

[Back To Index](#)

Troubleshooter

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Han Solo was a happy man. The cash pocket on the inside of his vest was comfortably full of negotiables, his hangover was almost gone, and those mysterious galaxy turns that propelled him erratically toward some unknown destination seemed to be, for the present, all in a benign direction.

Threading his way on foot through the maze of Danis' casino district, heading for a favorite gambling haunt, Solo was tempted to whistle. His lithe figure, slim-hipped and obviously capable, cut a fair swath through the milling crowds. Han was perhaps not the best-looking man on the street, but he thought he was, and that added a good deal to his rather insolent charm.

His mind occupied with nothing more serious than the anticipation of an afternoon of pushing his luck at Skyslide, the tall Corellian rounded a corner and ran smack into a body moving at full tilt, the initial collision knocking the breath out of both of them with an *OOOF!* in chorus.

Solo's first impression, when he looked down to the sidewalk, was of a large herding dog with a pair of gorgeous legs. His unwitting assailant had landed in a slightly indecent sprawl and Han, though he was by no stretch of the imagination a gentlemen, could, when the occasion demanded, be counted upon to behave in a gallant manner. He enjoyed the diverting view for only a moment before offering his hand to the bewildered girl and pulled her to her feet.

"You O.K.?"

"Oh, yes...Oh, pardon me, I'm so sorry..." the girl began. Unsteady on her fashionable but precarious stilt-pax, and trying futilely to tug down her microshift which, at full stretch, did just barely clear the tops of her nicely rounded thighs, she was flustered and charming all at once.

From beneath her rioting tangle of tawny hair she pulled a wide disarming grin. "I'm really awfully sorry! I'm supposed to be at a briefing *RIGHT NOW*! And my boss is going to kill me!" Her long, mobile hands churned the air in a sort of comic dismay.

"Well, don't let me keep you, sweetheart. Sure you're O.K. now?"

"Oh, yes. Are *YOU* O.K.? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Solo was amused to note real distress in her large gray eyes as she peered anxiously from beneath her unruly mop.

"No, I'm fine. Go on, get, you'll be late."

She nodded energetically. "Well, bye then. Take care," she said and took off at a run, managing to nail Solo's left instep with a wicked stilt-pax as she raced away.

"Aaargg!" remarked the spaceman, shifting his weight to his right foot in a little hop that threw him off balance so that he lurched backward, colliding with a surly Laglit.

"Blow off, drunken human-scum," the Laglit snarled as Han went down, cursing roundly. "Human-scum pig," it added, daintily avoiding the Corellian obstacle at its feet.

Han staggered up, his fury almost beyond words, though several pungent maledictions burst from him.

His foot hurt.

Under his breath, with grim determination, he repeated, "It is gonna be a *FINE* day! Never mind some lase-brained honey in blue underwear -- it's gonna be a *FINE* day..."

Several hours later Han Solo wasn't so sure.

Skyslide being a game of limited variables, it was not long before Solo became aware that he was being hustled, though the subtle gifts of his opponent made it difficult to pin down any definite instance of outright cheating. Certainly, though, a process of legerdemain was being employed

against him, brilliantly employed, and the bottom line was, the stake with which he'd begun the game, and his spirits, had dwindled appreciably.

His opponent was an ordinary looking sort, a blue-eyed Hibandjer with a rich purple pelt and elegant antlerettes, but his bland demeanor appeared to mask the heart, or hearts in the Hibandjer's case, of a game-sharp even wiler than Solo himself, who could fleece most species and leave them smiling.

The dodecahedral dice tumbled across the red playing surface once more, and Solo suppressed yet another groan of anguish. Hibandjer's point-plus-six and another sizeable loss. That cut it. More than anything, Solo hated being cheated.

"On spec," he announced, palming the dice with his right hand and pushing the remainder of his cash to the center of the table.

"On spec, huh?" the Hibandjer replied. "Good luck!"

Solo smirked patronizingly, fingered the dice, and with practiced skill gave them a never-fail flick. They came to rest in front of the Hibandjer. Solo gaped in disbelief.

"My point, Spacer," it grinned.

Without thinking, the Corellian lunged to his feet reaching for his gun, which fortunately he, like everyone else entering the gaming area, had checked with the nubile Arms Hostess. He came up furious but empty-handed. He did, however, offer to beat the living shit out of the Hibandjer. who merely bowed graciously, grinning all the while, pocketed its winnings ("My money," Solo hissed through clenched teeth) and strode to the door where it was met in the shadows by a tall man in a dark business suit who passed it a sizeable sheaf of currency in exchange for the dynamic dice.

Solo was hunched over the bar, blowing the last of his cash reserves in an attempt to sweeten a sour mood with native aqua vit and wondering where everything had gone wrong, when an unctuous voice intruded on his glum thoughts.

"Say, I saw what that Hibandjer did to you, friend," it said.

Han looked up, his lip curled in eloquent disgust. The speaker was a human, male, dark hair, dark business suit. Solo looked away disinterestedly. "So?"

"Well, unless I miss my guess, friend, your prospects don't look any too good right now." Han nursed his aqua vit sullenly. "And," the corporate type continued, "I'm looking for someone like you to handle a job for my company. Maybe we could do business, Captain..."

"You know me?"

"Oh, by reputation only. But I hear you're...ah, quite capable -- just the man for the job. Are you interested?"

"Interested in what?" Solo drawled, eyeing the other man speculatively. He knocked back the last of his aqua vit, and watched as dark suit signaled the bartender for another.

"What could be a very lucrative assignment, Captain. Will you come with me and have a word with my superior?"

Solo thought a minute, weighing his increasing lassitude against his obvious and urgent need for cash. As usual the money won out. He tossed back the last aqua vit, and for a moment the lassitude almost came out on top, then he chided himself sternly. "O.K.," he replied, "we'll go see your boss."

A little fuzzy at the edges maybe, but Han didn't forget to snag his blaster as they left.

* * * * *

The glare of Danis' midafternoon sun fall gently through a wall-sized sheet of filter glass, bathing the office in a rich amber glow, soothing and pleasant. It was a place of understated luxury which suggested Big Money. Solo would have bet the man across from him seated behind the desk had manicured nails. He would have been right.

His assistant, Solo's dark-suited shadow, introduced him as Mr. Skan. The spacer nodded curtly, hands on hips, and at Skan's polite invitation, eased into a comfortable chair, turning so that he could watch both the interviewer and the door through which he'd come.

"I approve a prudent man," Skan smiled. Solo guessed he didn't smile often. The look was brittle, a mere baring of the teeth in an otherwise cold and watchful face. "Too bad you weren't as prudent earlier today at the gaming table."

"You didn't get me up here to criticize my gambling techniques, did you, 'cause if you did, I got better things to do."

"Really? As I understand it, you're flat out of things to do and that's why you're here." The statement being purely rhetorical, Skan continued, "I represent TREC, Trans-Empire Corporation, you've heard of us. We wish to hire your services." He waited for Solo to raise a verbal eyebrow at this, but the spacer was watching him impassively, fist to cheek, though his thoughts had taken on a decidedly negative flavor, so Skan went on.

"We've got big trouble on Borodine." Solo registered that.

"The armament planet."

"Exactly. A good percentage of our corporate gross is invested in Borodine guns -- our subsidiary, Star Blaster Enterprises, manufactures half the firepower on Borodine."

"They make roto-crossers, too," Solo added conversationally.

Skan looked annoyed. "***AND*** they make ***GUNS***, Captain, and for the past month they haven't been able to get one damn blaster off planet, because every time a ship tries to take off with a cargo of Star Blaster freight, it blows up before it clears the atmosphere!"

"That could be a problem," Han said with mock concern.

"You're damn right it's a problem. That's why we need someone to go in there and find out what's happening -- someone who knows his way around the ports, the back alleys, someone with contacts..."

"What makes you think I have contacts?"

"Oh, come off it, Solo," Skan said wearily, "you've been smuggling guns off Borodine for years."

"Me?" asked Han, his features automatically arranging themselves into that look of boyish innocence that Chewie always thought of as "cub-caught-with-paw-in-Tooco-jar."

"Yes, you. Don't you think we notice anything? We've logged you in and out -- oh, maybe a dozen times, Captain Solo. We've got enough on you to put your ass in an ARC slammer for a hundred years!" The teeth were bared again, the eyes icy points.

So that was it. Han had wondered why Skan was being so free with information before he had even agreed to take on the job. They thought to force his compliance by holding those log sheets over his head. Well, it

wasn't going to work. Solo had no love for the Trans-Empire Corporation, which he considered malignant, bureaucratic and easily as reprehensible as both the ARC Authority and the Corporate Sector Authority, not to mention the Empire itself. And he was not about to do their spy work for them, regardless of the possible reward or punishment.

"What makes you think I want to work for you, Skan? You corporate types give me a headache. Lot of other ways to turn a credit, you know, and about now any of them are looking pretty good."

Skan regarded him briefly, then asked, "Isn't it awfully difficult to fly that four-man freighter by yourself?"

"I've got my copilot..."

"Correction. *WE'VE* got your copilot." Lots of teeth.

"You bastard!" Solo exploded, coming out of his chair with furious speed and blurring his gun into action. "You're gonna get Chewie, and we're both getting out of here right now or you are in serious trouble, Skan," he said tight-lipped, leveling his laser at the executive's throat.

Skan cast a glance at dark suit, who nodded once, then remarked with disdain, "Go ahead and fire, Captain. There isn't enough power there to do any damage. We drained the power pack while you were being cheated blind by the Hibandjer with the loaded dice. Sit down."

"You can't do this..." the Corellian began.

"*WE ARE TREC!* We can do anything!" Skan shouted. Solo sat down. There didn't seem to be a percentage in doing anything else...unless he could somehow get behind Skan, get a clip-lock on the angle between his neck and shoulder, tighten it to the max, maybe a shade beyond...Skan was probably not aware of his danger. He continued to talk. "We need you, Solo, and we're going to have you. You're going to do just what we tell you, or that shaggy partner of yours is on the permanently missing list. Got that?"

Han eyed the exec with undisguised dislike. They were a match for stubbornness, but Skan held the high card at the moment, Solo reminded himself. At the moment.

"Now," Skan continued, leaning back and permitting himself a frosty smirk. "You'll be accompanied by one of our agents, just to make sure our interests are protected. One Lethwell Purlee, fresh out of the TREC Academy and ready to tackle anything. I would send a more seasoned

operative with you, but in this case it's difficult to know whom to trust -- and Purlee's too new with us to have been suborned. Besides. I think having the Wookiee as a guest in our facility here will insure your every cooperation, right?"

Solo remained stubbornly silent.

"Send in Lethwell Purlee," Skan commanded his intercom.

Immediately the door opened and Solo's jaw dropped. It was the girl in the blue panties.

"Well, hi!" she grinned with genuine surprise and delight, seeing Solo. "We're going to be partners, I hear." Lethwell Purlee aimed an exaggerated wink in Han's direction and managed to get something in her eye. She was thus otherwise engaged when Skan said, "There's more to Purlee than you may think, Solo. Just watch yourself. She can also copilot your freighter, by the way," he added in a louder voice, "so I suggest you two get underway. Your registry's been temporarily altered for you. You've already got liftoff clearance and Purlee can brief you on anything we've...ah, overlooked in our discussion, Solo."

"Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you, Skan?" Han asked.

"With good reason, Captain. Ask yourself which one of us directs corporate operations from this office and which one of us runs a patched-up cargo hauler half a light ahead of the law."

Solo chose to ignore the jibe. "Skan, besides Chewie, what the hell am I getting out of this?"

"An all-expense paid trip to Borodine, first. Then troubleshooter-plus-double-hazard wages on this end. My methods may be a bit unorthodox, but I'm a fair man, Solo. You can trust me to keep my end of the bargain." He was a corporate shark, a high-echelon power merchant and a crook, but for some reason Solo believed him. He didn't like him though.

"You're a real prince, Skan," he said with contempt. The insult slid right off Skan's monumental armor of self-approval. He bared his teeth one more time.

"What make's that blaster you carry, Solo?" he asked.

Han smiled sarcastically, "It's a Kletts-Rushak 460 Blazer, Skan, a fine piece of equipment."

"Kletts-Rushak, hum? Our competitors."

"Yeah. The other half of Borodine."

* * * * *

The cockpit of the Millennium Falcon was at the best of times a cramped space. With Lethwell Purlee in the copilot's seat Solo was discovering it to be dangerous as well. When the Falcon was safely berthed in hyperspace and automatically vectored toward Borodine, Han turned to his new partner. "Purlee," he began.

She turned to him with her disarming grin, and reached out to gently touch the back of his hand, thereby giving him a stinging electric shock. "Han, please call me Lethwell," she said. "It's so much less formal."

"Lethwell. We've got an hour before Borodine, so why don't you fill me in on what we're heading into. Your boss and I didn't have much of a chance to get into details."

"I know," the girl said. She looked away uncomfortably. "I know Mr. Skan pulled a fast one on you. I didn't know it was you, of course. I mean, he said he'd lined up a smuggler who would probably be uncooperative...but here it turns out to be you, and we've already met and everything. Small world, huh?" she ended tentatively, leaning an elbow on the instrument panel and somehow managing to depress the button which activated the escape pod launch sequence, and before Solo could reach across and shut down the jettison initiate, one lonely pod disintegrated in the whirling chaos of n-space.

"Borodine?" he said hastily. "Guns?"

Lethwell had been staring at him speculatively, seemingly oblivious to the pod's demise. Now her eyes widened. "Oh, right," she began briskly, swiveling her chair to face him. Her long legs, her momentum, her absurd footgear, all contrived to bring her left foot soundly into agonizing contact with Solo's right shin.

"Shit!" he yelled, grabbing the abused leg. The girl's face fell.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't," he commanded suddenly. "Don't say a thing. Don't even move. Sit right where you are. Just stay there. I've got a little present for you."

Muttering to himself, Han stalked aft with only a trace of a limp. He slammed through the door to his private compartment, dropped to his knees and rummaged impatiently in a battered foot locker. With a grunt of satisfaction he came up with his quarry -- a pair of small, obviously feminine bootlets. For just a moment a smile softened his features, then he shook his head, muttered some more and stalked back to the cockpit.

Lethwell Purlee sat, embarrassed, hands in her lap, her offending foot tucked under her. She looked up shyly, hearing his approach. "I'm really very sorry, Han," she said quietly.

"Forget it, Pur...Lethwell. Here. slip into these and let me space those damn stilt-pax."

"Thank you. They're lovely. Comfortable too," she sighed, wriggling her toes. "Don't really go with the micro, though. But, no matter."

Dropping into the pilot's seat Han asked, "What did you do before you become a TREC troubleshooter?"

"I was a showgirl. You know, tableau dancing?"

It figured -- those incredible legs. "And why'd you quit?"

"Can't you guess?" the girl asked ruefully. "In case you hadn't noticed, accidents seem to happen wherever I go. I only got through TREC training because my test scores were so good. I'm a brain," she explained.

"O.K. then, smart lady, tell me what you know about the situation on Borodine."

* * * * *

Forty-five minutes later Han knew as much as he cared to about Trans-Empire Corporation's merchandising problems. Well up to production, the armament factories were putting out the guns, but none were getting off planet. No ship bearing the TREC intersystem's registry had cleared Borodine's atmosphere in over a standard month. At first, every one attempting to take off had exploded. Then no pilot could be found, nor crew, who'd make the Borodine run for TREC; and now great stockpiles were gathering in the warehouses. Not even smugglers were taking on cargo turned out by Star Blaster anymore, and the words "jinx" and "curse" were being heard, not infrequently above port level, in TREC boardrooms.

Though it was generally assumed Star Blaster's biggest competitor, Kletts-Rushak, was responsible for the sabotage, no one had as yet been able to discover how.

Suspecting even his own operatives, Skan, Division Head, Region IV, had decided to play a wild card. And the wild card was a Corellian smuggler named Han Solo.

"So that's it," Lethwell Purlee said, "all we know and a lot we guess."

"You're pretty sure it's Kletts-Rushak?"

"Well, unless it's the rats."

"Rats?" Han was, with Purlee's surprisingly competent assistance, setting the Millennium Falcon, temporarily yclept the Catahoula Compromise, down behind a blast wall in among a dozen or so other drab tramp freighters.

"Oh, it's definitely Kletts-Rushak, I was just kidding about the rats. It's a local joke. There's this species of intelligent rodent on Borodine. They've stirred themselves up into some sort of movement, trying to get the local government to grant them second-class citizen status. They've got spokespersons, and they stage marches and media events to get publicity. It's really funny." Purlee flicked the final set of switches, nodded with satisfaction as the Falcon's hydraulic struts eased her weight down with a sigh, then gave Han a quick smile. "They call it Vermin's Liberation!"

Han's first stop, with Purlee in tow, was the herb shop of Soffalet the Jas, a place the Corellian never failed to visit when he made Borodine planetfall. It was here he gathered a supply of mancet and all the gossip current around the North Quadrant Spaceport.

"An herbalist?" Purlee questioned in a whisper.

Solo nodded, ushering her into the dark, cool interior of Soffalet's Herbarium. They waited a moment among the hanging baskets and bundles of exotic vegetation, eyeing the shelves full of stoppered jars.

Presently the herbalist appeared, seeming to materialize out of a large fern. "Ah, Captain Solo! Welcome," he beamed. A short, pale humanoid, Soffalet the Jas was affable and talkative. "So fine to see you again. And the Wookiee? Where is the huge Wookiee?"

"He missed this trip, Soffalet. My friend Purlee's along for the ride this time."

"Purlee," the Jas cackled, "lovely, lovely! Excellent taste, my Corelli friend. Welcome to my establishment, lovely Purlee."

"Uh...thanks," the girl smiled, bending down to shake his proffered hand.

"And how can this humble Jas be of service to you, Captain Solo?"

"Just information today, Sofalet. Can we talk in the back?"

"Assuredly, my friend, assuredly. Come this way." The Jas slipped the lock on the entrance and led the way toward the rear of the little shop.

Over a drink of something that took Purlee completely by surprise, Solo questioned Sofalet about the gun problem.

"A curse? This very superstitious Jas says *No*. It is Kletts without any doubt. He is at the bottom, though no one has discovered how he does it. The ships, when they were taking off at all, were guarded, the shipments searched...You see, the cargo ships were not shot down -- they simply exploded, oh, so far," Sofalet gestured with his hand above the table, "so far off planet. No one knows why."

"And the smugglers? No one's even trying any more?"

Sofalet looked unhappy. "It is a great misfortune, Captain. Two weeks ago the Medwaller Sisters and Big Bruk the Equalizer blew in with a Starwind Jammer frigate and announced publicly they were leaving with it full of Star Blaster armaments..."

"And?"

"Ah, Solo, the Medwaller Sisters will sport no more."

Han thought it a sad loss. He observed a moment of silence in their memories. Very nice memories. "So everything's just shut down?"

"Kletts-Rushak still ships of course, and a few of the smaller weapons manufacturers, but no one will touch a Star Blaster cargo. It was rumored the Empire might even take a hand..."

Solo snorted in disgust. "Keep 'em out of the ARC. We'll handle our own problems," he said with an almost proprietary fondness for his present corner of the galaxy.

"My sentiments exactly, but what are you and the lovely Purlee -- if I may make so bold as to ask -- thinking of doing?"

"Well, Purlee here works for... *OW*!" She'd nailed him on the instep again, and he was pretty sure it had not been an accident this time.

"Uh...I'm sort of a smuggler's apprentice, Soffalet," the girl said conspiratorially. "You know, learning the ropes from an old hand? Han thought the challenge of taking a Star Blaster cargo off Borodine would be good experience for me."

Solo's face was composed and unhelpfully free of expression. He was thinking, *Chewie, Chewie, Chewie, what I do for you...*

Soffalet looked from one to the other, obviously mystified. "You are, pardon me, Corelli friend, most crazy! No one takes Star Blasters off Borodine."

"Well, they sure don't do it before dinner, Soffalet, and I think the lady and I will cruise around and grab a bite somewhere. Somewhere quiet where we can have a little talk," he added meaningfully. "Thanks for the drink. As usual you've been a help."

"My pleasure, Captain. Anytime. Ah, before you go -- perhaps a sniff?"

Han, who usually preferred to drink his highs, declined the spice politely, but Lethwell was intrigued. "I never had any before. Don't look so surprised," she explained. "Besides, I just want to try a tiny bit."

As Soffalet tapped out a small mound of greenish crystals into Purlee's outstretched hand. Han reflected with good-natured resignation that Purlee straight was a handful, stoned she would probably be a menace to navigation.

"Just...ah...that's right. Just inhale, through your nose and mouth at the same time. Imbibe it. Make you feel fine, lovely smuggler Purlee," Soffalet encouraged.

"Whoo...oooh..." the girl offered, knocking it back with the most original spice "hand" Solo had ever seen. Too late he recognized the look on her face. "Haaach-zshoo!" She sneezed, nearly blowing poor Soffalet down. "Haach-zhoo! Haach-zhoo!" She leaned helplessly over the table to brace herself as another paroxysm ravaged her nose.

"Sorry, Soffalet," Han grinned ruefully. "One in a billion -- and she's got to be it."

The Jas, safely distant, made little placating gestures.

"Oh, Han...Aaagh...pfoo...hell! Aaach-choo!" was about all Lethwell Purlee could manage.

"Come on, honey, let's get you..." Solo started, coming up behind her with an arm about her waist at the same moment Purlee decided to sneeze again. Drawing a huge breath, she pushed herself up from the table and caught Solo right in the teeth with the back of her head.

"Ow! Goddammit, Purlee, take it easy!" He was tasting blood. "Soffalet, later," the Corellian announced, and taking the girl's hand he dragged her from the wide-eyed herbalist's shop. But not before she'd knocked over the large fern.

* * * * *

By recent standards, dinner had been a tame affair. The TREC agent had done nothing worse than spill a drink in his lap. But she had been most evasive when he'd tried to discover anything personal about her. She had eaten and smiled and gestured self-deprecatingly whenever he'd probed for specifics until he'd finally given up. Now, heading back toward the Falcon and still miraculously on speaking terms, for the first time they noticed the rats. Not particularly large or menacing rats, just a huge quantity of rats. Scuttling everywhere, they gave a surreal sense of motion to the dark street, a watery feel as the infrequent glow spots positioned at intersections reflected off their many scurrying backs.

"Ever see so many rats?" Lethwell asked as they walked.

Han shook his head. "Intelligent, you said?"

"That's what I heard." She looked at them curiously, glad that rodent phobia was not among her problems. "But I kind of doubt it. They don't look very smart, do they?"

"Up yours, sweetheart!" squeaked a tiny voice at their feet.

Purlee gasped and grabbed Han's arm.

A small gray beastie winked red eyes at them and scurried off into an alley.

"That satisfy you? Look," he said, determined to try again, "before we go any further, Lethwell, let's got a few things understood -- like what, exactly, you're doing here -- with me -- on Borodine."

"Well," the girl sighed, "It's like this..."

Suddenly Solo clamped a hand to her mouth and, with an eloquent look, pulled her into the alley. "Not a word," he whispered in her ear. She nodded. He released her, whispered again, "Just saw someone I recognized."

"You always hide from your friends in alleys?"

"Who said anything about friends? I just saw Rynar of Rodi, no friend of mine, I promise you."

"Rynar of Rodi?"

"Also known as The Preacher. And whatever he's doing on Borodine, sure as hell it's got something to do with the guns."

"Why do you call him The Preacher?" Purlee moved closer to Solo, and he took the opportunity to circle her trim waist with his arm. Her scent was subtle, interesting, and it was very nice to have her lips next to his ear. He collected his thoughts. "He used to be. A charismat. One of the old religions. His church kicked him out when they found out he was using his pull to line his own pockets instead of theirs. He's got a...magnetism, I guess you'd call it. Gets people to do what he wants. Never hurt for females, I can tell you, and he's a scruffy-looking dude."

"Like the Force?" Purlee had slid an arm around Han.

"What's the Force?" he asked absently.

"Never mind. Is he gone yet?"

"Yeah, I think so. Look, I want to check this out with Soffalet. If anyone knows what Rynar's doing on Borodine, Soffalet does. Come on...."

* * * * *

The Millennium Falcon poised silently on her landing gear in the low-lit docking area behind the blast wall. Around her, other space craft hung in utter stillness.

Except for the rats. Like lines of turbulent water, columns of rodents converged on the Falcon, scuttling up her landing gear and finding tiny areas of ingress not automatically ship-sealed within the atmosphere.

Wriggling in by the hundreds, they made their way forward, each one bearing a tiny mouthful of altitude-sensitive explosive. One by one they deposited their little loads at a central location until a sizeable ball of the stuff formed, a malignant lump that spelled death for the Millennium Falcon, and whoever was unlucky enough to be aboard her when she cleared the ionosphere.

* * * * *

"Door's unlocked," Han muttered.

Suddenly Purlee clutched his arm. "Don't. Don't go in there," she said urgently.

"Huh? Why not?"

"I...I don't know. Just don't. Someone...something's there."

"Yeah, probably Soffalet," Han grinned, but he eased his blaster clear of the holster and flicked off the safety. "Wait here," he instructed the girl.

"Han, be careful," she said.

The shop was dark, cool and redolent. Solo slid around the door jamb and, pressing his shoulders against the wall, moved soundlessly toward the overhead light switch. He sensed something definitely not-right, but was puzzling over its essence when he heard the sound of scuffling at the door, and then Purlee let out a yelp.

Swearing, Han whirled.

"Help, Han!" Purlee yelled, then cried out angrily as a hand covered her mouth. Solo took a step in the direction of the door and tripped over something sprawled among the potted vegetation. A body. Soffalet's body.

"Purlee! Hang on!" he hollered when something slammed into the back of his head with telling force. His lights dimmed quickly, but as he went down with a stifled cry he saw, or thought he saw, small red eyes watching him.

* * * * *

The lights came up with theatrical speed. Han registered a small, plush, intimate room more like a boudoir than anything else he could name. He also registered a comforting warm body close to his. Purlee shifted sleepily, moaning a little.

Solo roused himself a bit awkwardly and did a quick turn around the room. The single door was, of course, locked. With a wry grin, Solo drew a chair over and propped it against the door handle. It would not only give them (whoever "they" were) a surprise, but it would give his a warning. He came back and dropped to a sitting position, pulling the girl up against him, an arm about her shoulders, her head cradled against his chest. They sat on the floor of the low-lit, sumptuously furnished suite, upon the lush carpet, and leaned against a divan.

"Hey, you O.K.?" Han asked with an unaccustomed touch of tenderness. The girl looked fragile and vulnerable, disheveled and thoroughly helpless.

"I'm all right." She made to snuggle closer, and Han braced himself for the inevitable elbow or knee in a vital spot he'd come to associate with Lethwell Purlee, but all that happened was that she snuggled closer. "I am scared, though," she whispered. "Where are we?"

"No idea. But as prisons go, it could be worse." The girl snuggled even closer. Han sensed she had something important to say. He encouraged her by gently ruffling her hair. It was thick and springy and it smelled wonderful.

"Han..."

"Ummm?"

"Han, I don't want to die a virgin."

"You're not gonna...a WHAT?"

"Sounds silly, doesn't it? Everything else around me breaks so easily."

He was momentarily at a loss.

"Han, I...I like you very much. You're really awfully attractive..."

"Uh, Purlee, if you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting..."

"I like you very, very much." She kissed him.

Returning her kiss with conviction, Han's mind leapt to several perfectly good reasons why her suggestion was crazy, and just as swiftly his body discarded them all. Her hands were very busy, and somehow her gorgeous legs had become entangled with his. He cooperated with the inevitable.

"Purlee..."

"Lethwell," she corrected.

"Leth..." It was a caress.

"Oh, Han..."

"Just lean back. Very, very, very carefully."

"Oh, Han..."

"Um...you are beautiful."

"Oh, Han..."

"Relax, Leth..."

"Oh, Han... *OW!*"

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

* * * * *

The voice that intruded into their post-pleasure lethargy was small, squeaky and impatient. It contrived somehow, though lacking in timbre, to convey a delicate disdain.

"Are you humans quite through?" it piped.

"Huh?" Han, who had assumed the room was unoccupied, raised his head curiously and looked around. As he was quite close to the floor at the time, he found himself eye-to-eye with a small, rather disapproving rat.

"I said, 'Are you humans quite through?' I may not have much volume, but my command of Standard is excellent."

"Leth, Leth," Han nudged the quietly smiling girl. "We've got company."

Behind his chivalrously presented back, Lethwell tidied up.

"Haven't we met before, friend?" Han asked the crouching rodent.

"I insulted your mating partner there over on Numa Street, for which I apologize. I did not know who you were then..."

"And you do now?"

"More or less. Also I observed the incident in the herbalist's shop. You see, I overheard you in the alley, discussing Rynar the Preacher. Your comments intrigued me and I followed you."

"You know who did this?" Han made a general sweep, indicating their present predicament.

"The Preacher's men, of course."

Han considered that for a moment. "You got a name?" he asked finally.

"Of course!" replied the rat with dignity. "We may be small but we are cultured. You may call me Gripophase lup Tachron, or just Tac for short."

"Thanks, Tac," said Han amiably. "Now, do you suppose you could brief us (Purlee, rosy-cheeked and looking demurely pleased, had curled at his side) on just what the hell's going on around here?"

"Indeed," the little rat squeaked. "It all began with Kletts-the-bastard, a greedy villain who would put his chief competitor out of business. He imported off-planet aid in the person of Rynar the Preacher -- a nefarious move! Our people were just getting their consciousness raised, understanding the nature of their rathood, and Rynar exploited that. How cleverly he manipulated our emotions! He told us, for example, that Trans-Empire Corporation and their subsidiary Star Blaster discriminated against rats. So what? Everyone discriminates against rats! Oh.... But I personally believe Rynar is acting on his own now. He is a madman, driven by desire for power. It sickens me." Tac slowed down in sheer disgust, and Han and Purlee traded a pair of unreadable glances.

"How come he never convinced you?" Han wanted to know.

"I? I come from a long line of cynics, Captain. We may be sociologically insignificant..."

"...but you have all the finer perceptions. I know." Han finished for him. "O.K. Look, I sympathize. I'm on your side..."

"Do not patronize me, Captain."

"Who's patronizing? Don't be so touchy. I am on your side, and I'll do what I can to help. But I need information first. The ships. How does Kletts blow them up?"

"Altitude-sensitive explosive. Rynar orders us to rig all outgoing ships with Star Blaster cargo."

"Amazing, and so simple," Lethwell commented.

"And Soffalet," Han asked. "What'd they do to him?"

"A blaster-bolt to the back of the head when they heard you coming. Rynar has men in his employ as well as misguided people."

Solo was sorry about the garrulous herbalist. The problem was rapidly becoming a personal one.

"And where are we now?"

"A reception area off the main hall of Rynar's House of Worship. He 'receives' females here while in the main hall," and here Tac's small voice seemed to tremble with emotion, "he deceives my people with lies!"

"O.K., steady kid," Han said, thinking quickly. He was about to ask one further question about the altitude-sensitive explosive when there was a commotion at the door. Tac jumped a foot. "I will do what I can for you and your mating partner," he squeaked, and vanished.

"Up, and ready to run for it!" Solo commanded. They took up positions on opposite sides of the door, just as the chair gave way and several armed men burst into the room.

The first man in reeled drunkenly as Solo delivered a lightening jab from the shoulder, breaking his jaw. He toppled forward toward Purlee who should; by all rights, have gone down beneath his weight in a tangle. But she sidestepped with surprising agility, a move Solo saluted with a raised eyebrow, before the rest of Rynar's crew forced their way through the door and, by sheer dint of numbers, overcame the defenders.

Solo, arms pinned behind him, endured a series of short, painful blows to the midsection while Purlee, likewise restrained, screamed maledictions at their attackers. Suddenly the punishment and the screaming stopped.

Han looked up. The Preacher stood in the doorway, looking not at him, but at Purlee. Drawing a painful breath Han was about to warn the dark, sharp-eyed man off that particular territory, when he realized Purlee was

possessed of an intense, uncharacteristically serious expression. She stood straight, feet planted apart. her pose challenging, head lifted, eyes intent on Rynar. The Preacher appeared to shiver beneath his long mantle. As Solo watched uncomprehendingly, he drew himself up to match the girl's posture, giving her the fierce stare of a predator. Wordlessly they fenced with invisible weapons while Han stared in fascination at the strange and wonderful change that had come over Lethwell Purlee.

Presently, however, she breathed a sigh and slumped dejectedly. "Not yet, not yet," she muttered. The Preacher laughed sharply.

"Don't toy with powers beyond your comprehension, woman!" he intoned. "I can carve you into pieces and eat the pieces, and you know it. So let's have no more foolishness."

The TREC agent, her irrepressible spirits rebounding quickly, glared defiance at Rynar of Rodi. She even managed a wry conspiratorial smile. "He doesn't know everything," she assured the Corellian.

Han was thinking back, something Skan had said, an allusion to Lethwell's being more than he imagined. *Could this be what he meant? What was the girl up to?*

Ignoring her for a moment, Rynar came face to face with Solo.

"You got hydraulics in your shoes, Preacher? Don't look as runty as the last time I saw you," Han sneered.

Rynar fixed Solo with the predatory stare and silently suggested that the pilot at once suffer excruciating pain in his right side. Han felt it hit him and began to double over when it occurred to him the Preacher was manipulating him. He denied the pain, straightened and refused to accept it, throwing it back at Rynar. "Go play tricks on your rats," he said through clenched teeth.

"Captain Solo," Rynar replied with relish, "I would enjoy teaching you a lesson in civility, but there is another, more pressing appointment that you and the ambitious lady must keep." He smiled unpleasantly, then grew suddenly menacing. "I have a mission on Borodine," he whispered, his eyes glittering with a sheen of madness Solo did not remember from their last meeting. "A holy mission in which your interference will not be tolerated. You are going to leave my planet, you Corellian trash, in your ship. Your fine ship full of Star Blaster weapons -- a common smuggler plying his trade."

"And when the altitude's just right..."

"The Curse, Captain. The Curse...Boom," the Preacher said nastily. "Take the Corellian and the female to their ship."

And helplessly, Lethwell and Han were herded at gunpoint out into the quiet Borodine night.

* * * * *

The interior of the Millennium Falcon, which should have looked welcoming with its familiar, well-worn pattern of contours and angles, now appeared to Han Solo as a cold place, alien and deadly. He mistrusted every inch of the bulkheads, and the false floor beneath his feet, as he and Lethwell were prodded along the corridor to the cockpit.

"She's been set on a star course, Captain. You don't have to do a thing." Rynar fumbled beneath his robe, drawing out Han's blaster. "Here. Go out armed at least," he smiled, handing the uncharged gun butt-first to its owner.

"Go to hell, Preacher," replied Han, holstering the useless weapon.

"If it's any comfort to your final moments, Captain, you've played your part in a Divine Plan. I and my followers have been chosen to rule this planet of death. Even you," he turned a weirdly benign glance on the smoldering Purlee, "even you were prophesied, and will now fulfill your destiny."

"Go away," she said simply.

Rynar made a mock bow. "Clear skies, then, the both of you. And...oh! My men have pulled all the overrides. Your journey will be swift and soon over." With a flourish of his cloak, Rynar of Rodi turned and exited the cockpit. His followers trained their guns on Solo and Purlee for several beats, than backed out warily. A moment later the hatch slammed shut and the Falcon's high-gravity engine fired.

Cautiously, the two prisoners lowered themselves into the control seats. As the starship heaved herself off the ground, her landing gear whining up into flight position, Purlee declared in a remarkably composed tone, "I'll bet you've got a lot of regrets now."

"Just one," Han answered.

"Tell me."

"That I didn't find out from Tac just where in hell they stashed the explosives."

She was climbing smoothly through the atmosphere at minimum boost without her captain's reckless, driving acceleration. It was an irony Han Solo appreciated.

He watched the readouts, mind running ahead of his ship out into the star-dark which was the only home he knew, the rich, endless beauty and freedom that had been his life. His gaze drifted up and out.

Purlee had to raise her voice to get his attention.

"Han! I think -- listen to me! -- I think I can find the explosives."

"You what?"

"There's no time to explain. Just...just..." the girl had drawn into herself, controlled, gray eyes fixed on some scenario Han couldn't see. She drew a breath, let it out slowly.

"It's a mass...purple...about the size of my fist. Han, it's nearby."

The Falcon's captain watched in fascinated silence as Purlee reached out with invisible fingers to search the ship. The corner of his eye caught the altimeter. Adrenaline surged.

"Han, it's under something...warm...get down!" she commanded. "Look! Please!"

Solo was on his knees at once, scrabbling beneath the control console running sweating palms over the shadowed surfaces. The Falcon began to pick up speed as her big Hauler cut in, forcing her upward through the ever-diminishing layers of resistance.

"Malfunction, you big bird," Han whispered. "You've done it enough before. Do it for me now!"

"Han, the seats! It's on one of the stabilizers! Go! Go!" Purlee dropped to the floor, ski-jewing around the base of the copilot's seat, grasping frantically at the shock-absorbing struts on its underside. "Not here, not here! Hurry!" she cried.

The pilot's seat was clear.

The surge of the Falcon's hyperdrive warming for jump pulsed through the floor and throbbed against Han's belly and thighs as he snaked across the

cockpit to the navigator's station. He slammed his hand upward, desperately hoping -- and was rewarded by contact with a firm, pliable excrescence that fitted his grasp perfectly.

"I've got it!"

The hyperdrive was a steady roar now. Han struggled up, clasping the lump of explosive. Purlee simply yelled, urging him on with pure emotion, as he flung himself aft, racing his own ship for his life.

The escape pods lay like eggs in a nest -- five silver, silent globes and one burnt-out shell where Purlee had so long ago, a day perhaps, caused an inadvertent jettison.

The girl's scream merged with the engine's howl as the Falcon strained against the last vestiges of gravity. Han thrust the handful of explosive into the nearest pod, slammed the hatch and hit the eject.

He waited, gasping, tremors coursing through his body. One...two... The enormous concussion sent him sprawling. Things went red, then black, then Purlee was in his arms, clutching him with relief and joy.

"Oh, you did it! You did it!" she sobbed over and over again, rocking a little and planting small, swift kisses all over his face.

"Hey..." he began, attempting to sit up.

"Han, we're alive! You did it!" the girl laughed.

"Me? You did it, honey. I don't know what you've got, but it works."

"I guess I can tell you now..."

"Business first, Leth," Han said, climbing painfully to his feet. "The Falcon just went superlight and the sooner we hang a U-turn the better."

* * * * *

"...and I've known about it for a long time. It's a source of power I can tap, but so erratically!" Lethwell explained. "When I'm not consciously directing it, and sometimes even when I am, well, that's why all the mayhem wherever I go. But TREC wanted the gift I had anyway. Some gift!" She grinned. "Mr. Skan didn't like being in the same room with me. Up until today! Today it really worked! I'm applying it and directing it almost without thinking..." The gray eyes searched Han's face intently.

"My instructors said I needed to 'mature' a bit, that was their word. Do you think...could they have meant...?"

Solo chuckled. He cocked his head and regarded her with narrowed eyes. "I've heard of crazier things, Leth."

"Are you so irresistible, Han?" Purlee smiled incredulously, looking away from the pilot for a moment. "This is crazy," she declared. "So completely irresistible..."

"Well, no one's 100%, darlin'."

"Han, I feel used and manipulated, don't you?" She turned to face him -- smoothly, gracefully, her knee brushing his with the gentlest kiss of contact.

"Maybe, but in this particular case I'm gonna ignore my instincts." He leaned forward and took her hands, brought them palm-together to his lips and kissed the tips of her fingers. "Feel like taking on the Preacher now?"

"You bet I do!" She slid her hands around his face, holding him contemplatively for a moment. "You know," she said happily, "I feel more 'liberated' than any rat."

* * * * *

There appeared to be a standing-room-only crowd for dawn services at Rynar's House of Worship.

Moving through the dim light Solo and Purlee approached the converted warehouse. His blaster, fully charged off the Falcon's calls, rested comfortably in his right hand. Purlee was unarmed, but lethal. Even in the travel-worn micro and soft bootlets Solo thought she looked great.

"Remember the layout when they took us through the main hall?" She nodded. "Well, I'll give you five minutes to get into position at the...What the hell?" Something was crawling up his leg. It reached his boot top and clung there, staring up at him with little red eyes. "Tac!"

"At your service, Captain," the rat replied.

Solo reached down and offered it a hand.

"Thank you," it responded, "climbing humans can be quite taxing. Congratulations on your survival."

"Thanks, Tac," said Han to the rodent on his palm. He stared squarely at the beastie, mentally adding another small weapon to his arsenal of surprise. "Look, do you suppose..." he began, as ideas chased themselves around in his head. "Suppose you could do us a favor?"

"If it will help you to stop the evil Preacher, I will do all I can."

"Good, then listen..."

* * * * *

Dispatching the latest obstacles in the way of his manipulative megalomania had put Rynar the Preacher in a fine mood. He stood at the head of the room, a lectern before him, and delivered an incendiary sermon. His power, like waves, washed over the assemblage, the preponderance of which was made up of rats, though a fair number of other species were represented, including his human henchmen.

So great was the force he exerted even Solo, flat against a rear wall in the shadows, felt the persuasive pull of it. He spoke of revolution and conquest, exhorting his followers to ever more daring acts of sabotage, and Solo thought that without the protection the powerful Kletts was able to afford him, the Preacher would have been carted off ranting to the bastinado some time ago. As it was, the Corellian suspected not even Kletts realized just how dangerous a creature he'd let loose in his own territory.

Rynar was hitting his climax, punching his delivery with a dramatic pause. He drew a breath. There was total silence, shattered jarringly by a new voice -- cool, clear, powerful, it rang out over the audience.

"Rynar of Rodi!" Solo smiled. Purlee had located the audio hookups.

The Preacher's eyes were large dark holes, his face a study in fury. He recognized the voice.

"Who speaks?" he demanded.

"The gods deny you, oh Preacher of Lies!"

"Show yourself, False Prophetess!"

The congregation had frozen at the intrusion of the second voice. The hall was still, all eyes and photoreceptors on the dais, when Purlee made her entrance. In one of Rynar's magnificent mantles, her wealth of hair static-charged out to its full sweep, she looked, indeed, otherworldly.

The crowd murmured and chattered.

"The gods' wrath shall destroy you," intoned Rynar for the benefit of the audience, and in a low voice pitched for her alone, he added, "but I shall be their executioner."

Lethwell faced him from the right, impassive. "Do your worst, charlatan," she said, and even without audio boost her powerful voice carried to the rear of the hall. "The gods deny you!"

Several of Rynar's armed followers began to converge on the platform.. Solo leveled his blaster. "Nobody move!" he shouted. The men hesitated.

"Kill him!" screamed the Preacher, then abruptly doubled over in pain as Lethwell lashed out at him with her force.

Solo saw Rynar clutching the lectern, straightening, and the girl staggering back with a cry -- then he was surrounded by lase-flash.

He ducked through the main doors, firing over his shoulder and found himself caught in a deadly crossfire as guards stationed in the foyer turned and began to hurl a heavy barrage in his direction.

With the speed of a whip lash, Solo reversed momentum, throwing himself into the alcove behind a pillar, lase-bolts cutting chips from the masonry all around him with a whining hiss. He locked the 460's trigger and, two-handed, raked the entrance way. Guards fell. Pinned down inside the main hall, the Corellian could only hope Tac had kept the courage of his convictions.

He inched forward slightly, still hugging the wall, to get a clear shot at one of Rynar's warily circling men. He could spare only the briefest consideration of the tableau on the dais, but he saw Purlee was still on her feet, locked in a combat of wills with the sinister Preacher. He squeezed off three rapid bursts and pulled back into the small shelter of the pillared alcove, just as one of the snipers who had him pinned down drilled his right leg with a needle beam.

Biting back the cry, he felt his leg slide out from under him, useless, drawing him down into the sniper's main line of fire. He swore furiously, opened up the 460 in another trigger-lock and tried to throw his weight backwards as he staggered and went down.

Upon the dais, Rynar had made the mistake of underestimating his opponent's strengths. Attempting to deal with Purlee and at the same time keep control of his parishioners had cost him pain. Now he exerted

himself more completely in Lethwell's direction. His confused, agitated followers watched excitedly as she groaned, his long-practiced technique riveting her with agony.

The woman marshaled herself, retaliated. The thought of Han, in danger nearby, flickered in her consciousness. She wavered, feeling Rynar's power like hands reaching out to encircle her throat. Thrusting all but the thought of power unleashed from her mind, Lethwell Purlee hurled her very best shot at the malevolent madman. He stiffened with a cry, black eyes wide and staring. Blood began to trickle, then gush, from his nostrils, his lips. He clutched at his chest, knees giving way beneath him.

Lethwell held him up, held the flaccid body in the powerful grip of her will, and very gently draped it across the platform for all to see.

Suddenly a single rat in the center of the hushed crowd began to leap up and down, hopping madly and screeching in its small rat-voice, over the whine and sizzle of energy weapons. "He's dead! Dead! God is dead! Run! Run!" Tac was doing his part.

Lase-fire shrieked past Han's ears, slicing closer and closer, sooner or later sure to find its mark. With a fatalistic shrug Solo continued firing. He was wondering grimly where the damn rat was, when he heard the cry, and all hell broke loose. Han threw himself prone across the floor, elbows propped, blasting one fiery arc, and then the rats were on him.

Lying flat out, shielding his face with his arms as thousands of small furry bodies raced across his back, Solo missed the spectacle of Rynar's gunmen being swept away, fighting and screaming beneath the carnivorous wave which, released at last from its bondage to the Preacher's machinations, behaved in its customary ratlike manner.

Purlee slowly descended the platform, following the receding wave, directing a protective aura over Solo's body, watching the remaining parishioners, human and nonhuman, scatter wildly out into the sunrise.

She reached Han at last. But for the two of them and Rynar's body, the hall was empty. He pushed himself up on all fours as she sank to the ground beside him.

In a moment they were sitting companionably together, backs against the wall, his wounded leg stretched out before him.

"Long night," he remarked, yawning.

"Yep."

"Leth?"

"Umm?"

"You're something else." He ruffled her hair.

* * * * *

Tac scuttled across the control board of the Millennium Falcon, busily investigating each lever, dial, button, and switch. Occasionally, he asked a question which Purlee fielded as well as she could.

Presently, Han swung into the cockpit and sidled easily into the pilot's chair. "We're all set. Cargo's secured, clearance to lift. Seen enough, Tac?"

"Fascinating, Captain Solo. Thank you for the run of your ship," piped the little rat.

"My pleasure," replied Solo with a wry grin. It would be good to see Chewie again, he reflected, but he thought he would probably miss Tac, too, for a little while. "Well, I guess this is it, friend. Good luck shaping up those new followers of yours."

"They do look up to one a bit," Tac admitted modestly.

"Just don't forget Rynar's mistakes. People like their freedom, you know."

"A good point, Captain. Goodbye. Goodbye, Mistress Purlee. It's been an honor knowing you."

"Goodbye, Tac. Good luck." Lethwell reached out and stroked his whiskers. Tac hopped onto her lap, down to the floor and skittered away. In a moment Solo closed the hatch.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Let's clear the ground."

As the ship raced starward under his usual maximum acceleration, Han said thoughtfully, "You know, TREC went to a lot of trouble and expense to arrange this mission. Getting the two of us together and all..." He paused a moment, watching the beautiful woman beside him. "Lot of expense," he repeated, "to get the two of us together. At, oh, say, a third of maximum, it could take us...days to get back to Danis. Don't you think we really ought to..."

She grinned lasciviously and finished for him, "...give them their money's worth?"

END

[Back To Index](#)