smacking sound, a scream, and a woman's curses mixed with her sobbing.

"Not enough Rebels for you to beat on these days, huh?" Solo snarled, hurrying up the remaining steps, Leia close behind.

At the grimy glass-paned window they paused and peered inside. A dull light shone from a small bedside lamp. Sovrynsky stood with his back to the window, his tunic-coat draped over a nearby chair. A woman dressed in a night-robe was sitting huddled on the floor before him. She looked up at the Imperial and Leia saw her face was bruised and streaked with tears, her eyes flashing pure hatred.

Sovrynsky picked up some kind of long cane, like a walking stick, and held it up in a threatening fist as he, too, noted that expression of defiance.

'No, please," the woman begged, backing away on her knees.

Shoving open the window, Solo triggered his blaster and stunned Sovrynsky just as another lightning-bolt lit the room, hiding both the flash and the sound.

The woman's head turned to follow Sovrynsky's toppling form, then looked up again, eyes wide with horror as she gaped at the shadowy figures by the window. Her jaw dropped and she clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle a scream.

Solo holstered his blaster, and lifted a pleading hand. "Take it easy. We came for him. We're not going to hurt you. Okay?"

She gulped then nodded, seeming somehow reassured as she realized the second figure was female. As Solo bent and slapped binders about Sovrynsky's wrists, the woman stumbled to her feet and retreated to sit on the bed. She trembled from head to toe but made no further sound, her nervous eyes watching Solo's hands.

"Dammit," Leia muttered. "He'll be out at least an hour. So much for asking him any questions."

"Q-questions?" the woman stuttered, turning and blinking at her.

"Yeah," Solo said, flicking her a glance then staring murderously back at the unconscious Imperial. "He poisoned a lady-friend of ours."

The woman snorted bitterly and lifted a hand to examine the painful bruise on her cheek. "Sounds like his style."

Solo turned and watched as she pushed her long disarrayed hair back about her shoulders then secured it with some kind of clasp. Her left eye was already swelling shut and there were finger-sized welts across her cheek. "Are you okay?" he asked, taking a step closer.

"Is there something we can do to help you?" Leia added, also approaching her cautiously.

"You already did," she said and nodded toward Sovrynsky. "Thanks. He wouldn't have stopped until I needed a doctor."

"Tell me about it," Solo said sourly.

The woman cocked an eyebrow and Leia explained. "Han was his prisoner."

"Oh." There was a wealth of sympathy in that one small word. Leia flashed her a wry smile. "Here, let me tend those bruises. Is

that a washroom through there?"

As Leia applied first aid, Thera Capens told her story - Sovrynsky had threatened her friends, forcing her to become his mistress. She fell quiet and began trembling again.

"Here," Leia pulled a blanket about her. "It's over now. He won't ever hurt you again."

"You're going to kill him?" she asked, still shivering.

Leia blinked. She hadn't really considered that. Could she kill a defenseless man in cold blood, even someone like Sovrynsky? "I don't know," she answered softly. "I meant, he's being transferred out."

Thera shook her head, wincing over her bruises. "Not now, he won't be. They'll have to investigate all this first."

Leia let out a sighing breath and collapsed to sit by Thera on the bed. "Of course. I hadn't thought."

There was a long moment's silence and Thera asked, "You need him to tell you how to cure your friend, right?" Solo and Leia nodded in unison. Thera patted Leia's hand, the one that still held the cotton swab she'd used to clean her face. "You have a gentle touch, Rebel. How do you plan on making him talk?" Leia shrugged and Thera gave her a wry smile. "You're new at this, aren't you. Interrogating people, I mean."

Leia snorted. "It's not something they taught at the Palace."

Thera's good eye widened. "You were one of the King's servants?"

"Ahh ... well ... sort of," Leia evaded and heard Solo snort amusement.

Thera sighed and looked back to Sovrynsky. "Threats won't work with him. It'll take a long time to break him, and you don't have time. His guards will be here by dawn."

"I know," Leia said heavily.

Solo moved back to them from where he had been watching the street from the window. "We'll have to take him someplace else to work on him."

"You gotta get him outa here first," Thera pointed out. "I don't recommend the front door, too many snoopers and spy-eyes. I can have a friend of mine bring a motor-sled round back if you can carry that creep down the safety exit ladder."

'Hey, that'd be great," Solo gave her a disarmingly friendly smile, "I was thinking I'd have to lug the mongrel all the way back to our ship."

"You have a ship?" Thera regarded them hopefully. Can you take me off-world? I don't want to be here when his thugs come round asking questions.'

Up until now Leia hadn't stopped to consider what might happen to Sovrynsky's lover after the Imperial disappeared from her life. She certainly couldn't leave her for Imperial interrogation. 'Right,' she said grimly. "Pack your things, and have that vehicle ready. How do you feel about joining the Rebel Alliance?"

By way of answer Thera threw her arms about her and hugged her delightedly.

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When Colonel Sovrynsky finally got his blurred vision back into focus, he definitely didn't like what he saw.

On the other side of a small ship-board cabin, standing slouched insolently up against the bulkhead, was Captain Han Solo. But the biggest shock was finding a woman he'd swear was the Rebel Princess Leia Organa, dressed in common Rebel fatigues, and watching from the other side of the small room. Solo had always had a way with women -- but a Royal Princess of Alderaan?! Sovrynsky felt all the old jealousies resurfacing and hated Solo all the more.

"Enjoy your beauty sleep?" Solo sneered, moving closer. "I'm afraid it didn't help, but there wasn't much to start with, now was there?"

Sovrynsky ignored the insult. He turned to check his surroundings further and immediately regretted it. His head felt ready to split. Clothed only in his rain-damp uniform shirt and trousers, he was bound painfully tight to a chair before a small desk in an otherwise empty cabin. The deck and bulkheads reverberated with the unmistakable feel of hyperdrive engines at full throttle.

Momentary panic caused Sovrynsky's pulse to race. Hyperspace! The experts who had implanted the transponder micro-beacon in his arm had assured Sovrynsky they could follow it to the other side of the galaxy if need be. Sovrynsky had told them there had best not be a need or they would answer for it. He'd ordered them to capture the Rebels before they could leave Hargeeva.

Panic became rage as Sovrynsky realized someone higher up had pulled rank to force his team to allow Solo to leave Hargeeva with him. Obviously High

Command had decided they could not rely on their interrogators getting the information, so they'd opted to follow the Rebel ship to its base. Easy enough for them, but that left Sovrynsky in Rebel hands for at least the next few hours.

Sovrynsky tried to find moisture enough in his dry mouth so as to speak. "You'll never get away with this, Solo," he began.

The Corellian cocked an eyebrow at him scornfully. 'Oh really? You make too free with that word, 'never,' Harrin. You also told me, years ago, I'd never see Patrina again, remember?"

'So she betrayed us after all," Sovrynsky sneered. "That would surprise only my superiors. It is as well measures were taken to ensure she would be of no use to your pitiful Rebellion."

And I didn't think I'd enjoy hitting a bound man." Solo's green-gold eyes glinted like ice in a snowbank. "But then you're no man, are you, scum!" He swung a powerful right fist and connected with the side of Sovrynsky's head. Tell me what you used on her or you'll get a beating that'll make the one you gave me look easy!"

Sovrynsky sucked at the inside of his split cheek and swallowed blood. He hoped this ship wasn't far from its destination. Those fools in Intelligence would pay for getting him into this! And you Rebels pretend to have such pure ethics," he taunted, directing a glare at the Princess. You see? Torture comes as easily to you as to us."

Organa flushed and turned away, then said quietly, "You're wrong."

Solo stalked around to face his prisoner. If his eyes had been icy before they were deadly cold now. "I'm not a Rebel, and you can be sure I'll do whatever is needed to keep Patrina alive. You think you can withstand my desperation, Sovrynsky? You know how much she means to me. Do you truly believe you can hold out against whatever her dying drives me to do to you? And she is dying, scum. Slowly, breath by breath, she's failing. She dies and you die too. But I guarantee your death won't come any faster or less painfully. I'll keep you alive a long time, Sovrynsky. My grief will know no bounds."

Looking up into those death's-head eyes, Sovrynsky flinched. He swallowed hard and tried to tell himself help wasn't far off. It didn't work. "Look, he said nervously. I don't want Patrina to die. She's worth a lot to the Empire, and ..."

Solo leaned forward, grabbed at the front of Sovrynsky's undershirt, pulled him closer and snarled, "Screw the Empire!"

"Right, right," Sovrynsky nodded, squirming frantically to free himself. "I was only trying to say that it was their idea to poison Kelvin. I told them it could go wrong. I warned them."

Solo let go, stepped back, but his expression was just as murderous. Organa asked, "What did they give her?"

"Just the usual security drug, it's easily cured with a dose of Trypanid."

"Liar!" Solo roared. "I should kill you, you filthy coward." He

drew his blaster and flipped the stun setting to high power, narrow beam. "No more stalling. Tell me now or I fry you -- starting from the toes up." The weapon snout lowered. Sovrynsky gulped and paled. And this time," Solo warned, "be sure you get it right."

It took Sovrynsky several tries to find his voice. "I swear, that is the truth," he pleaded. "Trypanid will fix her - - "

Solo's finger shook on the trigger and the blaster barrel wavered as he struggled for control. Organa stepped forward, but only partially blocked the weapon's aim. "Our doctor has already tried Trypanid," she said. "We've known the formula for the usual Imperial security drug for weeks. That's not what you used on Patrina."

"You get one more chance," Solo spat, "then I start roasting you."

Sovrynsky's eyes bulged and his jaw worked convulsively. He couldn't look away from that threatening blaster muzzle. "It's the truth, I tell you! There must be something else wrong with her!" Solo's knuckles flashed white about the trigger. "Kill me and she'll die too!"

Solo uttered a foul curse, turned his back, holstered the blaster and hit the door release. Organa followed.

Sovrynsky caught a quick glimpse of a brightly lit outer corridor before the door slid closed again. He sagged against his bonds and tried to ignore the sweat streaming into his eyes. His heart was pounding so hard that it hurt his ribs.

He'd told the truth. Why was Solo refusing to accept it? Kelvin must have caught some strange disease. Sovrynsky hoped fervently that the Rebel base was not far off. The moment the ship landed there the Sector Fleet would follow to demand the Rebels' surrender. Picturing what he'd do to Solo shortly thereafter set Sovrynsky muttering and snickering savage fantasy. He waited like a predator in a web, already imagining the taste of the kill.

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Well?" Luke asked from the rec room table where he and Thera had been playing a holo game. "We heard a lot of shouting. But you don't look happy."

"We're not," Solo growled. He poured himself a cup of water and swallowed it down.

'You were right, Thera," Leia said. "I'm not much at this interrogation business. He's calling our bluff."

Solo crushed the cup and hurled it furiously against the bulkhead. 'And I don't have the stomach to roast him a little at a time. Not even for Patrina." He stood and slammed one hand on his blaster. "Some friend!"

"Patrina wouldn't want you as her friend if you were any different, Han," Leia said softly.

"So," Luke put in quietly, watching them keenly. "Does this mean we go to plan C?"

Leia nodded then waved him off as he got to his feet. "No, Luke. Stay there. I'll do it. I'm the one got us into this mess. I hope General Rieekan is in a good mood. He should still be at Sector headquarters. I can reach him there."

'Good thinking," Solo said morosely, "You wanna avoid home base, Your Worship. Baran's probably looking to have you shot on sight."

Leia sighed. "Something else to make my life interesting." "What's this Plan C?" Thera watched Leia disappear into the cockpit.

Luke explained. "We call for help. Leia's going to transmit to headquarters and have them send an interrogation team out here to us. That way we don't endanger Rebel lives if anyone's tracking us."

"Tracking?" Thera started. "Can they do that?"

Solo snorted, his back still turned to them. 'Oh,yeah. It's been done before."

Luke added, "They plant a miniature transponder on a ship's hull. Sometimes they do it as a matter of course on any freighter that docks on an Imperial-controlled world. But I don't think we have anything to worry about. I never left the ship. I set up a vid-scan and I know no-one came near this place."

They looked up as Leia returned and slumped dejectedly into a seat opposite them.

"Cheer up, Princess," Luke reached over and squeezed her arm. The interrogation team will crack Sovrynsky in no time."

"Princess?" Thera sat up straighter and peered suspiciously at Leia. "You're not? You couldn't be, Princess Organa?"

Solo seemed to enjoy the reaction and said, "Yep, tis she, the one and only, Her Regal Majesty, Princess Leia Organa."

It took a moment for Thera to find her voice. "We were told you were killed when ..."

I "I'm sure Sovrynsky's up to something," Solo interrupted suddenly. "I thought he'd crack as soon as he saw who had him prisoner, but he wasn't even surprised to see me. He didn't so much as blink when I told him Patrina's with the Alliance. He's so slaggin' smug about something."

"He told me there was a big push to uncover Rebel information," Thera put in. "He's desperate for a promotion back to AT-AT command. You're right, he probably is scheming something."

Oh great," Leia said glumly. 'Any ideas?"

Thera shook her head, but then looked up suddenly. "Wait! What was that you mentioned about trackers, Luke? How big are those things? What do they look like?" Luke indicated. Thera jumped to her feet excitedly. "That's it then! Got to be!"

"What?" Solo and Luke demanded in unison.

"Last night, when Sovrynsky kissed me, I tried to push him away," Thera explained, pausing significantly before she added, "And I felt a strange hard bump on his left arm. He yelped and got mad because I'd hurt him, must have hit a tender spot. I asked him what was wrong with his arm. He said he'd had surgery. Then he got this real nasty look in his eyes and he said, 'But it'll hurt the Rebels a lot more than it hurts me.'"

Solo, Luke and Leia exchanged alarmed looks. 'A tracker!' Leia said, her face pale. "I should have guessed. We got off-world with him too easy."

"Now, where have I heard that before?" Solo said flatly. "Come on. Someone bring the medkit. Sovrynsky's about to have more surgery."

Thera followed, but then suddenly blocked her companions as they were about to open the cell door. "Wait!" she urged eagerly, "I've got an idea. Maybe we won't need your interrogator friends after all." Her lips pressed into a thin hard line. 'And I can exact a little vengeance into the bargain.'

Leia frowned at her. "The Alliance doesn't torture prisoners, Thera. Not even him. I'm not going to use this transponder removal as an excuse to..."

Thera went a little green at the thought. "No, no," she assured. 'Nothing like that. Just listen and follow my lead.'

Solo nodded and held her gaze. "Good idea. I think I know just where you're heading."

\* \* \*

Sovrynsky all but had heart failure when he was dragged out into the common room and saw Solo standing by the rec table -- now fitted with restraints -- and with a medical scalpel in his hands.

But that was nothing compared to his reaction when he discovered his safety net - not to mention any hopes of future promotion - were about to go out the airlock. He might never escape now! His only consolation had been the local anaesthetic Organa had applied to his arm before Solo cut him. As soon as the transponder had been removed it was dispatched into the vacuum of space. Shortly thereafter the ship went into another hyperspace jump.

"Your friends will never know what happened to you, fool," Solo announced as he returned to the common room again and leered down at the Imperial officer tied across the rec table. Organa was slapping some synth-flesh over the wound in the Imperial's upper left arm.

"He doesn't have any friends," Thera put in maliciously.

Sovrynsky turned awkwardly to glare at her. So, she'd been involved in his capture too. She'd pay for that! If only he could find a way out of this mess.

So how did it feel to be on the sharp end of the knife for once?" Thera moved to stand over him. 'If I'd been doing the cutting I wouldn't have used a local.'

Solo unlocked the left manacle and the Imperial sat up though his right hand remained chained to the table's side. I should have thought of that earlier," Solo said, eyeing the woman thoughtfully. "You wanna cut on him, be my guest. There are plenty of places he'll still feel it."

He handed the scalpel to Thera, who nodded her thanks and ran an appraising finger along the flat of the blade. "Maybe you better take him back into his cell, Luke put in on cue, I don't want blood all over the decks out here."

"Fine by me," Thera said coldly. She looked to Solo. "You drag him in there and tie him up and I'll be along in a moment. There's a few other things I want to try on him too." She turned again to Luke. "May I borrow your tool kit?"

"Sure," Skywalker nodded. "I'll go get it."

"Move it along," Solo freed the chains from the table and Sovrynsky's hands went protectively to his stomach. Back to your cell, scum, the lady wants to play catch-up. I saw the scars you left all over her. I'd say she'll be busy with you all the way back to base." Solo shook his head with mock regret. "And no one's gonna come rescue you no more. Such a shame."

"Wait!" Sovrynsky pleaded, all self-control vanished in a melting tide of sheer panic. She might kill me, and then you'll never get that antidote for Kelvin."

"Oh, I'll be sure to keep you breathing, hero," Thera spat. I wouldn't want to deprive Solo of his turn."

"But, but ..." Sovrynsky spluttered, his eyes rolling frantically as Solo propelled him toward the cabin. Kelvin won't die if I give her the antidote in time."

Solo spun Sovrynsky round to face him. "What antidote? You said we'd already tried the only one."

"I, I lied," Sovrynsky stammered. 'I thought the fleet would be here soon to free me. Now, well, maybe we can do a deal.'

What kind,of deal?"

"I cure Kelvin and you guarantee my freedom."

The Imperial waited, growing more nervous as Solo looked none too happy and Thera fidgeted with the scalpel. Think of all those Rebel lives you can save with Kelvin's new technology. What do you lose by letting me go? I don't know where we are."

Solo drew a deep breath. "You have a deal," he said.

Sovrynsky sagged in relief and the Corellian lifted a threatening forefinger, "But we don't let you go until we're certain Patrina's fully recovered."

"Of course," Sovrynsky tried shakily to wipe away the sweat trickling down his brow and making a soggy mess of his normally perfectly groomed moustache.

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That means we'll have to take him to the base," Leia pointed out when they told her.

Solo frowned and said, "He'll never see the nav coordinates or even the view from the cockpit. He could never identify it. But he does have to go there - he says the antidote will need continual adjustment. It's a complicated poison. There will need to be frequent blood tests." Solo looked away, his jaw set grimly. "I swear he better know what he's talking about, or Thera and I get to do trauma therapy with him as the stress release."

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Back in his cell, Sovrynsky was slowly getting his pulse back under control when Organa entered -- with Solo shadowing her -- to verify that she had agreed with the deal. He could hardly believe he'd won a second chance. He had no idea what was wrong with Kelvin, but her friends had just given him the chance to redeem himself with his High Command.

He could play doctor for as long as it took to find his opening for escape - and a hostage who knew the base location.

Will your commanding officer agree to my release on these terms?" He kept his eyes lowered as if cowered, but needed to hide the cunning he knew they'd read from him.

"We won't be involving my commanding officer," Leia said. "No one will ever know you were on base."

"I see," Sovrynsky nodded. He flinched as Solo clamped his fist under the prisoner's jaw, forcing him to meet the his angry, intent eyes.

"You do exactly as we tell you down there or some trigger-happy Rebel is going to enjoy blasting a hole in you."

"Exactly," Organa nodded agreement. "We recruit from Hargeeva, as you know. You keep your head down and your mouth shut or someone will recognize you and there'll be no deals from them. They remember the families you enslaved and murdered."

Suddenly, Sovrynsky no longer needed to hide his true feelings. Solo looked much happier as he read the genuine fear in his prisoner's eyes. Then he shoved Sovrynsky back into the cabin cell for the duration of the journey to Hoth Base.

\* \* \*

Luke waited until it was late night on Hoth Base before contacting the deck officer - a former Red Squadron pilot who'd been temporarily retired from combat service after being severely wounded in battle. Luke didn't like lying to the man, or distracting him as Solo and his Imperial prisoner got by him, and found little consolation in it only being a half-lie.

It was true enough that Leia wanted her presence on base a secret until Rieekan returned to overthrow Baran-Brain's reign of terror. The deck officer had laughed at that description and said he

and his crew would be happy to help in any way possible.

And so it was that Solo found himself, with a disguised Sovrynsky in tow, standing before sickbay entrance. He'd overheard the deck officer tell Luke that "the lady scientist" was still alive but he knew no details. Solo hoped she had not deteriorated much further than the terrible comatose state he'd last seen.

He leaned forward to warn Sovrynsky, "Remember, mind your manners in there. I'll have this aimed at you every second. You don't want another stun headache." He prodded Sovrynsky in the back with the blaster barrel. The weapon was carefully concealed beneath the blanket he'd thrown over his arm - he'd often brought one with him during past vigils at Patrina's bedside. Hoth Base was always icy cold despite the struggling generator's attempts to provide heating.

Sovrynsky pushed against the door release and stepped into much brighter light of the sickbay, Solo close behind.

Doctor Jaya Oran turned quickly away from her work, a smile lighting her tired face as she recognized the taller of the two visitors. Solo!" she greeted. Thank the stars you're back. She's hanging in there, but just barely." She frowned as she noted Solo wasn't smiling. You did get it, didn't you?"

"More or less," Solo shoved Sovrynsky forward. "My prisoner here says he knows how to cure her. He should - he's the one poisoned her in the first place."

Sovrynsky flinched as the doctor turned furiously accusing eyes on him. "It will take some time," Sovrynsky said nervously. To cure her, I mean. We must work as a team. I'll need you to interpret blood tests so I can determine what

combination of the time-release substances are currently present and devise the correct antidote."

"I've been taking blood tests every hour," Oran said coldly. She was pleased to see Solo had a blaster beneath the blanket he now put aside. And I've been unable to find any effective counter-agent. The blood test readings never change."

Sovrynsky swallowed against a dry throat. He moved close to Kelvin's bedside to read the life-sign monitors. The test readings never seem to change," he corrected. 'Your computers would not scan for the substances we have recently created. You will need to reprogram for their chemical markers then take another blood test. May I use this datapad to list the entries?"

"The sooner the better," Oran nodded. "If we're going to be running such sophisticated scans, we'll need more power than this simple machine can provide. I'll go borrow Baran's fancy computer. I know exactly what I need." She gave Solo a worried look. "Do you need more guards?"

Solo shook his head. "Baran doesn't know we're back, and I want to keep it that way."

Oran's lips twitched. "I had to treat him for concussion. That must have been some punch."

"Actually," Solo snorted, "I think he hit his head on the wall."

"Whatever," Oran said cheerfully, "He had it coming." She moved to the door, paused and said, "I'll be right back. If you're sure you can manage?"

"It's set for stun," Solo said. "I've only got to squeeze the trigger."

"Right." Oran left and the doors whooshed closed behind her. Solo watched while Sovrynsky punched keys on the datapad.

Still watching his prisoner, Solo edged closer to Patrina. She looked as still and white as death and a thrill of fear went through him. "I'm here, Patri," he said softly, touching her face with his free hand. "We're gonna make you well."

From out in the corridor came the sound of clicking heels on duracrete and, close behind, the heavier footfalls of marching boots. A woman's voice complained, "I'm sure I don't need no guard just t'bring these supplies down to the doctor."

"Any medical supplies are worth a fortune on the black market," a trooper's deeper voice answered. "We've had medics attacked in the past. It never hurts to be careful."

"Kest!" Solo cursed. "Sounds like a couple of Baran's Nervous Ninnies."

He looked about for a hiding place, spotted a free-standing privacy screen. "Get over there," he waved Sovrynsky toward it and the Imperial hurried to obey. Han had only just taken his place in the cramped but concealed space beside Sovrynsky when the door opened and a small, stooped female wearing a pharmacist's insignia, and two security troopers entered.

"We'll wait for you here, Assistant Griek," the senior of the guards said, and he and his partner took up a rigid at-attention stance by the door.

"I tell you all this worryin' is not needed," Griek sounded almost at the limits of her patience, her voice thick with the accents of her native Hargeevan homeland. "But if you insist, then don't come no closer. Goodness only knows what germs you're trackin'in here on those filthy boots."

Han almost dared not breathe as the pharmacist supplier crossed to a shelf on the wall no more than a hand's span from his and Sovrynsky's hiding place. She stacked the supply packages, then took two or three steps to stand at Patrina's bedside. Solo watched as the woman bent down and placed her hand to Kelvin's pale forehead, apparently testing for fever. Then Griek began fidgeting with the bedclothes.

Han flinched as a loud beep sounded from one of the guard's comlinks. The guard called to Griek. "If you have those supplies safely stored, we've got to be going. Someone's trying to mess with Baran's computer."

"Fine," Griek said, sounding glad to be rid of them.

Han bit back a groan as he realized the doctor was having problems getting hold of the needed equipment. He wished he'd hit Baran harder. He waited impatiently for Griek to leave, but she continued her fidgeting.

"We're all alone now, Patrina," Griek said and her suddenly altered, leering tone made Solo's flesh crawl. "How does that make you feel? I'm sure you can hear me -- people often do when they're in coma."

Baffled and not at all sure he liked what he was hearing, Han watched as Griek pulled some object from her pocket, her free hand pinching at the exposed flesh of Patrina's arm.

"One more injection," Griek continued. "That's all it would take and I'd have my vengeance for the husband and son your work cost me in the slave mines. Do you know how many people died there because you brought those Imperial

savages to Hargeeva, Patrina? No, of course not, all you cared for was your precious work! Well, you're not the only clever one. I almost killed you and the doctor never found no trace of my poisons."

Han drew a sharp breath and moved forward, but stopped again as Griek added, "But I can't kill you, can I? You're holdin' hostages just as Sovrynsky did. But mark my words, some day you will be brought to justice." She lifted the object and Solo saw it was a loaded hypo-syringe. "I have the cure here. It'll make you well, but only for the sake of the Rebel lives your work can help. When it's all over, you die."

"Hold it!" Solo warned, emerging from behind the screen. Griek jumped and dropped the hypo. Reflexively, Solo reached for it, and for an instant forgot his guard on the Imperial. Searing pain exploded in Han's lower back. Gasping in agony, he clutched at himself, and his suddenly nerveless fingers released their hold on the heavy blaster.

Sovrynsky lowered the scalpel he had driven into Solo's back and snatched the Corellian's blaster before it could fall to the floor. Then he stepped back as Solo made a groggy grab for him.

Behind them, Griek stood frozen in horror, her skeletally thin hands clasped to her mouth, and her wide blue eyes staring transfixed at the bright spray of blood spilling from Solo's wounded back. Solo took another stumbling step then folded, groaning and barely conscious to the deck.

"Now, I have my hostages," Sovrynsky announced calmly. He levelled the blaster at Griek and ordered, "You, find some bandaging."

Griek blinked, then looked from the blaster barrel back to Solo's bloodied hands which were ineffectually trying to stem the flow of blood. Medical training took over and she hurried to find some pressure bandaging then bent to tend the wounded man.

Sovrynsky sighed irritably. "Not those kind of bandages. Something to tie him up." Griek looked up at him in confusion, then returned to trying to place the pressure bandage. "Get away from him!" The Imperial snapped, stepping threateningly closer.

"But -- he, he could bleed to death." She pushed the bandage into Solo's hands and got to her feet.

"Oh, really?" Sovrynsky sneered. "I take it he's not on your death list then, woman?" Impatiently, he snagged her arm with his free hand and dragged her away from the barely conscious Corellian.

"Who are you?" Griek asked after a moment. She noted that somehow, Solo had managed to secure the pressure bandage and the flow of blood was easing to a trickle.

"I'm so disappointed that you don't recognize me," Sovrynsky said somewhat distractedly, his glance going from his prisoners to the door and back again. Doctor Oran would be returning soon, and by the sound of it, would bring guardsmen with her. "I realize my attire is hardly flattering, but still I'd have thought you'd know the man who rated such a vehement mention in your little speech just now for Kelvin's benefit."

She studied his face intently, then gasped, "Sovrynsky!"

"Quite so," he gave a slight mocking bow. "Stay back! This weapon is set for stun but I could make an exception in your case and alter it to kill. " His lips lifted in an ugly, curving scowl. "After all, you are but a slave and as such of little worth as a hostage -- or anything else."

Griek's fists bunched and her fair face flushed with rage. The Imperial flicked the setting on the blaster to kill and aimed for her heart. She backed away, rage becoming terror.

"Better," Sovrynsky nodded. "It would be a shame if I had to kill you when you were doing my work for me so well, poisoning our scientist friend." The blaster barrel wavered to indicate Patrina. "Or at least you were killing her until you changed your mind. And that is the cure?" He took a step toward the hypo still on the floor where she had let it fall.

Solo made a feeble grab for it and Sovrynsky kicked it aside. "Still with us, Solo?" he leered. "Good, I wouldn't want you to miss the last act in this little drama. All your heroic efforts to save Patrina were for naught, you see? One of your own kind was the murderer." He glanced again at the hypo-syringe. "Or would-be murderer."

"You ... lied ... about ... everything" Solo tried woozily to glare up at the man.

Sovrynsky shook his head. "Not everything. When I told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me."

"Now what?" Solo asked.

I need a ticket off this planet. Preferably one carrying the coordinates so the fleet can find its way back here."

Solo snorted painfully. No one's going to let you..."

"No?" Sovrynsky cocked his head as he heard footfalls in the outer corridor. "Perhaps you are right. But then if your friends won't bargain, at least I can make sure Kelvin does die." He lifted his boot to crush the hypo.

Solo grabbed feebly at Sovrynsky's leg before it could come down on the life-saving medication and the Imperial turned and kicked him in the ribs. Solo fell heavily back against the wall, dazed and bleary-eyed, but Griek had reclaimed the hypo.

'Give that to me now, slave,' Sovrynsky turned to her. She shook her head and backed away.

The door whooshed open and Doctor Oran entered. She was pushing a cart on which was balanced a spectrograph and a pile of datacards. Behind followed the same two troopers who'd been with Griek earlier. Further back, unnoticed because of her short stature, came a heavily disguised Princess Leia.

"What in all the fires ...?" Oran began. She made to move to Solo.

Leia too stepped forward, saw Solo wounded and Sovrynsky armed. She drew her own weapon.

"Stay back or she dies!" Sovrynsky shouted. His hand shook as he waved the blaster roughly in the direction of Patrina's head.

Griek, seeing the Imperial's distracted attention, dropped the hypo to the bed and made a grab for Sovrynsky's blaster. His fingers came down hard on the trigger and she took the full force of the blast as the weapon fired. Her blue eyes widened in shock, then glazed over as she crumpled, a hole charred in the front of her white tunic.

Sovrynsky tried to recover in time to realign his aim on the newcomers, but Solo lashed out, kicking him hard on the shin and upsetting his balance. It was all the opening Leia needed. She fired and felled the Imperial with a stun shot.

Forget me," Solo gasped as she moved to his aid. "Help ...Patri."

"Patrina?" Leia repeated in confusion. The guards moved to secure the prisoner and Leia looked across at Kelvin and spotted the full hypo lying on the bed by Patrina's bare arm. "This?" she said, picking it up and displaying it to Solo.

"It's the cure," Solo said. He tried to push the doctor away from him. "Fix her ... first."

Oran sighed but decided it would be easier to obey. Quickly she took the hypo, injected Kelvin, and then moved back to tend Solo. "Happy now?" she said sourly. "You're bleeding all over my floor."

"Sorry." But there was a faint smile on Solo's face as at last he allowed himself to pass out.

"Would someone mind telling us what the slag's going on here?"

one of the guards asked irritably.

'Don't look at me," Leia said in a deep voice. 'I'm only a lowly technician."

\* \* \*

"Wake up, Han."

Someone was stroking Solos face with smooth warm, gentle hands. It felt so good, and he felt so comfortable in general, that he was loathe to obey.

Then, he remembered where he was -- or assumed he was -- in Hoth Base Sick Bay; and curiosity about the owner of those caressing hands got the better of him. "Leia?"

Her dark eyes had certainly held a great depth of concern in the moments just before hed passed out. Or had that been Oran? He frowned confusion and realized he was further muddled by previously heavy sedation and other drugs. How badly had he been hurt? He hadn't been able to see the wound himself..

"Come on, Solo. I know you can hear me. Time to come out of it."

That was Oran's voice, but she wasn't the one stroking his face. Leia? he thought hopefully.

"No, its me, Patrina," another somewhat amused voice said, and Han realized that in his waking stupor hed spoken aloud. Just as well Leia isn't here, then. Wouldnt want her to know -- Wait! Patri!

Surprise and pleasure had him open his eyes and try to sit up all at once. That didn't work out too well. His vision was blurred and his body seemed to weigh as much as a small sized planet. Or someone had turned up an artificial gravity field to maximum. He groaned, shut his eyes again, and managed to say hoarsely but with wry amusement, "Patri, if that's you, and I feel like a corpse, I guess were both dead, huh?"

Patrina snorted amusement. "No, Slick, we won." She ruffled his hair. "And you better wake up soon or the entire base is going to be covered with wookiee fur."

Solos lips twitched. "He's been that bad, huh?"

"Yup," she said cheerfully.

Han opened his eyes, pleased to find this time the room stayed put and things began to take on focus. Again he tried to sit up, but where his eyes were willing to cooperate, it seemed the rest of him wasn't. Pain flared dully somewhere in his back and he smothered a curse.

Oran didn't bother. "Dammit!" she said irritably. "Two days we've been trying to coax him back to life, then hes no sooner awake but he wants to jump out of bed. Typical! Keep still, Solo," she threatened, "or Ill have you tied down."

Solo blinked, managed to focus on her face, then said with a sly drawl, "So, bondage is your thing, huh, doc?"

That set Patrina off into more laughter and there was a sound of amusement from someone further back in the room too. Oran leaned over him and threatened sweetly, "No, Smart Mouth, Im into sado-masochism, can't you tell?"

Solo snorted. "You win. Ill behave." It didn't seem hed have much choice for a while anyway. He turned his head on the pillow and gave Patrina a genuine, welcoming smile. "Looks like I'm her prisoner, but it's very good to see you up and around again, Patri." Despite the joking words, the tone was heartfelt.

Patrina leaned down and kissed him softly on the brow. "Thanks to you -- and your friends." She leaned closer still to whisper in his ear, "Calling for Leia, huh? She heard that, you know. And she blushed very prettily."

"Huh?" Solo started up a little and earned a glare from Oran. "What?"

Patrina inclined her head, and when Solo looked he found indeed Leia was standing not far away, close to the privacy screen. Her eyes were darkly shadowed and she looked like she hadn't slept in days. She was again dressed in the standard white jacket and pants.

"Hey, there, Your Royalness," Solo called, finding his voice weaker than he wanted it, "They let you out of the Brig, I see."

She shook her head, and her lips pursed into that familiar line he knew meant she was biting back a smile. She came closer, and told him, "Actually, I've been holed up here. I claimed medical immunity."

Oran snorted at that. "It would have been nice if youd got some rest while you were here."

Almost shyly, Leia approached the bed and touched her hand to Solo's. "It's good to have you back with us, Fly Boy."

"Thanks," he said and held her gaze a moment. "So," he said in a more neutral tone as she removed her touch from his hand, "we were after the wrong prisoner all along?"

"Yes. Sovrynsky took some pleasure in telling us why shed been driven to wanting vengeance," Leia sighed. "Poor Griek." She cast a hasty, apologetic look at Patrina, "I mean --"

"I know exactly what you mean," Patri nodded. "Poor woman. Lost all her family in the slave mines. I should have realized what the Imperials were doing to the work force -- I just never -- I stayed buried in my work in the city."

"Work that will save lives of the people of Hargeeva and many more like them," Leia assured.

Patrina let out a breath. "Yes, I hope so."

"So that stuff she was going to inject in you -- it was the real cure?" Han asked.

"More or less," Oran said. "I had to do some fine-tuning." She lowered a mock-frown at him, and added, "In between running after you that is."

"Ahh --" Solo wanted to know. "So, what's the damage? How long do I have to be locked up here?"

"Gratitude," Oran sighed, then reported matter-of factly, "Punctured kidney, nicked artery. You kept me busy."

Solos eyes widened. "Oh." That explained why he felt like shit.

"Oh," Oran mimicked and shook her head. She went off to a desk to check some readouts, "all he says, is 'Oh.'"

"Umm," Solo corrected, "and thanks!"

Both Patrina and Leia found that afterthought amusing. He eyed them warily, and decided to change the subject. "And what happened to my dear pal, Sovrynsky? Someone blasted him, I hope?"

"Sorry," Leia said, "I was set for stun."

"Damm. Too bad."

"Some big brass Intel Officers arrived this morning and have been interrogating him all day," Leia added.

Solo grinned. "I feel much better already." He watched, his smile fading in some concern, as Patrina returned to her own sick bed to stretch out.

But she called over to him, "I need some rest after watching you sleep for two days. And you two have some catching up to do."

"Ahh, yeah, OK," Solo said, and turned back to Leia, "When you say Intel Officer, I assume you mean, Intel as in Intelligent and not Barran Brained?"

"Yes, thank all the fates," Leia said with feeling. "Rieekan is back. Baran is gone."

"Gone?"

"Sector Command sent him way back out to the Rim to do administrative duties at one of our Refuge Bases."

"The further away, the better."

"Exactly."

"He gave Leia some trouble first, though," Oran put in from her desk.

"Yeah?" Solo craned to look across at her.

"Nothing much," Leia waved it off -- "just the confined to Sick Bay thing. It's you he was really after."

"Me?" Solo rounded his eyes in comic innocence. "Now, what did I ever do to him?" Leia smiled and again Han found himself reveling in her rare moments of happiness. "Anyway," he went on quickly, "what could he do to me? I mean, he couldn't court-martial me."

"Oh," Leia said impishly, "I think he'd rather have waited until you were on your feet again so he could have you executed by firing squad."

Solo blinked, then frowned darkly and looked sharply away from Leia's face. The joking words had bought back sudden, vivid and overwhelmingly painful memory. His father had died just such a death, murdered by the true traitor. Han blinked hard against a sudden burning in his eyes, then closed them to hide the betraying emotion.

"Han?" Leia said in sudden concern. "I was joking. Are you OK?"

Her tone had alerted Oran who came closer to ask, "Are you in pain, Solo?"

"No," he regained his composure and managed to look at them as if they were crazy. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are," Oran said skeptically, but wandered off to tend to her medical reports again, apparently satisfied by the reports from the various sensors monitoring him.

Leia was watching him keenly. "Really, Han, Rieekan took care of Baran for us once and for all."

"Yeah," Solo's lips curved into a semblance of a smile, "best news I heard all day - other than for Patri."

"Right." Leia frowned at him suspiciously a moment longer, then gave up on the mystery. "And Patri's already got any of our on-base opposition back pedaling. Even Borsk."

Solo blinked. The petty politician was a notorious thorn in everyone's side. Solo had many times hoped the Bothan dim-wit egotist would get buried in one of Hoth's snow slides, or meet with some other deadly fate. "I'm impressed. How did she manage that?"

Leia's mouth curved up. "Black mail -- of a kind."

"If it worked against Borsk, it's my favorite kind."

"She told the Council that she'd be happy to supply all her knowledge of the new alloy in designs for the laser array on our cannons as long as The Falcon is one of the first ships to benefit from it."

Yeah? Solo was more than pleased. That could mean all the difference in battle.

"And--"

"There's more?"

"And she told them your experience with modifying weapon systems would be vital to achieving the best results with increased fighter fire-power. Borsk and his cronies won't be referring to you as smuggler scum anytime again soon."

Solo snorted. "Oh, I'm sure I can find new ways to get him steamed."

Oran had wandered over in time to overhear that. "Now there's the greatest understatement ever made in the history of life as we know it." She hit a control and dimmed the lights. "Enough talking for you, Solo. Stars, don't you have any other speeds other than all ahead and dead stop."

"Oh." Solo winked at Leia whom he decided looked strikingly beautiful in the softer light. "I think I could demonstrate a few variations."

Leia rolled her eyes. "Dream on, Fly Boy!" She walked with Oran toward the exit and Han heard her deliberately loud parting shot, "It's a shame you can't do anything about his delusional state."

Solo smiled and settled back. He should rest while he could -- when his shedding carpet of a co-pilot found he was awake, he'd be in for a real lecture!

End

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