

[Back To Index](#)

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Voices on the Air

by [Martie Benedict O'Brien](#)

Author's Note: This story was written and illoed in February 1984. Any similarity between it and "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" is purely coincidence.

Sometimes. Han Solo reflected, you can reason with your woman, and sometimes there's nothing to do but employ a little force. "Get it together, baby," he said softly, drew back his arm and slammed the heel of his right hand into the Millennium Falcon's obstinate control panel.

The recalcitrant read-out surged into the red, then dropped compliantly back into blue and the Falcon's captain gave it a satisfied smirk. "Just needed a little encouragement," he said.

With a practiced eye, Han scanned the rest of his board and found it operating within tolerance. He thumbed a switch and leaned toward the speaker grid. "Chewie? You about through out there?" he called.

His Wookiee co-pilot barked an affirmative from somewhere beneath the Falcon's convex belly. "Good," Solo replied, "I've got her ready up here. Anytime the Barric cables are stowed away, lock her up and ..."

A sudden rhythmic beeping began to sound from the communication network's open band, cutting the Falcon's captain off in mid-command. "What the hell," he frowned. He cut audio until the signal translated to a visual pulse on the comm screen. "Chewie," he said, "I've got what looks like an automated distress call. Just started. Can you see anything out there?"

Han waited while the big Wookiee shuffled out from beneath the starship and straightened, craning his head this way and that, sniffing the wind of the small, arid moon where they'd grounded the Falcon for repairs.

The Wookiee raised an open hand toward the cockpit and shook his shaggy head.

Han punched up a directional reading. "I make it about three kilometers at maybe 18 on the horizontal plane. Look close." The pulse remained steady and strong, but visual scan gave them no clue as to who or what had originated the electronic call for help, and Han found himself faced with a decision. His immediate inclination was to stuff the Barric cables in their repair-access hatch and clear the ground without further ado, the prospect of becoming involved in someone else's desperate plight, when his own was usually quite desperate enough, giving him no pleasure whatsoever. However, the Wookiee resolved the dilemma by moving hastily off in the direction of the distress signal's origin.

"Chewie!" Han called after him. His first mate turned impatiently, squaring the bowcaster firmly at his shoulder. "Uh ... I'll cover you," the Corellian sighed. Pulling rank on someone twice your size had a way of being unprofitable, he recalled. Chewbacca had been known to say no. Firmly.

With a nod to even this lifeless little mood, Han locked down the board by code sequence, known only to himself and the Wookiee. Though somewhat offhand in many of his dealings, he was uncommonly prudent where his means of transport and livelihood was concerned. He then headed aft, the weight of his holstered blaster a comforting reassurance on his right hip.

The moon's surface was grainy and coarse. Withered looking ground cover grew in forlorn clusters in the lee of the boulders, sheltered slightly from the bitter breeze, a thin, incessant presence. Han pulled his leather wind cheater closer about his shoulders as he stalked along beside his co-pilot. "What a place," he grouched. It was indeed an unattractive and unwelcoming prospect, a bad place to be in need of help.

"A little to the left, Chewie," Solo indicated. He consulted the portable tracker in his palm then tucked his hands once more into his jacket pockets. The boulders were becoming more thickly strewn and the two spacers were obliged to take a zig-zag course, homing in on the distress signal as they approached what must at one time have been a range of rocky hills. Now they were little more than crumbling stony heaps raised against the dun colored sky.

"Hold it." Solo stopped, putting out a cautionary hand. He read the tracker, looked up and squinted against the meridian brightness. In a low voice, he said, "It's coming from over there. Behind that big rock. See it? The one with the sort of spire on top?"

The Wookiee whuffed. "Right. So give me a second to angle around over that way, then go in through the defile." Solo nodded quickly. "Go now," he said.

As Chewie cat-footed toward the narrow opening, the Corellian moved with precision into a position behind and to his right, circling swiftly and fetching up against a wall of rock, blaster out and poised high in a two-handed grip.

Chewbacca's russet form disappeared behind the outcropping and Han swung into a secondary position to the Wookiee's left rear. As he did so, his eye caught a gleam of metal in the natural corrie behind the largest boulder, and at the same time Chewie growled in surprise.

"What is it?" Solo demanded.

The Wookiee voiced a summons.

Han relaxed his offensive grip on the laser gun, although he kept it ready in his right hand, and cautiously he moved through the narrow defile to join his partner. Together they looked down at the remains of a ship's escape pod. It had been a little scorched in its passage through the moon's scant atmosphere, but it appeared to have landed atop the rocky mound above and tumbled down to a twisted rest at the massive boulder's foot. Through the port they could see a human face.

"Get it open," Han said.

If the escape pod's occupant were alive, he decided, it was just barely. The man was haggard, his closed eyes sunk deep in their greyish sockets and a line of dark brown at the corner of his lips spoke of brutal handling.

"Help me ease him out, Chewie," the Corellian said softly, reaching in to support the man's head and shoulders. He wore a worker's one-piece over a high-necked pullover. There was a bright metal cuff about his right wrist, but nothing else to note. As they began to ease him from the twisted wreckage, he moaned.

Chewie growled a caution.

"Yeah," Han muttered in reply, "internals. We'll probably kill him if we move him." The stranger's moan broke into an attempt at speech.

The Corellian and his partner knelt at the sides of what was beginning to look like a coffin. "Listen, pal,," he said, "don't try to talk. I don't want to move you till I know you're not ..."

But the man's hand snaked out and with surprising strength grasped Han's wrist. "Don't go," he whispered. "Got to tell you ... No time ... no time."

Solo glanced up at Chewie from beneath lowered brows and the Wookiee shook his head gravely.

"Okay, I'm here," Han told the dying man and steeled himself for the role of confessor. It happened sometimes, out among the stars death needed a witness. When he thought of it at all, Solo privately favoured the idea of dying at a ripe, old age in bed. With a woman. Abruptly.

"Wingspan," croaked the stranger. The effort cost him and he coughed. "On the ice plains at Glune." His eyelids fluttered, his gaze wandering aimlessly as though he sought to fix on his listener.

"Right here," Han encouraged. He clasped the man's hand, wondering why he chose for his dying moment a reference to a planet so far out on the Rodi Rim it was barely on the ARC star charts.

"Wingspan," Han repeated, trying to get the fellow's thoughts back on target.

"Yes ... the mountain ... mountain of fire and ice." He paused for a ragged breath and continued. "Voices on the air. I fell. The crystal broke, and I was free. Got away ... stole the ship ..."

Dreams? Delirium? Han didn't know. He hunched his shoulders against the cold and waited restlessly, thinking that if the man were not going to die quickly, he could surely stand the trip back to the Falcon.

"Crysfires as big as your hand. Azulites and amberglows ..."

Solo's eyes widened. He looked down at the speaker, whose pallor had worsened. His cracked lips parted for breath.

"Crysfires?" Han encouraged. "Big azulites?"

"Treasures of the universe," the stranger confirmed, though he appeared not to have heard the Corellian at all. "Wealth beyond imagination. Indigoes, sunstones ... huge. For the Voices. For the living dead ..."

Mentally sifting as was his custom, Solo came up with a picture of enormous gems resplendent in Wingspan's polar corona, and he got a rush that warmed him against the chill.

Chewie, however, heard the reference to living dead and it caused him to glance over his shoulder and sniff the breeze.

The man in the escape pod coughed once more, drawing Han's attention away, for the moment, from this vision of jewelled infinity. "You're hundreds of lights off Wingspan," Han told him. "That's a long way to go."

The man's eyes flew open and for the first time, he fixed Solo with a cognizant expression. "Spacer," he gasped, "you can't go far enough." Something seemed to take hold inside him then; his eyes rolled back and his body stiffened. "No ..." he whispered, poised on the point of negation, then the internal grasp let him go and he went slack, shutting down for the last time.

After a moment, Han looked up. "That's it," he said quietly. The Wookiee offered a word of passing in his own language. He rose and stretched while Han gave the man a quick scrutiny, looking for clues to his identity. It seemed wrong to witness someone's death and not even be able to say who'd gone. He remembered the bracelet and searched it for a name.

It had nothing to offer. A single curving span of gold, it bore a rectangular colourless stone, with a faint fissure running the length of it, but no other markings. Nor did it appear to be designed for removal. Han thought with distaste of manacles. He shrugged and did a bit of mental torque-shifting.

Chewie made a suggestion about the corpse.

"No, I don't think so," Solo was thinking swiftly. "Take too much time to dig a hole in this gravel. "I'll tell you what. Let's give him a fiery send-off and let the wind take his ashes." The Falcon was waiting just a short hike away and that jewelled infinity was beckoning seductively. "No one who ever spaced wants to spend forever in the ground, right?"

Chewie backed off as Solo raised his laser gun. Setting it for heat dispersal, he washed the wrecked escape pod with fire. It erupted with a satisfying incendiary flash then settled to a suitable pyre.

Han holstered his blaster, nodded to himself and turned, motioning Chewie to get it moving. The Wookiee fell into a shambling jog beside his captain and muttered something that Han thought translated as "expedient". The Corellian gave his co-pilot a look, but he didn't slow down.

Barric cables safely stowed, the Falcon's two man crew took off the chill with cups of strong tea as they leaned over the gaming table examining an old- style two-dee map of the planet Wingspan.

"He said 'the ice plains at Glune', so it's got to be on the polar cap, here," Han pointed.

Chewie voiced an opinion.

"Glaciers? It's a possibility." He frowned, scanning the folded-out square. "Of course that would put it out of reach. There must be thousands of glaciers; the whole area's lousy with mountain ranges."

Chewie suggested with typical Wookiee sarcasm that the whole idea seemed out of reach and Han, who'd heard it all before, ignored him. The fuzzbball always whined at first but could he ever spend the proceeds afterwards!

"Polar caps," Solo repeated. "And volcanic activity. Mountains of fire ..." He trailed off for a moment, imagining. Then, "Crysfires as big as your hand and azulites ... I would settle," he said, seating himself and stretching his long legs out before him, "for crysfires as big as that. How about you, pal?"

The Wookiee made a few dismal predictions about the outcome of their contemplated venture.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Solo replied, "but what if he wasn't hallucinating? What if it's there, 'the treasures of the universe'?"

Chewbacca growled loudly and Han looked up with one of his more practiced expressions of complete stupefaction. "Living dead?" he said uncomprehendingly. "Living dead? The figment of a primitive culture's uninspired imagination, and you'd let them keep you away from ambergloows you'd have a hard time carrying?" The Corellian sat up and shook his head in disbelief. "I'd have thought you had more of a spirit of adventure than that, more imagination, more honest greed ... Where're you going?" This to the shaggy Wookiee's retreating back. Over his shoulder the co-pilot informed him.

"Right," said Han. "I thought you'd see it my way." Grinning to himself, he re-folded the map and followed the Wookiee forward to the cockpit where colorful visions sparkled behind his eyes all the way to Wingspan.

The hamlet of Glune crouched at the foot of ice encrusted mountains and sent wispy flumes of woodsmoke to spread on the clear, cool air. A small trading port, it offered the only shelter and warmth for kilometers in the snow-and-tundra waste of Wingspan's most northerly latitudes. Here, where few cared to venture, it harbored a small but interesting racial mix and, Han assumed, the sort of conviviality one might expect when beings banded together against the weather.

He snugged the fastenings of his jacket. "Traders," he reminded the Wookiee. "We'll just see what's valuable in this part of Wingspan."

The Wookiee shrugged and followed his captain down the ramp, grousing to himself. The long twilight of polar summer made their shadows lengthen, giving an odd, oblique look to what scenery there was to see.

Not much, Han decided. He had grounded the Falcon quietly in the shelter of a conical hill which rose between them and the town, and, aboard an all-terrain skip, they made their way down-valley. The inhospitable mountains to their backs, before them stretched flat, wind-bitten tundra and the cluster of buildings which made up the settlement.

Though there were passers-by and folk going about their business, no one looked their way as the two spacers angled the skip in among several others parked at the edge of the poorly paved roadway. With his usual skill for such things, Han had managed to locate a bar.

They stepped off the low cargo carrier and into the shadowy interior of Glune's inn. Though it was less bitter than simply chill, there was relief in shutting out the climate in the smoky half-light before a fire.

With a move practiced so long it had become instinct, Solo stepped to one side of the door and surveyed the room. Not large, perhaps half full of drinkers who paid them no more heed than had the townspeople on the street. Solo found it curious. The Wookiee at least usually occasioned some comment, and he wondered if it might be significant; ever since making planetfall intuition had been pulling at him from all directions.

The woman tending bar looked up at the sound of the door and Solo was gratified to discover that he and the Wookiee had not after all become invisible. She stared at them a moment then nodded. "G'day," she said over the low murmur and clink of glasses.

Han closed the distance between them, enjoying the pleasant sight. She was tall and slender with attractively angular features beneath a carelessly coiffured tangle of red hair.

He leaned against the bar. "Hello," he said. "What have you got that's hot?"

She flashed him a glance.

"To drink, I mean," he said easily. "Something to take off the chill."

"Cider," she shrugged.

"Make it two." Solo watched her pour two steaming mugs, wondering if it were just the nagging intuition again or if she really were nervously preoccupied. A feeling of undercurrents seemed to pervade the room.

"You must get a lot of strangers around here," Han offered, referring to his and the Wookiee's unnoticed entrance into town.

"Not many."

Again, Han got the impression of tension. "What I mean was ..."

"Look, stranger," she said quickly, her voice low. "Just get out. This is not a healthy place to be. Drink up and get out."

Han was about to explain that he and his partner were merely traders looking for consignments to haul, when the woman's advice was cut off by a strange dual tone, like a signal which seemed to fill the room from somewhere.

Uncomprehending, Han watched as the drinkers set down their glasses in unison, rose and began to troop toward the door. Then he caught the flash of metal at the wrist of one, then another, of the men and the adrenaline jolt hit him like a laser bolt.

Before he could call Chewie's attention to the manacles, twins of the one on the dying man's wrist, the woman grabbed his shoulder. "Quick!" she whispered, "over the bar and through that door, both of you!"

"What for?" Solo felt the excitement building inside, the desire to follow the tantalizing lead and he rounded on the woman impatiently.

"They're coming," she said furiously. "Look, get out of sight fast if you value your freedom."

The magic word. Solo and the Wookiee vaulted the bar as one. As he hit the floor, Han drew his blaster and covered their retreat through the back bar access as Chewie secured the dim room into which they crowded.

Inside, they held very still and looked at one another with puzzled frowns, weapons poised for instant action. Han strained his ears to get a clue as to what was transpiring beyond the door. He heard nothing for a moment, then the sound of footsteps; several persons entering through the front door. Han pressed against the door frame. Beyond, he could hear the bartender handling glassware.

"Everybody off?" asked a woman's voice.

"Yes, ma'am, all off," the barkeep replied.

There was a satisfied grunt. "Good. You've got a nice place here. Keep minding your business and there won't be any trouble."

"Yes, ma'am." Though her voice was low, Han was sure it was far from subservient. Chewie shifted restlessly and Han gestured for quiet, but there was no further conversation and in a moment the woman cracked the door and motioned them out into the bar once more.

"What's going on?" Han asked.

The redhead looked at him squarely. "Believe me, stranger," she said, "you don't want to know."

"Humour me," Han suggested. He holstered his blaster and leaned against the bar.

With a tight shrug, she went back to her glasses. "We've got problems here, and that's all you need to know. How'd you get here, anyway?"

"By skip. It's parked out in front. What're you afraid of?" Han was persistent.

"Friend," she turned her grey eyes on the Corellian with grim exasperation, "there's a good chance you and your partner haven't been spotted yet. Get the hell out of here while you still can. Take your skip and go back wherever you came from."

Han was impassive. "Why do they all wear bracelets?"

"I'm trying to save your goddamn life!" she insisted.

"Thanks, I appreciate it, I really do." Solo smiled easily and met her angry stare with a rather warm and persuasive look. "But all I'm asking for is just a little information. For instance, what's your name? Mine's Solo."

She placed her hands very firmly against the Corellian's chest and said with slow emphasis, "My name is Rhid-3-Rhid. I like your face and you are charming as all hell, but I'm not buying any today. Get out. Goodbye." Then she gave him a shove.

Solo backed into Chewie, his hand going up and palm out in an attempt to avoid any further hostilities. "Okay, okay, you made your point, Rhid-3-Rhid," he said with a touch of irritation. "We're going." Then more softly, "We're going. Thanks for your help." He turned and strode to the door. There he paused for a moment and said over his shoulder, "Good luck with your problem." Han felt her cold grey eyes on his back as he and the Wookiee stepped out into the chilly twilight.

As they climbed aboard the low-slung skip Chewie rumbled a question.

"Next," Han replied, "we find out where everyone with bracelets went and we try to stay out of trouble."

Chewie reminded his captain that what had started as a wildbreerbat chase had developed some rather sinister potential hazards.

"Nothing," agreed Han, "is ever easy. But," he continued, as he guided the gyroed skip back the way they'd come, "I think it's worth it. Crysfires, partner. And don't forget the indigos. I can FEEL it! We're in the presence of wealth!" He repeated almost reverently, "Great wealth."

No activity of any sort hindered their retreat from Glune; the streets were empty. Nor did they appear to be observed, though Han's sharpened sixth sense picked up plenty of not-right vibrations.

Leaving the road, Solo reached a promontory high above the seemingly deserted town. As the skip whined to a halt, he unclipped his binoculars and tested the bleak prospect. He had gone almost 360 degrees from his starting point, when he called out, "Chewie! This looks like it!"

The Wookiee growled a query at his captain, who was riveted on something high up and to the north.

"Right there." He spoke low, adjusting the focus. "Something's going on. It's like a mine entrance about half-way up that big cone. Here," he thrust the binoculars at the Wookiee, "see what you can see; I'm going in for a closer look."

Han slid into the pilot's seat from where he'd been perching on the rear engine housing and demanded a high-performance take off from the modest cargo hauler. They jounced over the rough terrain as Han sought to give them a better vantage point, rarely taking his eyes off the dark gash in the rounded mountain's face. Chewie gave up any hope of using the binoculars.

Presently, Solo cut the engine and coasted down a little incline and into the long shadow of a shelf of living rock. He slid free of the skip and, snagging the binoculars once again, scrambled up the slanting, rocky face where a fairly level space presented itself, and upon this the Corellian stretched out, elbows braced and watched with magnified scrutiny the line of dark activity against the incline across the valley.

A column of figures in open cars was moving slowly up the winding road from town. As each car reached the tunnel entrance, Han could hear a signal being given, made faint by the meters of empty air, and the cars' occupants raised their right arms in what looked like a salute.

As Han watched, female guards armed with rifles passed each carload into the darkened tunnel mouth. He upped the magnification to maximum and was able to make out the enigmatic bracelets encircling raised wrists.

"Yeah," Solo muttered, somewhat satisfied. It was all beginning to make a sort of strange sense, and he had a gut feeling his first impression of manacles had been correct. Somewhere inside that mountain - volcano, he reminded himself, the fire mountain - somewhere inside were the huge crysfires, the "treasures of the universe". He clipped the binoculars to his belt and climbed back down to where Chewie waited by the skip.

"I want a sonic scanner," he told the Wookiee. "And we both want something to eat, right?" The Wookiee whuffed affirmation and Solo nodded. "Back to the Falcon, then, and I'll tell you what I think is going on."

Chewbacca made his customary sarcastic comment about what his captain thought and the Corellian sighed deeply as he started up the skip. "Fuzzball," he said, "when we clear this planet with a load of negotiable rocks, you're gonna thank me." He gave the Wookiee a wry look. "And I won't forget to remind you, either."

The sonic scanner, a box-like device Solo held before him, probed the volcanic mountain with invisible pulses, seeking space. "There's usually more than one lateral vent," he said, "like the main one that's guarded. If we can find another," he moved the box a few degrees on the diagonal, "then we go in and take a look around."

He moved the box again, then glanced at the Wookiee. "You know, this IS going to work," he said with Corellian conviction, noticing that Chewie, almost unwillingly, was becoming interested in the project. It always took a while to get his blood up, Han knew, but an enthusiastic Wookiee was a great asset. It was worth the effort it usually took to engage his attention. He looked back to the box and what he saw made him grin. "Hold it," he said. "I think this is it."

The scanner's small display screen presented a cross-section of the area, and it now divulged the presence of a fissure working its way outward from the main vertical shaft. "Chewie," said Han, looking from the screen up the bleak face of the mountain. "I think we've found a back door."

From the boulder field where they began, it was a climb of some 100 meters or so to the position of the tunnel's mouth. They could see no sign of it from below, but Han was determined. He'd shucked his shipboard wear in favour of some cold weather gear, a high-necked heavy sweater and insulated wrap boots that

gave him maximum warmth plus maximum agility. Both were necessary in the climb he now attempted.

The Wookiee, his luxurious pelt ruffling in the chill breeze, moved easily from one hand-foot hold to another up the mountain side, and Han was reminded of a suma-sloth in high gear. He watched him for a moment, squinting against the snow glare as the wind plucked at his hair.

"Wait up!" he called, then stretched for the first of the Wookiee's chosen hand grips and followed in his wake.

It was not an endless climb though it was beginning to seem so when Solo, with a final effort, hauled himself onto a narrow ledge and halted, catching his breath and using the big Wookiee as a windbreak. His fingers, even in snug thermal gloves, were stiff and unfeeling, and he slapped his hands together as he looked around for the opening, or some sign of it, shrouded in snow.

The Wookiee whuffed and pointed to the shallow depression in the old snowpack. The more temperate air of summer had melted down all but the ancient ice layers, disclosing surface rocks and indicating the topography of the mountain's face.

Han nodded. "I think you've got something; it's worth a try." He drew his blaster and gave it a quick turn to dispersal, then levelled it at the concavity in the snow, firing in short, searing bursts. The ice layer glowed with laser flash, liquefied and slid over the lip of the ledge in a quick cascade of slush and shards, exposing a low, wide opening that went down into darkness.

"The back door," Han muttered and Chewie asked an obvious question. "Scanner says it's plenty big, all the way in. No tight squeezes for you, partner," his captain assured him. "So let's get in out of this wind."

It was dark inside, once the tunnel mouth had been left behind, steeply inclined and warmer, if only for the cessation of the chill, gusting winds. Solo unclipped his rhodium illuminator and by the glow from its uncoiled element guided them down into the mountain's heart.

Now and again lesser side tunnels opened off the main vent, giving Han the impression of a network. Too small to register on the long-range scan, they didn't fit in with his admittedly scant knowledge of volcanic geology, but they reminded him of mining, and it puzzled and further intrigued him.

They had gone perhaps a kilometer along the basalt tunnel, fired and glazed in ages past by volcanic torrents, when Han called a halt. A cool, steady draft was coming at them from further along the passageway, carrying with it the faint, but

unmistakable sounds of activity. "Chewie," Han said softly, "there's money on the wind." And for the first time the Wookiee was inclined to agree.

They continued their quest but more stealthily now, as the sounds ahead became louder and after another several hundred meters, Chewie first with his far- sight, and then Han, could make out light ahead, paling the tunnel walls from beyond a slight northward bend.

Solo dropped to his knee, motioning the Wookiee down behind him. Then slowly they crawled forward toward the light.

The tunnel ended in a sheer sided drop. At its lip, Han solo peered out and down at the volcano's core, a vast rocky chamber with its base meters below and its pinnacle lost in the black shadows above.

For a long moment he failed to find words. The core was bright with crysfires. They glittered with magnificence from every surface, the natural basalt ones which gave back their radiance in a muted glow, and the man-made platforms and mezzanines about the shaft's periphery where large working lights cast a cold brilliance upon the gems. The crysfires flared under the illumination with eye- searing incandescence so that some of the men who worked among them wore protective eye shields.

Even at a distance, Solo wanted to squint against the dazzling light. Not in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined such a display of elemental wealth. For the Corellian, it was a quasi-religious experience and he needed a moment of silence before attempting to express his awe in suitably flippant terms.

His wit went untested this time, however, as into the pause came a voice behind them.

"You're covered," it said quietly. "So don't reach for your gun." Solo's hand, set in motion by the first word, came to a tense halt halfway to his blaster. "You don't pay attention to good advice, do you, Solo?" the voice continued, and Han recognised the bar tender from Glune, Rhid-3-Rhid.

Behind him Chewie shifted slightly and made a subtle "ready" signal that Han felt against his spine. He tensed to throw himself out and clear of the woman's line of fire as soon as the moment felt right.

"Don't turn around, either of you, just back up slowly from the edge," she told them. Complying, the two spacers began to ease themselves away from the vertiginous drop and Han decided to waste no more time.

"Now!" he rapped, flashing into motion and flinging himself toward the far wall where he staggered, collapsed and slid limply to the tunnel floor, helpless in the grip of a wide-area stun charge.

At his feet the Wookiee tried to find his balance and stand against the insupportable weight of his own body. Rhid-3-Rhid hit him again with the stun charge and the russet body flopped onto its belly and lay still.

Turning to Solo, who summoned up an expression of malevolence past the weight of paralysis, the woman shook her head. "I told you to stay out of this, stranger," she said. "Go on, give me a dirty look. That's all you're going to give me."

Through lack of anything else to do, Han scrutinised Rhid-3-Rhid briefly, admiring her leggy stance in high wrap-boots and the careless protrusion of her very red hair, and he accepted her last statement, with a gamesman's philosophy, as a challenge.

"This business is much bigger than a handful of crysfires, Solo, so I'm just going to put you and your friend out of my way for a while. Go to sleep." The woman drew down on him and Han prepared himself for the inevitable as she stunned him once more and he lost consciousness.

He awoke to the feel of Wookiee fur in his face, but it took an annoying several minutes to shake off the stun before he could move with sufficient agility to roll away from the unconscious heap that was his friend.

Singing to himself, as he had long ago been taught to do when working off a stun, the Corellian tried making some guesses about their present situation. None of them seemed even plausible.

"Sonda was a freighter's ace and a gun-running' ..." he sang softly, inching his right hand up toward his hip where he was astonished to feel the familiar cold grip of his Kletts-Rushak, still snug in its holster. "Sonofabitch!" he exclaimed. The situation wasn't merely implausible, he thought, it was becoming downright surreal. Either Rhid-3-Rhid had a rather severe memory problem, or she was basing the stun impact on one of her own species. Maybe Wingspaniards wilted under a stun and stayed down for hours. Whatever, it presented him with an edge.

Presently, Chewie began to whuff and growl as he came out from under the stun and Han inched over to him, prodding him into further wakefulness. "Not long," he said to the Wookiee's query. "I make it five, six minutes. Come on! Heads up, pal. We're going exploring." Solo helped his co-pilot stand, steadying him until he growled with annoyance that he was not a cub.

Han grinned to himself, leading the way back down the tunnel by which they'd come, then ducking into the first side path that gave promise of going down. The Wookiee followed grumbling.

Automatically setting his internal direction finder, Solo took this turn, then that, always progressing toward his goal of riches with an instinct of which a narhound might have been proud.

The tunnels that wound on ever lower were illuminated faintly with glo-spots set into the stone at junctions. Beneath one, Solo halted, mentally feeling around them for the next turning. The pale light glanced off the planes of his lean and hungry face, rippled over the metal surfaces of his blaster, drawn and ready. He gestured with it to their left turned, and came face to face with several armed men.

His eyes widened in surprise and he swung the laser gun up into a defensive position, but they merely stood facing him impassively, silent and motionless. Then he noted the manacles.

Han eyed the men speculatively. "Afternoon, cousins," he said. No response. Hands at their sides, they waited, eyes fixed on the middle distance. "Your sister does it with Raxerians," he told them pleasantly, then waited for a reaction. "Three at a time," he finished, when there appeared to be none.

The Corellian shrugged. "I don't think we're going to get much of an argument here, Chewie," he said. And stopped immediately. Voices, female voices, were coming from behind them.

Thinking of Rhid-3-Rhid and her stunner, Han dodged past the manacled men, pretty sure now that he could see a pattern forming amidst the strange elements with which he was confronted, and he didn't much like what he saw.

Together, he and the Wookiee rounded the next corner and drew up flat against the tunnel wall. Han searched anxiously for any place of concealment. Further along the tunnel there was a door set into the stone. It was half-irised, emitting low light from within. Since there seemed to be no other immediate choice, he motioned the Wookiee to follow, and they climbed through the aperture into a glorious sight.

Han gasped involuntarily as his eyes adjusted to the higher light level and he took in their surroundings. It looked like the store room of gods. From floor to low ceiling gems and jewels of all shape and hue glittered and winked seductively. Tier on shelving tier, they ranged about the walls, a pantry of dragons, stretching back into the darkness. "Ghana," Solo breathed reverently. "I told you, pal, I told you." He reached out and touched an azulite too large for a ring. Its blue wonder was intoxicating. A corunda beckoned, the colour of wine. "You can tell the

grandcubs about this one," he said. The whole vault was filled with shining wealth, making Solo wish he had a grav-sled.

Though awed by the magnificence of the display, he nevertheless was still all business. Picking and choosing with rapid, practised appraisal, he filled the leather carry-all Chewie had slung about his shoulders. The Wookiee complained. "So what if it's a little heavy?" Han whispered. "Since when do you turn down a treasure? Stand still, damn it! I want to get a couple of these ..." Solo froze.

Deeper in the shadows he caught a flash of movement. Motioning Chewie to a position opposite the door, he back-stepped carefully into the shelter of a gem tier, blaster poised, and waited, tension at once nerving and exhilarating him.

Rhid-3-Rhid came moving warily from the rear of the long store room, stepping from shelf to shelf and Solo had the vindictive satisfaction of jamming the muzzle of his laser gun into the small of her back as she passed his place of concealment. "Not one word," he cautioned softly. "Not until my partner has that stun gun of yours. Then we have a little talk, understand?"

The woman nodded once. "But I thought you ..."

Solo prodded her with the blaster and she went silent while Chewbacca relieved her of the stunner and handed it to the Corellian.

"That's better," Han said more easily, holstering his own weapon and turning her around. "Like I said before, lady, all I want is a little information. Suppose you give it to me now."

Her eyes were like ice, but her tone belied a temper. "I don't know who you are," she said angrily, "but you've blundered into my investigation!"

"What are you investigating?"

"Solo, you are a persistent bastard."

The Corellian smiled briefly. "You don't know the half of it," he commented, "but my ancestry isn't in question here, sweetheart, so let's get back to what's going on."

The redhead closed her eyes and sighed a uniquely feminine supplication for patience in the face of a male's perversity. Han appreciated the gesture; he had seen many less attractive women than Rhid-3-Rhid.

"Okay," she said at last. "You may as well know, since you're in it anyway. This isn't a gem mining operation only. This mountain does grow an endless supply of

crystals, yes, and the Syndicate is pulling them out hand over fist, but they're not getting rich on the stones. They could have sent a revenue agent on that one," she added with sarcasm.

Han raised an eyebrow. "And what are you?" he asked.

The woman sighed again. "Wingspan Republic Fourth Quadrant Intelligence."

"A spy," Han amplified.

"Welllllll" Rhid-3-Rhid made an equivocal shrug. "I'm supposed to find out what's going on, if that's what you mean. They set me up as the new owner of the bar, and I've been investigating. This," she looked around at the storeroom and up, including the entire volcanic mountain in her awed gestalt, "this is an incredible operation."

"Which is?" Han was beginning to suffer an attack of impatience, as he often did when there was a slow down in the flow of information germane to his survival.

"They're planning to enslave half the planet," she said simply.

"What half?" asked the pragmatist Solo.

Rhid-3-Rhid smiled, a twitch of the lips. "The male half," she replied, then continued, to his eloquent expression. "The cuffs. See, the Syndicate discovered that subsonic communications, when dispersed through the oscillation of certain of these volcanic crysfires could sort of tranquillise. But it only works on males. It makes them ... receptive to commands. And the women have been threatened into silence. The townswomen - these are their husbands and sons. They eat and drink and make love to their wives, I suppose, but so long as they're wearing these cuffs, they're under the control of whoever's issuing directives."

"Goddamn," Han said softly, considering the possibilities. "But how do they expect to implement it planetwide?" he objected.

Rhid-3-Rhid looked at him squarely. "The Syndicate is made up of women. Power-hungry women." She paused then went on with what seemed to be a tangential question. "How many women, close to heads of government ... let's say wives, courtesans ... do you suppose could be persuaded to slip a little gold cuff on their man's wrist while he slept? Think about it."

Han did and it gave him a momentary chill. "They've got broadcasting equipment?" he asked.

"The men have been mining the gems - these are the rejects - and fitting them into housings. They'll do anything they're ordered to do; their minds are like

mush. The housings go into satellites. The satellites go into orbit." She shrugged. "Planetary takeover."

"And where do you stand in all of this?" Solo wanted to know.

"Hip-deep, same as you," she replied. "All I want to do now is get out of here and alert the Quadrant Authorities. I can't even send a transmission, since they've got all bands jammed. And just who are you, anyway?"

Han glanced at the Wookiee, then back to the woman. "Couple of wayfaring strangers," he grinned. "Tell you what. If we can make it to my ship, I'll get you out of the range of their jammers and ..."

Whatever offer Han was about to make went unspoken as Chewie suddenly snarled and gestured furiously for quiet. Rhid and Han backed into the shadows, their eyes meeting in a silent contract. He passed her the stunner and quietly unholstered his blaster; opposite them Chewie crouched in readiness to grapple whatever adversaries were approaching.

Outside the door a female voice said, "Who had authorisation to enter the reject room?" The aperture irised all the way, admitting a tall dark woman in coveralls. Han and Rhid became part of the wall. Chewbacca, however, was ominously visible. The woman turned slowly and came eye-to-chest with the Wookiee, looked up, backed off and started to scream when a great hairy hand clamped over her entire face.

Chewie looked a bit desperately at his partner over the struggling female. Han gave Rhid a dig in the ribs and frowned toward her pistol. "Oh," she mouthed and quickly aimed and fired. The woman in the Wookiee's arms went limp.

"Mardian? What's going on in there?" came a second voice from the tunnel.

Rhid cleared her throat. "Uh, not much. Come on in and see for yourself," she said.

"Mardian?" Obviously puzzled, another woman entered and Chewie had her in a hug before she'd cleared the door. Solo stepped out of the shadows and brought up his laser gun. He put a finger to his lips, gesturing for quiet and the woman, wide-eyed, nodded her acquiescence.

"Good," he said quietly. "Now, what we want is out. No trouble, no fuss or you die. Understood?"

She nodded again.

Han looked up at Chewie and signalled for the woman's release. "But first I want a few answers," he said menacingly, levelling the blaster.

What he got, the instant the Wookiee's hand uncovered her mouth, was a yell that set the jewels vibrating on their shelves. "DRONES! ALERT!" she hollered.

"Oh, shit!" growled Solo. "Run for it!" He jumped for the door, catching the jamb with his left hand and swinging out to cover the hall as Rhid and Chewie scrambled through behind him.

"Back the way we came!" he ordered and the trio took off at a clattering run up the dim lit tunnel. Behind them the woman continued to scream for drones, and Han wondered what their chances were against the mind-numbed men of Glune.

He discovered when they rounded a corner and came face to face with the group of men they'd met on the way down. Only this time they were turned around and pointing weapons at the would-be escapees.

Han came to a sudden halt, involuntarily sucking in his gut. Rhid made a little "ohh" sound and danced to a stop beside him.

"Full reverse!" he commanded as laser bolts skipped and whined among them. Solo fired over his shoulder but the drones seemed oblivious; not ducking for cover, they gave chase.

"Great, just great," muttered the Corellian. "The survival instincts of droids."

A few paces ahead, Chewbacca plunged around a tunnel turning, yelped in alarm and ducked back, colliding with the two humans. Laser fire streaked past as they crouched against the wall. "What now?" Rhid demanded.

Solo scowled. "How does prayer appeal to you?" he suggested, firing back up the tunnel.

The pursuers were closing the distance fast and Han was beginning to think some very dark thoughts, when above the singing of energy weapons, they all heard a new voice shout, "Halt!"

At once the drones became immobile, their feet coming to rest and hands dropping to their sides. Solo looked around warily. Though the lull might prove a respite, it didn't feel like a rescue at all, and he got ready to run for it again at the first chance that presented itself.

"Drones on standby," said the new voice and then the speaker moved toward them through the drifting haze of dust and ozone. "Put up your weapons," she ordered. A plain, middle-aged woman, heavysset in what appeared to be the

regulation-dress coveralls, she was accompanied by the screamer and several other women, all bearing guns.

Solo holstered his blaster, surprised that it was not demanded from him. Then he realised all the drones were armed and he felt sick.

"We had a drone escape once," she said conversationally, "but never any intruders. We can deal with you, however."

Han offered no comment, though he gave her a challenging look.

"Take the woman, question her and put her away," the leader of the female contingent directed.

Two of her armed assistants came forward and Rhid yelled, "Hey!" as they prodded her with their rifles. "What the hell's going on here? Listen, you can't do this to me! I'm a bureaucrat!" Still protesting, she was herded down the tunnel and out of sight.

Han watched helplessly, wondering what the woman had meant by "put her away". His concern for Rhid's safety, however, was immediately replaced with apprehension over his own and Chewie's as the leader addressed him in a voice devoid of everything but a silky contempt.

"Men," she sneered delicately. "So curious, so greedy. Were you with her or on your own?"

Han stared at her and said nothing.

She dismissed his reluctance to speak with an airy wave. "No matter, I don't really care. We can use another drone." She glanced up at the Wookiee. "Or two."

"How do we know that thing's a male?" one of the support group asked.

"You could feel around in his fur," Solo suggested nastily, and the Wookiee growled.

The leader swung her pistol up and jammed it into Han's mid-section, forcing him back against the tunnel wall. Chewie lunged to his friend's defence, but the woman, never taking her eyes from Solo's, shouted, "HE'S DEAD IF YOU TOUCH ME!"

The Wookiee hesitated for an instant and three women drew down on him at close range. Han held his grim silence, knowing there was nothing to be done

now but wait for an opportunity. He had no doubt both he and his co-pilot would be summarily shot, were they to try anything aggressive.

The woman pushed her unattractive face very close to Solo's, emphasising the pistol barrel in his solar plexis and said, "I'm going to really enjoy seeing you jump when I call the shots." She drew back, never moving the gun from its point-blank threat. "Cuff him!" she snapped.

Han still refused to speak though his look was eloquent of anger. As an assistant appeared at his right hand with a golden manacle, the Corellian filled his mind with as much stubborn defiance as he was able. The metal was cool against his skin. I'll get free, he thought, nobody keeps Han Solo

.... little holes being burned into the ceramic dish. You put the dish on the conveyor and it travelled up to where the bright red line of light crossed the gap. You pushed the button and the bright red line of light streaked out and pierced the ceramic dish. Good boy, Han, here comes another dish. Good boy. Stubborn boy. You put the dish on the conveyor ... you are the most stubborn boy on this planet, Rannimage said. Who was Rannimage? ... and it travelled up ... stubborn little boy ... how you love your freedom. The crystal broke and I was free ... of light crossed the gap. The crystal broke and I was free ... and the bright red line of light streaked out ... and pierced the ceramic dish. Little holes being burned into the ceramic dish ... and I was free. Free. Free. Free. Free.....

Slowly, as though prevailing against monstrous gravity, Han Solo raised his right hand into the laser field while his left hovered over the fire button. His face was expressionless, giving no hint of the battle going on behind his eyes. He turned his wrist so that the crystal faced the laser aperture and slammed his left hand down onto the button.

The needle beam zipped out obediently and cut cleanly through what was before it - the receiver crystal, its metal cuff and Han's forearm. He gasped and bit back a cry, jerking his arm down against his chest as the cauterised wound throbbed and smoked. The sensation was extreme but bearable. Solo welcomed it, loving even the pain that guaranteed his body and mind were his own once more.

He caught his breath, looking warily around to see if he'd been observed, to get his bearings and try to spot Chewie.

He appeared to be at the bottom of the central shaft, on one of the working surfaces shelving out from the wall, and if he'd been observed, no one had as yet sounded an alarm. After a moment, narrowing his eyes against the gleam of crysfires, he saw the big Wookiee some distance away a level lower. He was engaged in a task of assembly, and, Han noticed, his carryall was still securely about his shoulders.

Carefully, Solo moved away from the laser operation and to the edge of the platform, keeping a weather eye out for any gun-toting females. He stretched full out on his belly, hooked his hands around the platform's edge and with a grimace swung his body out and over, dropping to the next level down. Moving swiftly in a semi-crouch, gun in hand, he skirted the oblivious drone workers and came up behind the Wookiee.

"Chewie?" he whispered. There was no response. Han was in a hurry. Wasting no more words, he grasped his friend's right arm and located the crystal on his wrist.

Chewbacca looked at his captain uncomprehendingly as the man drew his heavy, unresisting arm forward, then slammed it back into the wall. Suddenly the Wookiee's eyes lighted with recognition and he started to howl.

Solo cut him off with an upraised hand. "Come on, pal," he said softly. "We'll celebrate when we're out of here. Now we've got to move fast."

Still, the Wookiee took time to grab his friend in a relieved hug and mutter a question.

"How'd I get out?" Han repeated as they headed toward the only doorway they could see. "Well, how often do you remember me shooting with my left hand? Not often?"

Han showed him the neat hole through his wrist and his not very useful right hand.

The Wookiee didn't say anything, but his hairy arm encircled Solo's shoulder for a moment.

At the doorway they halted while Han pressed the panel. Its several sections irised, exposing an empty passage and silence beyond. Solo traded a look with the Wookiee, then motioned him through and followed, after assuring himself they'd not been observed. Together, they took off down the tunnel.

Several turns and intersecting halls along the upward way, it began to look more hopeful. Han's wrist ached, to be sure, but he and his partner were free of the mind-numbing bracelets and they were on their way out with a carry-all which promised to keep them fat and lazy for a good while. Altogether, Solo considered it a successful venture. Except for Rhid.

He shook his head. Spies had to take their chances, same as everyone else, he reasoned. Still, he determined that once they got back to the Falcon he'd send the message for her. As little as Han Solo cared for bureaucracies, it just seemed

the thing to do. Besides, he owed these heavy-breathing female types some sort of unpleasant surprise.

The resolve made him feel better and he hurried along beside the Wookiee until they heard a commotion ahead. Wary again, they flattened themselves against the tunnel wall and Han whispered, "This is getting monotonous!"

He cast around hastily and spotted a doorway not far back along the way they'd come. Motioning Chewie, he side-stepped down the tunnel, covering their brief retreat.

At the door, eyes still on the junction from which raised voices were issuing, he hit the panel. "Go on, just for a second until the horizon's clear," he told the Wookiee, who balked, objecting to the absolute darkness beyond.

"Of course it's dark, fuzzball," Han said impatiently. "We're inside a mined-out mountain. What do you want? Reflectors and traffic signals? Get in there!"

The Wookiee whined and peered dubiously into the impenetrable dark, but the sounds of potential discovery were coming closer. He placed a hand on Solo's arm to steady himself as he stepped into the unknown chamber.

"I'm right behind you, hurry!" Han insisted, then several things happened at once.

Chewie barked in surprise, lost his footing and fell, clutching tightly at Han's arm in a vain attempt to save himself. Solo, taken off balance, staggered at the threshold, tried to grab the round frame and cried out sharply as his injured wrist betrayed him. Together they pitched headlong into the darkness and began to slide down what felt like a chute, down and down into the mountain's rocky heart.

Far above, a woman in coveralls paused to hit the panel. "Careless," she muttered, "leaving the pit door open."

Too frightened even to swear at his predicament, Solo tumbled down the incline, unsure of time, distance or direction. He was only aware they had reached the bottom when he came to an abrupt and bone-jarring halt on top of the hapless Wookiee.

As Chewie struggled to get his breath, Han scrambled to his feet. Somehow, he thought wonderingly, he'd managed to hold on to his gun. Against all reason, it comforted him in the oppressive blackness. Awkwardly, he holstered it at his right hip, then reached behind him for the rhodium flash.

"You okay, Chewie?" he asked as the element began to glow, casting shadows like huge wings beating back on the walls of the subterranean chamber.

"Solo!" came the reply and Han did an incredulous double-take, wondering if the fall had somehow jarred loose from his partner a heretofore unacknowledged ability to speak Standard. And in a woman's voice, too.

"Solo! It's me, Rhid-3-Rhid!" She moved unsteadily out of the shadows looking dishevelled and disoriented, but more or less in one piece.

"Hey, family reunion time," Solo quipped. "What's a nice girl like you?"

She made a face. "It's against their rules to kill a woman outright. So they pushed me down the obliette. Miserable bitches," she said sourly.

"An admirable bunch," Han agreed, then asked as he knelt to help Chewie into a sitting position, "Any idea where we are?"

"None." Rhid dropped to sit beside them as they gathered around the rhodium illuminator's pool of brightness like aboriginals about a jungle fire. "Except it's down. And it's cold." She hugged herself.

"Come here," said the Corellian with a grin. "I'll warm you up."

"Oh, no, you don't! I know your kind. Take a girl down to some dark place. Some COLD, dark place, and then offer her the comfort of your arms. Ulterior motives, Solo," she said wisely.

He smiled at her attempt to lighten the mood. "Call me Han," he told her, "and come here anyway. "I've got to think of a way out and chattering teeth distract me." He held out a hand.

With a sigh Rhid accepted his offer, moving around the light to curl against his chest while he rubbed her arms. "How did you get free, anyway?" she asked.

"Persistence," he replied.

"I should have guessed." She paused a moment, then continued in a quiet voice, "You were awfully lucky."

"Probably just stubborn this time."

"No, I mean lucky to have been so stubborn. The effect of the manacles is irreversible. A few days in them and there's no more 'you' left. Ever." She snuggled closer.

Solo stared at the light and thought about that one for a few minutes.

Chewie sat looking down and around, sniffing the air currents. Presently he made a low sound.

Han looked up. "Onto something, pal?" he asked and the Wookiee answered with a single word.

"Fire? Sure, we could use a fire. And while we're at it, how about some manchet and brandy and the latest holofeature from Estaria?"

But Chewbacca was adamant. He snarled a few more phrases and Han scowled. "One thing after another," he said with resigned disgust.

"What? What's he saying?" Rhid wanted to know.

"He just reminded me this place is a volcano," Han replied.

"An inactive one," she added.

"Yeah, but Wookiees see things differently. 'Where the whemetil bloomed once, it can bloom again', right, pal?"

Chewie growled mournfully.

"See, he says we're sitting on a lava flow."

"Oh, great."

There was a moment of worried silence, then Han jumped up and Rhid scrambled to keep from being dumped. "Hell, I've still got the sonic scanner. I can find us a way out of here!" he said with conviction that bordered on bravado.

Unclipping the device from his belt, he began to pace the chamber with long strides, tilting his head back every now and then as though he would discover the secrets of stygian rock with his gaze alone.

He reversed directions and turned the scanner to a new angle, monitoring it closely. "I'm getting a pattern here," he exclaimed. "I make us about level with the floor of the main shaft but a little to the west.

"That's the way I came in!" Rhid said excitedly. "My Tundrabird's grounded maybe a quarter kilometer from the opening."

"Your what?"

"Tundrabird! Like a skyhopper, you know? They're modified for polar flying," she explained.

Han felt his spirits, at the bottom of the pit a moment ago, begin to rise at the thought of flight, sunshine and fresh air. "Nice going, sweetheart," he grinned. "Not only a way out but a ride, too. Chewie, bring the illuminator and let's find that tunnel."

With the help of the scanner and Chewie's nose, they at last located the side tunnel but found the entrance blocked with a tumble of boulders not even the Wookiee's great strength could budge.

"Dead end," said Rhid.

"No, I don't think so," Han replied, backing up and holding the illuminator high. "I think if we can blow a big one out of line, the rest will fall. Here." He handed the light to Rhid. "Hold this while I get some charges."

He fished around behind his back, cursing the uselessness of his injured arm, and came up with the detonator clip and its three charges. He climbed half way up the pile then knelt and planted them in cracks beneath what looked to be the keystone of the heap. "They're mostly good for unlocking difficult doors," he said, referring to the charges, "but if I fire them all at once, I think ..."

Chewie howled and pulled him down to the floor, pointing anxiously behind them.

"Damn it ..." Han stumbled and turned, distracted and impatient. What he saw gave him an adrenalin flash that tingled the backs of his hands.

With a crack and a rumble that was almost subsonic, the floor of the chamber began to split and the curls of smoke that had first alerted the Wookiee became geysers of steam as great subterranean pressure was released.

"Oh, shit!" whispered Han. He swung back to the boulder pile, noting how insignificant the charges appeared against the stony mass.

The crack behind them grew wider. A red glow emerged from the rent and the chamber became warmer.

"It's got to work," he said fervently. "That's all, it's just got to work."

Han backed off as far as safely possible. "Try to stay clear," he told the others. "I'm gonna blow it. Get ready to run."

The heat was becoming intense and the seething of molten rock rushed up through the ever-widening fissure.

Rhid and Chewie crowded away from the gaping hole, arms shielding their faces. Han wished himself luck and pressed the detonator. There was a muffled

whomp! Then two pitiful fizzles, and the keystone shifted a few centimeters, but remained in place.

"Goddamn it!" he hollered. "The goddamn charges didn't blow!" He was madder and more scared than he could remember being in a long time. Ignoring the pain in his arm, he leapt onto the rocky pile, clawing his way over jagged shards, and put his shoulder against the keystone. "MOVE, YOU FUCKER!" he demanded furiously.

The stone began to grate against its neighbours. Sweat poured down his face as he put every fiber of his being and all his indomitable will into the task of moving the monolith. Then Chewie and Rhid were beside him, straining in unison.

Suddenly the floor of the chamber burst with an explosion of fire. Heat and molten rock surged up from below like a bright, roaring fountain and the stone disappeared in a heaving sea of flame.

Solo ignored it, ignored the agony of his wound and the heat; he thought about nothing except moving rock and pushed harder. There was a timeless moment of heartbreak and then Rhid was screaming again and again as the keystone began to shift.

She implored it with her voice and her bleeding fingers as Han and Chewie put everything into one final effort. The stone moved, tilted, hung at the brink and rolled ponderously down to splash and be consumed by the inferno.

At once the other boulders began to loosen and turn. "Go!" Han shouted hoarsely, and they fought for the opening which was slowly revealed as the rock fall descended into the fiery lake.

First Rhid squeezed through, then Chewie. Han slipped, twisting away from a rush of smaller stones and felt his feet lose purchase. The furnace heat from below washed over him and he swore furiously. Then the Wookiee had him by the arm and he was hauled through the jagged opening into the cool and relative quiet of the escape tunnel.

For the briefest moment, they halted to catch their breath, listening to the sounds of escalating destruction beyond the tumbled boulders which still partially screened the tunnel from the lava chamber.

Han gathered eyes. "We don't have much time," he said with a glance toward the tumult behind them. "The scanner said this tunnel goes up, so maybe we have a chance to beat the magma flow. Chewie first, Rhid, you follow him and I'll be behind you."

When Chewie objected to the wisdom of putting himself in front of the two smaller, more agile humans, Solo grinned. "You're carrying the money, pal, now get going."

As the Wookiee moved off into the dark with Rhid trotting at his heels, holding the illuminator, Han looked down at his wound and found it bleeding. He started to tear off a strip from his shirt to bind it with, when a sizzle and a red glow creeping between the jumbled rocks made him think better of it. "Hell with that," he muttered. He clasped his fingers about the injured wrist, squeezing, and began to run.

The tunnel climbed and soon they were panting as they ran. Waves of heat pursued them and tremors shuddered through the stone at their feet. Turning back, Han could see wavering orange light painting the tunnel walls behind them, closer every time he looked. It was stifling and they sweated, gasping for air, forcing their feet up the slope.

Suddenly the Wookiee in the lead staggered to a stop, confronted with a narrowing of the passageway, and Rhid stumbled into him. Breathing hard, Han drew up behind them and thrust out a hand to steady himself against the tunnel wall.

"He'll never make it through there," Rhid panted, indicating the Wookiee.

"Oh, yes, he will," Solo said between breaths. "Get behind me, both of you."

The woman and the Wookiee hurried to obey as the bouncing brightness of the illuminator Rhid carried was dimmed by the fast approaching fiery glow.

Solo backed a step. He took a two-handed grip on his blaster and set a trigger-loc splash of laser fire into the narrow opening. Rock splintered and flew. He fired again, searching for a fault in the stone.

Behind them the rush of lava became a roar.

"Oh, hurry! Hurry!" Rhid whimpered.

Chewie called out for Han to stop firing and, dragging the girl, he shoved her before him into the passage. When she'd slid through, the Wookiee turned to Solo. He stripped off the carry-all pouch and thrust it into the Corellian's chest and at the same time brusquely relieved him of his blaster, motioning him into the crevice.

"Oh, no, pal." Solo's eyes narrowed as he realised what his partner had in mind. "Not without you, I'm not." The glow from down-tunnel lit his features, drawn in determination. "Both of us or neither of us. Get your furry butt in there!"

"Come on, you two!" Rhid yelled from the other side. "I can see daylight down the cross tunnel! We're almost out!"

Chewbacca stared at his captain and Han could see the stubborn look he knew all too well. But there were times when the Corellian could be matchless. 'If you don't go," Han told him quietly, "I don't go."

Of course, stubbornness coupled with super strength was something else again, Solo reflected, as his partner picked him up bodily and crammed him through the fissure, tossing the blaster after him.

"Chewie!" Solo yelled in anger and desperation. "Chewie!" The heat leaking through the narrow passage was sweltering. Without thinking he plunged back in, determined to drag the Wookiee to safety by main force if necessary. As he fought his way through the crack, he heard the "thunk" of the Wookiee's bowcaster, suddenly understood what his co-pilot was attempting and ducked back with a wild, exhilarated cry. "Come on, Chewie, come on!" he shouted as the explosive-tipped quarrel detonated in the fissure and rock began to crack and shatter.

First the Wookiee's big hand appeared, Solo grabbed it and pulled. A hairy shoulder emerged. Rhid filled her hands with Wookiee fur, dug her feet in and yanked.

Chewbacca roared at the rocks and, as though his mighty voice shouting imprecations had crumbled their resolve, more stone split and fell and in a rush the Wookiee lunged through the opening, crashed into Han and Rhid, who went down under his weight.

He heaved himself up and headed for the semi-circle of daylight at a dead run.

"Oh, hell!" said Han. "His goddamn fur's on fire!"

Grabbing Rhid's hand, he pounded off after the Wookiee, and as they sprinted for the tunnel's end, the wall behind them burst, spewing a great flaming vomit into the passage.

Through the heat, Solo felt a chill envelope him. He slung the carry-all over his shoulder, wondering if he'd ever stop risking his one and only life for money,.

Ahead the smoking Wookiee passed out into sunlight and, with a whoop, disappeared from view.

"It's the snowfield," Rhid managed to gasp. "Big snowfield right outside the entrance. Cool himself off."

Relieved, Solo gave her a grin. "We may get out of this yet, if that 'bird of yours can carry three."

Rhid shook her head. "No, but after this, I swear I'll make the damn thing do it!"

Her defiance was like wine to the Corellian. "Damn right!" he laughed.

They cleared the tunnel, the vanguard of the lava flow almost on their heels, and plunged down the snowfield. Below them, the Wookiee rolled gratefully in knee-deep slush.

"No time for games, partner," Han called to him. "Haul ass!" He and Rhid slid and ran past the Wookiee, cutting across the field diagonally, down toward the rocky overhang the woman indicated.

There, sheltered from any but the closest scrutiny was a trim skyhopper.

Han looked back up the slope and watched lava begin to pour over the lip of the tunnel, sending up thick steams as it hit the snowfield. He glanced at the Wookiee. His left side was black and scantily furred, wet and evil-smelling. He was, in short, a mess. The carry-all full of gems suddenly felt heavy to the Corellian. He passed it back to the Wookiee. "You look after these," he said and thought to himself that something better than their usual 55-45 split might be more equitable this time around.

The lava flow crept closer.

"Get aboard," Rhid called. She guided the Tundrabird out from the overhang and flipped the canopy off. "You two'll have to double up. Let's move!"

Melted snow was coursing past them as Chewie hauled himself into the passenger seat. Han put a leg up and boosted himself aboard, perching on the seat back between Rhid and the Wookiee.

"Here goes!" she said and coaxed the machine into a unsteady hover.

An explosive surge at the tunnel mouth sent a great burst of lava flying outward. The mountain boomed and shuddered. "Get out of here!" Han yelled and Rhid, startled hit lift and acceleration at once, forcing a high-torque get-away out of the Tundrabird.

She shot up and into an arcing curve while Solo hung on for all he was worth, lamenting the destruction of so many beautiful gems plus his now- irretrievable skip, with a last backward glance. He spared a thought for the drones but decided they would probably be as unaware of their death as they were what

passed among them for life. He did hope, however, with a certain thirst for retribution, that the Syndicate slavers were experiencing their moments of terror.

Rolling clouds of grey smoke poured from the volcano's huge central cone and hot ash began to rain down, coating the 'Bird and her occupants. She rocked on the waves of clashing air, then rocked again as laser fire drilled her starboard wing.

Solo whipped around, trying to brush his flying hair out of his eyes and spot the enemy.

In a banking turn, a dark skimmer came around the mountain's snowy shoulder, her forward-mounted laser cannon sending short, precise bursts in the wake of the fleeing Tundrabird. Looking in the rear viewer, Rhid cried out, "It's one of the Syndicate's ships. They make regular patrol flights!"

Han swore, reaching for his blaster. Propping both elbows on the 'Bird's rear deck, he fired and missed. "I can't touch them with this thing," he called over his shoulder to Rhid. "If you can't outrun them, slow down!"

"I damn sure can't outrun them!" she called in answer.

"Then cruise back toward the mountain," Han told her and fired again.

Chewbacca voiced a vigorous negative and Rhid yelled, "Huh!? You've got to be kidding!"

"Trust me," Han called over the rush of wind. "Take her around to the south-east side." He envisioned the gash in the mountain's face through which he and Chewie had entered, saw the high percent grade down which they'd come. He sighed and hoped there was a lot more than just romantic colour to the phrase "spacer's luck".

Rhid banked into a turn and the overloaded craft protested and wallowed but held her altitude. Laser fire streaked past them. Han returned it and scored on the pursuing ship, but at this distance he doubted if the occupants would even notice.

He twisted his legs around in the tight confines of the cockpit. "Don't know how we're going to do this," he yelled, "but give me the controls."

"What?"

"Rhid, just slide under me over onto Chewie's lap."

"Why?"

"I'll show you in a minute. Just do it!" he added fiercely.

Convinced, the woman snapped on auto-hold and wiggled out of the seat and across the controls. She hauled her long legs awkwardly over the panel just as Han dropped into the pilot's position and took over the Tundrabird's controls.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her draped across the Wookiee, clutching the windscreen frame with one hand.

"Hang on!" Solo yelled as the tunnel appeared ahead and to their left. Smoke issued from its mouth. He made fast, seat-of-the-pants calculations having to do with mass-shift, gee-force, pressure dynamics, load-lift and induction performance curves - then chucked the whole thing and mentally crossed his fingers.

Hard astern, the skimmer loosed out more fire, scoring a jolting hit on the 'Bird's port stabiliser. She tipped and dropped.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Han muttered. He hit auxiliary lift and yawed his starboard wing, righting the little craft just meters away from the mountain side.

He glanced back; the skimmer was level and closing. Ahead black smoke poured from the tunnel. He invoked every good-luck god in his pantheon, plus a dozen others, and threw the Tundrabird into a dive. The pursuer followed as Rhid screamed and Chewie roared.

Han cut his momentum with a hard breaking manoeuvre, jammed the lateral stabiliser control, and made the modest craft do something she was never designed to do. He stood her on her tail and went straight up, viscerally willing the induction drive to cover his bet, to claw for altitude against gravity's inexorable pull.

Slower, but dogged, the pursuing skimmer dove, then arced into an ascending path and followed.

The Tundrabird sailed past the roiling tunnel mouth just as a tremendous gust of head and wind belched out, blowing her clear. But the skimmer, racing upward, still firing, was caught by the huge gout of magma that, following the hot blast, exploded from the mountain. She disappeared in the fiery cascade, as the Tundrabird was flung high on the thermal updrafts and Han laughed and shouted with the primitive elation of simply being alive.

Presently, he brought the small craft around and set her cruising on a course for the Falcon. Rhid was crying, or laughing. Perhaps a little bit of both. Han took time to notice small things now, such as his wrist had stopped bleeding, and below them, lines of ground vehicles and an air car or two headed south out of

Glune as the women who had remained fled before the mountain's molten menace. He also noticed that the Wookiee's fur loss was worse than it had seemed. Solo shook his head at the minor tragedy. "Don't worry, pal," he said. "It'll grow back."

Chewbacca made teeth at his captain.

They flew on through the morning.

Having made orbit, the Falcon's three occupants unstrapped and headed aft to celebrate with a drink and begin to unnerve and thaw out.

"I don't know how I'll ever thank you, Han," Rhid said over a mulled brandy. "I could never have got out alive without you."

"Oh, we'll think of something," he told her amiably.

"Not just for the escape, either," the woman insisted. "Now that we're out of range, I can notify the authorities. They'll pick up the refugees and round up what's left of the operation. I may get a commendation. Really, I owe you." She smiled happily.

Solo returned the expression, though his had a lazy, half-lidded look to it. "After we get through all the business," he told her, "I still have to find a dealer to convert Chewie's carry-all into mega-credits. I'll be around for a while. Which reminds me ..."

He turned to the Wookiee, who had draped the skip's tonneau cover over his disgraceful singed areas, and now sat morosely at the gambling table with a steaming mug before him.

"Which reminds me," Han continued, "that you owe me something, partner." HE stood leaning against the acceleration couch, his arms folded and grinning smugly, as the Wookiee looked up with an annoyed inquiry.

Solo pointed to the carry-all lying open on the table, half its sparkling contents spilling out. "You're a rich Wookiee," he replied. "And you're alive and in one piece. Seems like I remember you were going to thank me."

He continued to grin as Chewbacca nodded grudgingly and, sighing, pushed himself up from the table. He faced the Corellian and growled a polite Wookiee phrase.

Solo closed his eyes, spread his hands and inclined his head in a mock bow, a move which coincided with his co-pilot's right uppercut.

Han found the deck rather abruptly. He shook his head and looked up at his towering partner in great surprise. The Wookiee pulled the tonneau tighter around his ignominious disfigurement and went back to his brandy.

The Corellian looked to Rhid, who was laughing. His mouth pulled into a disgusted line that, after a second, spread into his familiar lop-sided grin. Picking himself up off the deck, he dusted his hands and the seat of his pants and sat down next to the redhead. Across the table he addressed the Wookiee. "You're welcome," he said.

end

[Back To Index](#)