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Difficult Sometimes (aka Flight to Bespin)

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

Han Solo.

Every time she thought about him, the muscles in her neck and shoulders tightened, pulling and cramping under her skin as if to breaking point. And she couldn't help but think about him; after all, she was in his cabin, on his bunk and wearing his shirt.

Leia's gaze flicked tiredly back to the datapad on her lap, and for the fifth time she re-read the unfinished section of the report she had been composing. The characters glowed and blurred, a mess of incorrectly spelt words and poor grammatical structure. Sentences hung half-finished, their analysis and arguments suspended in mid-thought. She struggled to focus on the report, grappling with her wandering concentration and forcing herself to read exactly what she had typed. With the bottom corner of her lip tucked up under her teeth, Leia's eyes scanned the screen. The breath whispered heavily through her nostrils; the section would have to be re-written --- it made no sense at all.

One small finger stabbed at the keypad with a cold mixture of indifference and undirected anger as she attempted to correct her mistakes. She had written these briefing reports before, in less time and under more adverse and stressful conditions. She could write them in her sleep if needed. Why was this usually simple task proving so difficult? So difficult...

You make things so difficult sometimes.

With a brutal, unsatisfying finality, Leia deleted the last hour's work from the datapad's memory, punched the TERMINATE button and hoisted the terminal

onto the adjacent desk. The datapad slew across the desk top, toppling a collection of scribes, tools, disassembled relays, spare parts and data disks to the deck with a clatter that did provide her with some sense of satisfaction. Resolutely ignoring the mess her actions had created --- after all, she thought with more than a touch of superiority, Han would have --- Leia uncurled her legs and stretched them down the length of the sleeping pallet. She adjusted the fabric of the dark blue dress shirt around her knees, then gracefully scissored her torso down onto her legs, her hands reaching for the arches of her bare feet. Her loose hair fell around her face, shoulders and legs, stray strands lifting in the currents of the recirculated air. She lay her face against her knees as she completed the stretch, seeking some temporary relief for her tight muscles.

...so difficult sometimes...

She ruefully considered how she must look a sight in the shirt that was many sizes too big for her, the sleeves rolled up around her elbows, the tight, lapelless formal collar loose around her small neck, untethered hair flailing around her. For long moments she lay listening to her deep breathing, trying to relax away the gristly knot of tension that bunched within her.

...so difficult...

Had it really only been a week since the Empire had discovered the hidden Rebel base on the ice planet Hoth? A week since the Empire had effortlessly crushed the resistance offered by two companies of the Alliance's best troops. A week since Han --- Han! Why are you still here? --- had rushed into the remains of the command centre and insisted that she leave. His voice firm, demanding. C'mon. That's it. His hands gripping her forearms, forcing her to leave her post, more concerned for her welfare than his own safety, stirring the confusing emotions she felt for him; emotions that had been simmering and sparking within her since...

The bile-bitter taste that rose in the back of her throat levered her upright, and a chill swept through her. A sudden image of Luke had crashed through her musings. Luke... He must surely be at the Alliance rendezvous point by now, and worrying about where Han and herself were. She had resolved the propriety of Luke's safety many days previous; she just simply knew he had escaped during the retreat from Hoth. She had no proof of this fact, other than a undeniable feeling that he was alive and well. He was alive --- that much was right. But her concern for his well-being had been gradually swelling, rubbing against her thoughts like an annoying blister. He was alive, well and safe... but... Something else didn't quite feel right. Leia had a bad feeling about this.

Self-consciously she glanced over her shoulder and down at the accusing mess of equipment she had let fall to the deck. No matter how hard she tried to ignore

or deny it, she couldn't; it wasn't like her to leave such disarray, to have little or no regard for another's possessions. To be like Han.

Resolving to push both Luke's well-being and Han's... well, Han in general, from her mind, Leia swung her legs off the bunk and crouched down next to the desk. The shirt tails covered her knees and brushed against the deck plates as she collected the equipment. Despite the warmth of the cabin, the deck was cold against her feet. She tried to ignore the childish thoughts that traipsed through her mind --- How does he hold this scribe? This multi-tool? --- as she returned the pieces to the desk top. She shuffled the data disks, her fingers tracing the titles, not certain what she would find. CEC YT-1300 Stock Light Freighter: Specifications and Maintenance Manual. Ship's Log: Back-up Copy. Advanced Interspatial Quantum Physics and Nonlinear Hyperspace Geometry. Astroarchaeology.

...difficult...

Her eyes closed, hands packing the remaining unread disks together. No. She didn't want to think any more about that man than she possibly had to. Wasn't it already bad enough that she was stuck on this bucket of bolts, this excuse for a starship? But to have him so near to her, with no other distractions, no other people, nothing to do...it just made things so much more complicated. Difficult.

Clearing a constriction from her throat as she rose, Leia returned the data disks to the desk and climbed back onto the bunk. She chided herself for letting the situation get the better of her; the internal coiled spring that normally propelled her forward and onward had progressively tightened over the last few days, cranking up by notches, increasing the tension within her. What she really needed was to relax, unwind and recuperate before returning to the Alliance. That shouldn't be too hard.

With arms crossed in front of her chest, Leia rubbed her aching shoulders, strong fingers massaging deep into cramped muscle. She tried to clear her mind, let the currents of the galaxy carry away her thoughts and worries, but a mote of a headache pulsed at her temple and she tried to will it away. It had been persisting in her skull over the last hours, threatening to develop in to a horrendous migraine but not progressing past an annoying thump. She had hoped the restorative powers of a real water 'fresher would wash it away, and maybe even improve her mood. After travelling in the Millennium Falcon in the same clothes for the last seven days, cooped up with a lunatic pirate, a paranoid protocol droid and an increasingly anxious Wookiee, Leia had decided she deserved a quick cycle in the small refresher stall, even if the precious water was recycled and grey. And she had felt marginally better, until her plan to run her white combat outfit through the Falcon's valet unit on a wet/dry program had faltered. Unfortunately, but predicably as with any piece of equipment on this clapped out freighter, the valet unit had ceased operation halfway through the

drying cycle. Her damp clothes now hung by the door and she'd been forced to raid Han's minuscule closet to find something to wear. As she had never seen him wear this formal shirt before, she didn't think he'd mind if she wore it. Don't care even if he does mind, she amended.

A spasm jerked through her left shoulder and she dug her fingers hard against her skin, probing for the origin of her discomfort. She grimaced as she kneaded the knots, her fingertips brushing the soft fabric of the shirt. If she closed her eyes and concentrated, inhaling softly, she could detect his uniquely masculine scent in the weave of the fabric. Just as she had when she had first slept in his bunk. I'm sleeping in Han Solo's bunk. I'm wearing Han Solo's shirt. Part of her was uncomfortable with the connotations of a woman wearing a man's clothes, of the intimacy it implied. How many women would kill to be in this position? Or more to the point, how many women have already been in this position, so to speak? But her logical side reasoned that she was past that, especially seeing as she had been encamped in his cabin for five days.

Han had insisted that she take his cabin, and when she thought back on it, perhaps a little too insistently; whether he genuinely wanted her to have the best (best?!) accommodation on the Falcon, or he wanted her to be continually reminded of him, or he wanted some light housekeeping done --- she couldn't decide which. The small room had been as disarrayed as his mind, and she had spent the first hour tidying it up, hanging up the clothes that were strewn across the bunk, removing the used meal containers and ration wrappings, and giving the small desk some semblance of order. Apart from Chewbacca's rather neat and dark cabin, the other two crew quarters were full of packing cases, equipment, spare parts and other pieces of junk. Leia didn't know where Han was sleeping, and she told herself that she didn't really care; and sometimes, she even believed what she told herself. Since they had made good their escape, she had been avoiding him. She wasn't quite sure why she didn't want to spend time with him. No, she knew why she didn't want to be near him; she just didn't want to think about the reasons why --- and there were so many reasons. So she made certain she was never alone with him for any length of time, either seeking out Chewbacca or Threepio, walking away from conversations he attempted to start, or simply retreating to his cabin. By herself. Lately she had been spending more and more time by herself in his cabin, the lock firmly set, and she thought he was finally getting the idea that she wanted to be left alone. However she was finding it harder to ignore the baffled, almost hurt grimace that distorted his easy smile whenever she turned her back on him. Something within her caught and tightened at the thought that she had somehow caused him pain. She knew her feigned indifference was cutting him, and herself, deeply. Yet what else could she do? One of them had to act rationally and put a stop to this before things got out of hand. She wished he and that stupid lopsided smile of his would leave her in peace long enough for her to work out a way to stop her knees and her heart from melting whenever when she saw him.

The shipboard days had been long and empty, filled only by her thoughts, her feelings and the report she was preparing for presentation on her return to the Alliance. And, travelling at sublight speed with the Falcon's hyperdrive out of action, they were only just over halfway to Bespin. Only five days since their miraculous and reckless escape from the Empire, since Han had saved her life. Again.

A sliver of ice speared down her spine. Hunching her shoulders painfully, Leia gripped her arms across her chest and shivered. The air on her face and legs was warm, but she felt a bone-deep chill settle within her. She adjusted her position as she leant heavily against the bulkhead, curling her legs under her and pulling the shirt over her bare feet. She smoothed the cover of the pillow she cradled in her lap for added warmth.

Okay, she admitted to herself grudgingly, she was grateful he had saved her --- again. But it also annoyed the hell out of her. It was almost as if each time he rescued her, he took possession of another part of her soul. He had saved Luke's life as well, but somehow that was different. They were friends, after all. She and Han were friends too, of course, but it was still different. And difficult.

Back in the medical centre on Hoth, Han had gleefully told Luke, "That's two you owe me, junior." She wondered what it would take for him to crow a similar line to her. She owed him --- there was no way around it, no sense denying it. But what exactly did she owe him? And would he be expecting to collect?

Leia hugged the pillow to her chest. What sort of a relationship was going on here? Was there any sort of a relationship, apart from a fond, begrudging kind of friendship born in the confusion and danger of the corridors of the Death Star. Could a kiss stolen in the turmoil of flight from the Empire really be counted as a relationship? She couldn't continue avoiding him for the rest of the journey, and she'd have to eventually face him when they reached Bespin's Cloud City. Then what would happen? Why am I even bothering to worry about this, she wondered as she returned to massaging her shoulders. He's leaving as soon as the ship's fixed and he's returned me to the Alliance. The only cause he's committed to is the one to look after Han Solo. He's not about to hang around for me, and I'm not even sure I want him to.

Ordinarily she would never have associated with anyone like him, let alone become friends with him. It wasn't just that they were from opposite ends of the social spectrum; her father's sensibilities and lack of pretensions on that regard had certainly been impressed on her. Nor was it that he was smuggler, a criminal, for when it got down to the hard facts of the matter, Leia herself could be called a criminal. No, it was neither of these points. Well, maybe they do count for something, she conceded weakly. But above all, there was one factor that relentlessly gnawed away at her resolve --- Han Solo infuriated her. He was the most selfish and egotistical person she had ever known. Although a skilled pilot,

he was an absolute lunatic with his flying abilities, and there were times when she questioned his sanity. He spoke without thinking, without regard for customs or manners. He displayed intelligence, wit and sparks of brilliance and insight, and yet conversely his occasional lapses sometimes made her think that he was also a bit dim-witted. All right, so he could speak and understand quite a few languages, but he wasn't that well-educated. He had a quick mouth he either didn't know how, or have the sense, to keep shut. Plus he had all the breeding and decorum of a womp rat. Combine this with his ill-regard for anyone besides himself and the way he trampled on people's feelings with carefree abandon. And yet he was also brave and strong, strangely articulate at times, fiercely independent, and a natural leader many were willing to follow, herself included. However her mind refused to abandon her original, more sensible thoughts: Han Solo was nothing more than a two-credit mercenary, riddled with selfish intent to the very core of his existence. At times, Leia actually thought she hated him; the emotions he generated within her burned with such intensity they had to be hate. She didn't want to hate him, she told herself. She did like him, liked him a lot. During the brief moments they shared accord, she found him an interesting, insightful conversationalist. He also made her laugh. What she really wanted was for him to go away, to stop confusing her. She had never experienced such fierce, torrid feelings towards another being. But if she did hate him, why couldn't she stop thinking about him? And why did her heart beat faster whenever she saw him?

When she thought about it, these emotions had vaguely played around the edge of her consciousness for a while now, however they had dramatically surfaced after they had taken refuge from the Imperials in an asteroid field. The ship had lurched and she had fallen into his lap. A smuggler's lap was definitely no place for a princess and she had tried to rise but he had held her there firmly. Hoping, perhaps, that more would develop. Uncharacteristically, she had panicked slightly at that thought and had pleaded for him to let go. He had been taken aback, perhaps a bit unsettled that he had frightened her and had responded the only way he knew how, defensively, as if sitting on his lap had been her idea.

"Don't get excited."

But by then, in control of her fear, Leia had expertly parried, "Captain, being held by you isn't quite enough to get me excited."

She had felt the hurt and disappointment she caused in the way he had roughly lifted her off his lap, though his tone betrayed none of what he was feeling. "Sorry, sweetheart." His voice became low, husky, dangerous "Haven't got time for anything else." He had leered at her suggestively as he'd departed the cockpit --- the first time any man offered her an overtly sexual display. In that instance, she had felt violated. The hair had rose on the back of her neck, her stomach dropped, and for a moment she had instinctively feared for her safety. Quickly replaying the exchange in her mind, she heard the sarcasm and nasty humour in

his voice. She realised he had acted in such a way to punish her for not being more responsive, for her attack on his virility and because he had wanted to win this particular power play. And he did, Leia agreed with a grim smile. Why did he insist on staging this contest of wills between them? Why did he have to push her all the time? Why did he make things so difficult?

His vindictive immaturity had angered her so much that, despite the immediate danger of TIE bombers, fighters and Star Destroyers, she had stormed around the Falcon in a foul mood. She had ignored Han, asking Chewbacca what work she could do to assist with the repair of the ship. As she had welded some piece of equipment, she became aware of Han's eyes moving over her body as he watched her from the tech station. She had felt him watch her like that before --- at formal ceremonial occasions when her attire befitted her more as a princess than as a leader of a rebellion; at briefings she conducted, where he stood insolently slouched against a rear wall rather than assuming a seat with the official members of the Rebellion; once when he had helped her down off a high platform, his hands encircling her waist as she held on to his biceps, and she had tried not to stare in to his eyes; and recently when they ate together in the mess dining hall, she had noticed his stare becoming more frequent and open. She had not been surprised then, when he reached around her shoulders, ostensibly to help her with a stubborn valve, and pressed himself against the full length of her body. She had curbed her instinctive reaction to elbow him in the groin, instead roughly pushing him, and her own conflicting emotions, away.

"Hey, Your Worship, I'm only trying to help." His tone had denied any wrong doing on his part, and carried a hint of victimisation, as if she had misinterpreted his actions.

It had all be too much for Leia. The Imperial attack on the Rebel Base. The narrow escape from Hoth, only to run headlong in to a task force of Star Destroyers. Naturally, when needed most, the Falcon's hyperdrive had failed. Han's courageous piloting through the asteroid field, though inspired and skilful, was not much better than a controlled crash. Their haven inside an unstable asteroid was only a temporary respite from the Imperial Star Destroyers that hovered outside the field, awaiting their anticipated and obvious mad break for freedom. If matters weren't bad enough, Leia had had to brush up on her close combat skills to keep Han and his advances at bay. When the valve had stuck, Leia's strength had momentarily faltered. She was tired, scared, fed up with his sarcasm. Her hard exterior had cracked and she had admitted to him, "You make things so difficult sometimes."

His admission that he did had surprised her. But not wanting to be held fully responsible for his actions, shifting the blame, he had goaded her again, "You could be a little nicer, though." Perhaps seeking forgiveness for his previous behaviour or acknowledgment that he might still have a chance, he had asked, "C'mon. Sometimes you think I'm alright."

His pitiful tone had almost amused her. "Occasionally. Maybe. When you aren't acting like a scoundrel."

"Scoundrel? Scoundrel? I like the sound of that."

He smiled his lazy, lopsided smile, Leia recalled, and unquestioningly took the hand she had knocked against the stubborn valve, massaging it with his warm, large fingers. She protested. He slowly drew her closer, staring deep into her soul with an intensity that overwhelmed her, yet still lightly teasing her.

"What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid?"

"You're trembling."

His eyes. She distinctly remembered noticing the colour of his eyes, as if for the first time. They held her captive, held her tenderly, a clear hazel flecked with gold.

"You like me because I'm a scoundrel. There aren't enough scoundrels in your life."

She tried to resist him, tried to remember who she was, who he was.

"I happen to like nice men." And 'nice' was not the word to describe Han Solo.

"I'm a nice man." His voice surrounded her, penetrated her, deep and soft. For some reason at that moment she suddenly realised how handsome he was, his physical presence radiating, almost shimmering in the confined space. Her body tingling with anticipation, fear of the unknown, but her mind still maintaining some control.

"No you're not, you're ---"

Leia lay her cheek against the pillow and hugged her knees. She could still smell him on the pillow, his masculine scent mixed with the dab of fragrance she used. Even though she'd been in the cabin, slept in his bunk, for the last five days, she could still smell where he had slept.

A knock at the door broke the spell.

"Yes?" She touched the remote for the door.

Han stood there, his hair wet, moisture glistening on his bare chest, naked save for a towel wrapped around his waist. How typically subtle of you, Han, she

thought angrily. Her pulse quickened, a mesh of annoyance at his obvious attempt to seduce or impress her, and the unexpected pleasure she felt at seeing him again. His state of undress had certainly taken her aback, but at the same time she found herself staring, appreciating the lean, muscular lines of his body. The playful smile on his face and glint in his eye suggested he had wanted to shock or entice her with his brazen actions, wanting any sort of a response from her in preference to her indifference. But she didn't --- wouldn't --- bite at the bait he offered.

"What do you want?" she asked impatiently.

He smiled suggestively and leaned against the hatchway, one hand poised on his hip. His chin tilted towards her challengingly. "What have you got in mind?" He saw the anger cloud her face and, with a disappointed sigh, realised this stunt wouldn't work on her. The hand slid from his hip and he scratched his cheek. "Just want to get some clean clothes. Don't worry, I won't be long."

Reminding herself to be wary of him, she haughtily nodded her consent. As he entered the cabin, Han frowned at the foreign state of cleanliness that confronted him. It was the first time he had been in the cabin since Leia had taken up residence. He looked around from deckplates to bulkheads, nodding approvingly.

"You've cleaned up in here," he declared.

"That's the only reason you let me use your cabin in the first place, isn't it?" Leia cocked an eyebrow suspiciously.

"Good point," Han agreed as he wiped his hand across the desk, rubbed his fingers together in search of dust. "I did think the place could use a woman's touch, but I didn't think a princess like you would be up to it."

Leia let the snide comment lay where it had fallen, her eyes hardening, adding this remark to his list of faults she was desperately trying to accumulate.

"You've impressed me, though," Han conceded as his inspection continued. "Dusted, made the bunk, taken out the garbage---"

"Oh, I'm sure there's still plenty more garbage on this trash hauler that needs to be dealt with, Han," she interrupted sweetly, an insincere smile across her face.

He smirked at her, enjoying the interplay. The movements of his body slowed, shoulders tilting towards her. She watched the smirk become a sensual twist of his lips, his skin glowing as his face displayed the change in his thoughts. He moved slowly towards the bunk.

"I'll bet you're good at lots of things, Princess." His voice a rumbling whisper in her ear.

"More than you'll ever know, flyboy," Leia heard herself say, immediately wishing she hadn't as a spark ignited his eyes.

Her heart thumped, trapped within the cage of her chest, beating frantically like a timid bird flapping its wings. This was probably the longest they had spoken since they had eluded the Empire. As she had before, Leia could feel the distinctive presence that radiated from him, as if she could sense the way his physical body displaced the air in the cabin. This is getting dangerous, she warned herself. Pull yourself together. Eject now.

Struggling to keep her breathing regular, she dropped her gaze and studied her work-torn fingernails, hoping he would interpret her silence as disinterest and maybe hurry up and leave. Shielded from his intense stare beneath the hair that fell across her brow and face, the repressed tension between them thinned noticeably. Her composure returned with each shallow breath. Through lowered eyelashes, she watched his approach lose intensity. He casually banked right and passed by the bunk.

"I'll bet you're a pretty good cook as well," he tentatively suggested.

Please leave, she silently begged, trying to ignore the warm baritone of his voice that reached out to her.

"Y'know, Your Highness," he continued quietly, "some day you're gonna make some lucky fella a good wife."

The sincerity in his words lifted her head from her chest. This wasn't play. This was more than teasing about her refined upbringing, more than veiled innuendo; Han had meant what he had said, and the openness and honesty on his face startled her. She could never quite pick what he might do or say next.

Leia favoured him with a small smile that he returned. The thought that she might actually be someone's wife had never seriously crossed her mind. Perhaps, long ago, she had once dreamed of marrying a handsome prince or senator. But they were the childish fantasies of a young girl, and had been all too quickly dispersed by the realities of the galaxy. Since becoming a senator at the age of 16, Leia had had no time for such flights of fancy. And yet the sudden thought of marriage, the spiritual and physical union of woman and man, strangely appealed to her. A foolish, unrealistic notion, she chided herself lightly, but 'nice' all the same. And how 'nice' of Han to consider my husband a 'lucky fella'. Might even let him get away with that cleaning wisecrack for that one.

Han gestured at her as he moved to the closet. "Your hair."

Leia frowned. "My hair?"

"Yeah. In all the time I've known you, this is the first time I've seen your hair down."

With a vaguely wicked touch to her lips, she mimicked his gesture and drawing Corellian accent. "Well, Han, in all the time I've known you, this is the first time I've seen you half-naked."

He grinned lopsidedly at her. "Well, Princess, you know how I hate to do things by halves," he said, turning towards the closet and dropping the towel from his waist.

Leia's breath caught in her throat, and her cheeks blushed red hot. She caught a glimpse --- an indentation of hip, the firm, white flesh of buttocks --- before belatedly averting her eyes. A sharp, shocked embarrassment inflamed her anger. Trust the man to act so obviously, flagrantly, obtusely like, like... --- she struggled for a suitable epithet ---- like just how I'd expect him to act! She grit her teeth, the muscles in her neck tightening again. It was not the first time she had seen a naked man, nor did she think it would be the last; it was just unexpected and uncalled for, and yet the first and last thing she wanted to see again. Why does he always have to ruin things? Why must he make things so difficult?

"You can look again," Han called out.

Not trusting him farther than she could lift him, Leia gave him a few more moments before glancing up. His back was still towards, the muscles on his shoulder blades flexing and stretching as he settled a pair of dark trousers over his hips. He turned towards her, smiling brilliantly, immensely pleased with himself, as he buckled his belt.

Cheeks and eyes burning, Leia snapped, "Han Solo, you are incorrigible!" Her spine straightened and she pushed the hair from her face. "How dare you waltz in here, flaunting your wares like some...some... back-street party boy who's after a few quick credits before closing time!" And I'm just warming up!

His smile faded, his arrogance waning in the storm of her indignant anger. Even he could see he had pushed her too far. He stared at her solemnly. "Do you want me to leave, Leia?"

Yes! Leave, now! No, wait! She hesitated. If he left, would he return? Would she want him to return? Would it change things? Better? Worse? More difficult? "It's your cabin," she finally compromised. Let him make the decision.

Her breath came in a relieved sigh when he sat down on the far end of the bunk. His weight shifted the mattress, rippling down to her. He dabbed the water from his chest with the towel, searching for something inoffensive to say.

"My clothes look better on you than they ever do on me," he ventured, tousling the towel across his head.

"I'm lucky I found something clean," she lightly scolded. This was better, more natural. Reprimanding him rather than defending her own position. "You don't have much of a wardrobe to chose from."

"Whaddaya mean?" His grin beamed from under the towel, relieved she was still talking to him.

"This was about the only thing that wasn't black, white or dirty."

He scowled and dipped one shoulder dismissively. "I'm no fashion victim."

"I hope you don't mind," she said pleasantly. Liar.

She watched as he scrunched the towel in to a loose ball and tossed it to a corner.

"Can't even remember the last time I wore that," he said, trying to comb his damp hair with his fingers.

Barely shaking her head, Leia's gaze moved from the discarded towel to his ineffectual grooming attempts. So that's where the scruffy hair comes from, she mused. Does the man own a brush or comb? "You're nothing if but consistent, Han."

"Consistent, but not predictable, hey?"

She returned his apologetic smile, thinking it was probably the most of an apology she'd get from him. The colour of his eyes shifted grey-green, grateful for the unvoiced forgiveness she gave him. Those eyes... Leia looked down at her hands, studying the dry lines of her fingers. An uncomfortable, expectant silence filled the gap between them. The pulse drummed in her ears.

"You've been avoiding me," Han finally said.

"No I haven't." She said that just a little too quickly, defensively.

"Have I done something wrong? I mean, apart from usual."

His penitent question was unexpected. How could she reply to that? He hadn't specifically done anything wrong --- he was everything wrong.

"I just need some time to myself," she said softly, glancing up at him. She cringed at the lameness of her explanation. Even to her own ears, she sounded like an inexperienced schoolgirl breaking up with her first boyfriend.

He looked at her earnestly. "I thought we'd been getting along so well."

"We have been," she admitted with a wistful purse of her lips. Perhaps a little too well.

"It's a nice change," he continued, maintaining his momentum. "I was kinda planning on getting used to it."

"I wouldn't if I was you." You're leaving, after all, she finished in her mind. In reply to the crease in his brow, she added, "You know our truces never last very long. We get along better when we leave each other alone."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?" Her retort was sharp and he flinched slightly. Maybe that's why I'm hiding. I don't want to ruin whatever we've experienced in the short time left before he leaves. Forever. Rubbing her stiff neck, Leia levelled her tone. "I'm tired, Han. Of fighting and struggling with you." Tired of it all.

"What d'you mean?" He was incredulous. "We don't fight all the time."

"Yes, we do," she said simply.

"No we don't."

"We do," she insisted. "It's some sort of defective Corellian gene. You always argue with me."

"Nah, that's just banter, 's'all." He looked concerned.

"Han," she spoke to him slowly, as if to a child, "you always argue with me. I could say the sky is blue and you'd give me five reasons why it's any other colour but."

His sneer somehow made it easier for her to continue, as if reading from that list she was compiling, convincing herself how wrong and difficult he was.

"And when you aren't being argumentative or difficult, you're being flippant, sarcastic, rude, obnoxious. You call me names: 'Your Highnessness', 'Your Worship', 'Your ---'"

"No way!" he cut her off. "There's no way I'm like that! You make me sound like I'm an arrogant, argumentative son-of-a- "

"Han! Listen to yourself!" She couldn't believe she was having this conversation, this argument. "Why is it so difficult for you just to have a conversation with me without it escalating into an argument or a test of wills? Why do you always want to fight....with....me?" Leia's torrent slowed as she realised he was softly chuckling to himself, laughing at a private joke.

He gave her a dazzling smile. "You're easy to tease. And you react so well, Your Highnessness."

Leia blushed again, embarrassed that he had caught her out so easily. "Honestly, sometimes you act like a little boy who enjoys pulling my hair just to get my attention."

Han shrugged. "It works, doesn't it?" His playful demeanour changed. "But, go on. I can have a decent conversation with you. You'd be surprised."

He swung his legs up onto the bunk and sat opposite her with his legs crossed. He scratched the arch of one large foot and leaned forward. "What do you want to talk about?"

Resting his forearms on his long legs, hair damp, face clean-shaven and fresh, he looked younger, almost different for some unfathomable reason. Leia briefly imagined what he looked like as a gawky, long-limbed teenager, roaming the streets of Corellia, on the prowl for trouble and excitement. The gulf in their individual experiences and upbringings seemed unbridgeable. What did they have in common? What could they possibly talk about? She barely even knew who he really was. And he had such big feet.

"Why don't we talk about you," she suggested.

"Me? Why me?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, you've been with the Alliance ---"

"I am not with the Alliance."

Leia smiled indulgently. "Are you arguing with me again, Captain?"

"No, it's just ---"

"Do I detect a certain tone in your voice?"

Han immediately raised his palms in submission. "Alright, I surrender. You win." His mouth screwed up to one side. "Wanna talk about me, huh? There's nothin' to tell. I'm sure there's more important things we can talk about." He winked seductively. "Or do."

Despite the air of casualness, Leia detected his hesitant behaviour. Let him squirm a bit, Leia thought haughtily. Get a taste of his own medicine for a change.

"Nothin' to tell," she parodied, "or you don't tell nothin'?"

He sighed and muttered something unintelligible to himself.

"Sorry, Han?" Leia asked with great exaggeration. "Did you say something?"

Still resting an elbow on his leg, he brought a hand up to his head and heavily rested his chin in his palm. "You're not gonna let me get away from this," he asked, "are you?"

"You were the one who said you could talk and think at the same time," she teased. "Don't tell me you over-estimated your abilities."

He sighed again, a pained expression straining his face. "Why me?" he asked simply.

She gave him a simple answer. "We've known each other for a few years, and yet I know virtually nothing about you. You don't let much out." Or much in.

Without further hesitation, he gracefully slipped in to his standard patter, his mouth half hidden behind curled fingers. "Play your cards close to the chest, is what I always say."

Smart bastard. Closed answer to an open question. "And why's that, Han?"

He frowned, then recognition lit his face. He sat upright and raised a lecturing finger. "Don't try to psychoanalyse me, Princess." He pointed to himself. "I am the way I am and that's all anyone needs to know. About me or my motives."

Leia smirked at his abrupt defensiveness. The corner of his mouth dropped as if a fault in his shields had revealed a weakness. He glowered at her, then half-laughed.

"Besides, you can talk," he retorted. "Sitting up there in that ice tower of yours. Unflagging dedication to your responsibilities, your duty." He emphasised the

words as if this was a fault of hers, misguided dalliance. "Impervious to all. So cold and hard that sometimes I think your face'd crack if you smiled."

His barbs, though spiked, did not penetrate her skin. Much. They had 'discussed' this matter before, on numerous occasions; she knew he had trouble understanding why the Rebel Alliance was so important to her. Now she realised that maybe it wasn't so much that he had trouble understanding, but that he refused to understand. Perhaps even felt threatened by her devotion to something other than herself.

Leia cocked her head in annoyance. She didn't care if he was feeling 'threatened'. His remarks were uncalled for. How could they have more of a relationship if he couldn't --- wouldn't --- understand what she believed in?

"You take life too seriously," Han added quietly, as if realising he had been arguing --- again --- and supposing he had said too much. "I think you need to loosen up. Let go. Enjoy yourself for a change."

Her eyes narrowed, but she assumed her admonishing tone. "Han, unless you hadn't realised, we're in the middle of a war here."

His eyes rolled --- they'd been through this before too.

"I have responsibilities and obligations. I have people relying on me. People looking to me for direction and leadership."

She knew her speech was lost on him; his head slowly nodding in mock agreement only convinced her to continue.

"I've given a commitment to these people, what they stand for, and even to myself. If the Empire is to be stopped, then we must be prepared to make sacrifices, to put our personal dreams and desires on hold. I don't have time to 'enjoy' myself." She wanted to punch the bemused grin from his face. Instead she added, "And I certainly don't have time to walk around with a stupid, lopsided smirk across my face."

"Hey!" His indignant protest at her less than surreptitious jab was only half joking.

"Besides, we're not talking about me," she continued without missing a beat and prepared to ignore his disputive nature; it was easy to be forgiving when she had laid a direct hit on him. "You know all about me. It's my turn to find out who you are."

His eyes regarded her warily from under knitted brows. "Hmmm." He didn't sound convinced this was such a good idea.

"Come on," she appealed, an unvoiced challenge perched on her lips. "I promise to be gentle with you." She knew her comment was provocative, suggestive, but she couldn't help herself; it had seemed the most natural thing in the galaxy to say to him. And she relished the vaguely 'wicked' feeling that stirred within.

Han grinned to himself, the slight he felt dispersed by the familiar way she spoke to him.

"Okay," he agreed. "But I warn you, I bruise awful easy."

"You can show me the scars later."

"I'll hold you to that."

Watch it, she warned herself as she readjusted her position and rubbed at her neck. This may be fun now but things can get out of hand very quickly.

"So you were raised on Corellia?" Leia began. That seemed like a safe place to start.

"Raised? What, like a grain crop?" He smiled cheekily at her, determined to go down fighting. "Okay, okay," he quickly amended as she sighed with frustration. "Not exactly 'raised'. More like 'hit-the-ground-running'. Kept my head above water most of the time."

"Sounds like you've been in trouble with the authorities for most of your life?"

"Not 'trouble', Leia." His tone carried a touch of indignation. "I've never been 'in trouble' with any authority." His mouth twitched in thought. "'In trouble' with woman, I'll give you that much." He grinned at some private memory. "But with the tags, the local police, I prefer to think of it as 'mutual respect'."

Leia raised a sculptured, sceptical eyebrow, trying to maintain her seriousness in spite of the infectious smirk plastered across his expressive face. Han shrugged nerfishly.

"Okay, 'trouble' it was," he conceded, adding, "But I was fast enough most times to keep out of their grasp."

I can imagine. "What were you like as a child?"

"Not much different than I am now. Except shorter."

"Why doesn't that surprise me." She didn't doubt his sardonic quip, after all, what she had experienced of his behaviour had often made her draw the same conclusion. But why was he like this? What events had happened to him during

his formative years? What sort of adult guidance had he received? She switched track slightly, searching for a piece to the puzzle that was Han Solo. "What about your parents?"

Han had trouble keeping a straight face. "Yeah. Had two of 'em."

Leia sighed in exasperation at Han and herself as he grinned again, realising almost as soon as she had asked the question that a response, or at least a sensible response, would not be forthcoming. The query had been too personal and revealing, and a lifetime behind him. If she wanted to get under that thick hide of his, she needed a recent episode, one that was still reasonably fresh in his mind. Something significant, closer, the tracks of scar tissue tracing blue-white across his soul.

Leia dropped her hands from her shoulders, leaned forward. "When were you at the Academy?"

The smirk fell from his face, eyes crystallised to shards of ice, jaw tightening as his teeth ground together. Direct hit, Leia, she congratulated herself, grateful for the years of diplomatic training and perception. She had gleaned that much about his background from Luke. Han had confided in Luke about his previous occupation. Luke had, in turn, confided in Leia. She did not condemn Han for it; many of the Alliance's pilots and senior officers had a background in one of the Imperial forces. The knowledge had only added to the confusing conundrum he presented to her; Han Solo was more than what he seemed, more than a simple smuggler and mercenary. The man was more than difficult --- he was a nightmare.

Han stared at her knowingly. Subdued, he quietly admitted, "A long time ago."

The atmosphere between them carried the insinuation of resentment, but at least he had answered her question. He was uncomfortable, and yet he remained at the foot of the bunk, prepared to allow Leia to continue with her interrogation. The small smile she gave him conveyed her gratitude. For once their relationship seemed to be progressing.

Leia asked, "You were a Navy pilot?"

"Yeah."

Lighten things up before this backfires. "I can't imagine Han Solo as an Imperial," she teased, laughing lightly.

His face was impassive. "Neither could they."

Leia cringed. A sickening pain reminded her the muscle spasms had failed to cease. Thoughtfully she prodded at the tendons on the side of her neck. Maybe she shouldn't have tackled him on this subject. He was obviously reluctant to discuss it further. How much further should she push him? And yet there was still so much she wanted to learn and comprehend.

She shook her head in a gesture of bewilderment, and spoke to him slowly. "Help me understand, Han."

His features had set in a blank, unemotional mask.

"Why did you enlist in the first place? Why does an intelligent, wild young kid join a militaristic, disciplined outfit like the Imperial Navy? Why did you join the Empire?"

She knew she had been successful in deleting the accusatory tones from her voice when the corner of his mouth contorted in to a grimace, the hint of a wry smile.

"Nothing better to do," he suggested.

She smiled at him encouragingly, her head nodding slowly, coaxing him to open up to her. His shoulders heaved with a heavy sigh, throat clearing with a cracking sound emanating from deep within his chest.

"I haven't always been like this, Leia," he began, the cold in his eyes and on his face melting. "I was once like you and Luke."

Leia ceased her ministrations to her muscles. Breath suspended between parted lips, she leaned towards him, absorbed by every word he offered.

A sarcastic sneer twisted his lips. "I didn't exactly have your level of idealism, or undying faith in the greater good of humanity. But I was foolish enough to have dreams and goals." He shrugged self-deprecatingly. "One of 'em was to fly. And I was lucky enough to be accepted in to the Academy."

Leia knew 'luck' had nothing to do with it. The selection process for entrance to the Imperial Academy was a strict and demanding procedure designed to select the most academically capable and skill-specific cadets available. Only the top five percent of applicants were successful. In turn, the Academy's gruelling regimen and examinations winnowed out the cadets, resulting in a graduation rate of between sixty and seventy percent. The fact that Han had successfully graduated was testimony to his academic ability, his brilliance as a pilot and his determination to succeed at whatever he put his mind to.

"The Navy trained me, taught me to fly," Han explained. "In return, I sold off a few years of my life." He coughed out a bitter laugh. "Thought I'd find something I thought I needed. Something I thought was missing from my life. I was wrong."

Her face showed concern and understanding. "And Chewbacca's the reason why you..." she considered her words carefully "...left?" She also knew the real reason behind Han's court martial and dishonourable discharge from the Navy. Yet another baffling piece to this man.

He shrugged. "Lost a career and gained a smelly furball instead. Some exchange."

Leia rubbed at her neck, stared ahead distantly, past Han, past the ship's bulkheads. The ramifications of what he had said reverberated throughout her. He had allowed her to see a side of him he resolutely kept hidden from the galaxy. She felt honoured that he trusted her enough to share this part of himself with her. And at the same time, she marvelled at the chain of events that had been set in motion, the carefully crafted circumstances that had led up to a fresh-faced young farm boy magically appearing in her cell declaring he was there to rescue her.

"Do you ever wonder how things might've turned out if you hadn't made the choices you did?" she asked.

"No."

His quick reply jolted her. "Not ever?" She knew his opinion about the Force, didn't believe his destiny was controlled by anything apart from the whims of the Falcon's temperamental hyperdrive and the shifting faces of sabacc cards. But surely he must have second thoughts about the way things occur, had pondered what would have happened if he had failed to rescue an enslaved Wookiee from a cruel superior.

"Life happens, Leia." His face reflected his seriousness. "I try not to intellectualise about the reasons why things happen. It's easier that way."

His answer was almost too glib, well-practised. "Easier?"

"Keeps me on the straight and level."

"You? Straight and level?" She shook her head in disbelief, amused at his impressions about himself and trying to chip through the sober mantle he had adopted; he didn't share the joke. "You mean if you don't think about things too hard, your conscience doesn't get in the way."

"I jettisoned my conscience way back. Too much excess luggage weighs you down."

Again with the pilot-speak, she marvelled. Comfortable with the allusion of life to one expansive sortie, comprised of intricate flight manoeuvres. But she didn't believe his claim. Although she had often levied this particular character trait against him, she knew it was another fabrication used to patch the cracks in his facade.

Leia smiled at him coyly. "I think your conscience is about two meters tall with shaggy hair and blue eyes."

Han raised his chin defiantly. "Chewie doesn't tell me what to do. Nobody does and nobody ever will."

His voice assumed his mercenary timbre, immediately recognisable to Leia. Sitting there in front of her, bare feet, bare chest, hands resting on his knees, it was as if the light had angled through the fissures in his facade, illuminating the vulnerable idealist that hid within. Leia had peered through and seen a man flying from the galaxy at full shields, one evasive manoeuvre after another. She had wanted a serious, open discussion with him and had been relatively pleased with her success at chipping through to the heart of who Han Solo was, but now she feared he was retreating back under cover, safe from prying eyes. Ooh, the mood is definitely too dark in here.

"Oh, I don't know, Han," she suggested hastily with an exaggerated air, finger tapping thoughtfully on her cheek. "I can see a day when you're a hen-pecked husband sitting at home looking after the children while your wife's off saving the galaxy."

His unexpected chuckle displaced the cold dread within her. Leia had a sudden desire to wrap her arms around him, hold him, thank him for the gift of trust he had given her, feel his warmth against her face. She wondered how far from reality her whimsical prediction would be. Light years knowing Han Solo.

Grinning appreciatively at her teasing eyes, he told her, "I'd rather be neutered than give up my freedom. Besides, I can't see myself 'settling down'. There's too much still left to do and see. Too much glitterstim left to smuggle, sabacc games to play ---"

"Princesses to charm?"

The suggestion had flown from her unbiddenly. His hazel eyes darkened, softened, staring at her intensely.

"Is that what I'm doing?" his voice rumbled quietly.

His desire to move closer down the bunk towards her was palpable, but he stayed where he was, tensing, predator-like, waiting to pounce. Heart thumping, Leia pulled her knees up and hugged them against her chest, tucking the shirt around her feet. Her mind raced as she averted her eyes, a heady mixture of fear and excitement sweeping through her system.

"What about you, Leia? What are you gonna do when your war's over?"

His question caught her off guard, stemming the coursing emotions. She met his eyes again.

"Do?"

"Yeah." His easy smile was encouraging. "What do princesses do? Marry a nice young prince? Set up palace somewhere? Oppress the peasants?"

Grateful for the change in subject and intensity, Leia ignored his sarcasm and concentrated on an answer. When she was younger, she had dreamed of establishing a foundation to help those less fortunate than herself. However her dreams to help the needy had been subsumed by political realities and a consuming passion to correct the injustices of the Empire. The Rebel Alliance had helped channel these energies, but her immediate plans related directly to being an effective leader of the Rebellion and by that contributing to the overthrow of the Empire.

"This war still has a long way to go," she told him as she tried to stretch her aching shoulder muscles. "We've barely made a dent in the Empire's armour. I don't know how long it will take us to recover from our defeat at Hoth. And yet despite these setbacks, the Rebellion will regroup and reconsider, formulate new strategies and continue chipping away at the Empire." She cringed momentarily at the pain. "There's so much still to fight for and so much still left to do. I haven't even considered what to do when it's finished." Her gaze turned inward. "I doubt I'll even be alive by then."

"I think you'll out live all of us, Leia."

Her attention returned to him and she watched him absently rub a thumb across the scar on his chin.

"It's people like you that make things happen." His gaze was earnest. "You have the strength, faith and conviction to see this out. You're a survivor, otherwise you wouldn't have made it this far."

He regarded her silently for a moment and she recognised what a compliment that was coming from someone who rarely praised anyone apart from himself. She half-smiled and mused what in the stars was she doing sitting on a bunk with

a half-naked smuggler. Those hazel eyes smouldered beneath hair that lay rumpled across his forehead. She noticed how his broad shoulders rose slightly as he inhaled, how his chest expanded and contracted. The barely perceptible movement of his larynx as he swallowed. The almost sculptured point where his neck met his clavicle. The blue trace of a vein through his biceps.

"Besides, Princess, " he said, "you're too stubborn to let the Empire win."

Her neck and shoulders spasmed at this comment.

"You're having real trouble there, aren't you?" Han asked. "I can fix that."

Leia raised an eyebrow. "I bet you can."

He grinned. "No, really, I can"

He was halfway down the bunk before she could protest.

"Han, I don't think..."

"C'mon, Leia. Trust me," he reasoned, now next to her, his knee touching hers through the fabric of the shirt.

Reluctance riddled her face as he guided her in front of him. She couldn't believe she was allowing him to get so close, was allowing herself to play along with this charade. With her back towards him, he placed his long legs on either side of her. His hands moulded to the swell of her hips, pulling her closer towards him, warming her skin with his heat. Leia clasped her arms across her chest, hands cradling the base of her throat. The blood pulsed against her fingers.

His fingers ran down the edges of her hair, gathering her tresses in one hand, the knicks and work-roughened patches of his skin catching on the fine strands. He draped her hair over the front of her shoulder, fingers brushing against the back of her neck. Despite his warmth, Leia found herself shivering.

"Besides, I don't bite," he said. "Not unless you want me to."

"Very droll, Han --- ow!"

She gasped as he began massaging her narrow shoulders, strong fingers pushing in to tight muscle. She squirmed at the immediate discomfort she experienced, automatically tensing against the pain and the warm touch of his hands. She tried to reason with herself, to tell herself that if she relaxed she would gain most benefit and maybe even enjoy it, but her stomach swirled with uncertainty.

"Boy, are you tense." His fingers kneaded the knots in her muscles. "Relax, will ya. I promise I'll be on my best behaviour."

"Since when have you behaved yourself?"

Telling herself to relent, trying to ignore the spikes of pleasure that leapt within her, Leia was very aware of how this would look if Threepio or Chewbacca happened by. He was sitting too close to her, too intimately close. His legs almost touched her sides. She could feel the heat radiating from him, enveloping her. Leia quickly reached over and touched the remote to close the door.

"Why, Princess," Han said in mock horror. "This is so sudden."

She elbowed him gently in the ribs and explained, "This doesn't look right."

"Feels great at this end. Now, relax."

"I'm trying to," she said, but her arms remained firmly wrapped across her body.

"Here." He stopped the massage, his arms reaching around her shoulders, hands closing over the backs of her hands. His breath whispered through her hair. "Just let go for a minute." He pulled her palms from her throat, unwrapped her arms, and placed her hands in her lap. He returned to massaging her shoulders. "There. That's better."

And, she had to admit, it was. His fingers worked in to the stress she had built up in her shoulder muscles, stretching and smoothing it away. His hands were warm and strong through the fabric of the shirt. She closed her eyes as the tension ebbed away, thoughts drifting.

"Han, why have you stayed with the Alliance for such a long time?"

From behind her he said, "You pay well. Any self-respecting smuggler wouldn't pass this up. And I've been at a bit of a lose end. Nothin' better to do, you might say."

"No other reason?" She could even hear the disappointment in her voice herself.

His fingers moved up her neck, crunching against the vertebrae. "Give me some time." His tone sounded like a promise. "I'm sure I can up with something."

His thumbs slid down her neck, following the curve so that he was massaging the bare skin of her shoulders, his hands pushing past the loose collar of the shirt. An involuntary shiver passed through her as his fingers moved tantalisingly down her shoulder blades, up over the top of her shoulders and ever so slightly across

the top of her chest. Surely he could feel her heart thudding beneath her sternum.

It was quiet, too quiet, the peaceful air in the cabin broken only by his deep breathing and her muffled, unintentional sighs of release and relief. If she didn't find something to talk about shortly, who knew what would happen.

Leia cleared her throat, struggling to maintain her composure. "So, is there anyone back on Corellia wondering why you haven't maintained contact?"

"No." His answer was soft, simple, unaggressive, not detached and defensive as she had come to expect from him when discussing his personal life.

Her head lolled sideways as she arched her neck, assisting his efforts, absorbing the strength he rubbed in to her shoulders. Her arms brushed against his legs and, without thinking, she rested her forearms on his thighs, her hands on his knees. Her fingertips caressed the piping on the seams of his trousers and she glanced down, the blood-red stark against the polished white of her slender fingers. Something else to ask about, to fill the silence, to disperse the sensations that tickled across her skin.

"This is a Corellian Bloodstripe, right?"

She had heard of the infrequently awarded military decoration but had never met anyone who had won it. She had suspected for some time that this is what the red piping on his trousers signified, but had never had any reason or excuse for asking him if it was.

Han's hands continued their work. "Yeah."

He edged closer to her and she felt his breath against the bare skin of her neck. Her eyelashes flickered, lips trembled, savouring the dizzying rush that threatened to overwhelm her.

Somehow she managed to control the pitch of her voice to redundantly add, "You don't get one just for keeping your nose clean."

"No." His response was muffled as he softly kissed the nape of her neck.

Leia initially bristled at the unfamiliar caress, but he kissed her neck again, his lips warm and slightly parted, and her body tingled with unknown delight. She closed her eyes in anticipation of another touch from his lips. His hands were still on her shoulders, lightly holding her steady, and he placed his open mouth further up her neck, the kiss moist and promising. A sensual pleasure stirred deep within her.

She felt him slip even closer, his long legs angled up around her, nearly gripping her as her hands slid back down to his thighs. Head bowed reverentially, he pressed his cheek against her neck, inhaled the scent of her, moving his face up in to her hair. Leia could sense the strength of his hunger for her, his passion tightly-leashed, straining for release. Simultaneously thrilled and scared to be wanted so much, she seemed incapable of any rational thought or action.

Han eased her compliant shoulders back against his chest. His breath was hot and sweet against her ear and she squirmed with enjoyment.

"Do you want me," he whispered, "to stop?"

She slowly turned in his arms, pushing against a leg, an arm, found herself leaning against him, hands flat on his chest. Her senses were heightened, invigorated. She was aware of everything about him. The heat and texture of his skin. His clean, fresh scent. His shallow, expectant breath. The hard buckle of his belt pressing against her stomach, competing with the evidence of his desire for her. The way he stared at her with the same intense, powerful look that had started all of this from the beginning. She found herself yearning to satisfy her remaining sense, to taste his lips against hers.

Tentatively at first, her hand traced the line of his freshly shaved jaw, the scar across his chin. He kissed her fingers as they brushed against his lips, and she trembled with eagerness. He copied the movement of her hand, his rough fingers warm around her oval face. His thumb stroked her lips, then he leaned down and kissed her softly, his mouth firm around her upper lip. Her eyes remained wide and open, returning his unwavering gaze. The kiss was delicate, exploratory, clarifying. He wanted her, it said, but at her pace.

Uncertain how to initiate another kiss, she glanced at his lips. He noticed the movement of her eyes and kissed her again, his mouth gently devouring hers, arms wrapping around her, holding her against his body. She continued to watch him during the kiss, now surprised to see his eyes close in concentration. Reflexively, Leia gave in to her instincts, let her lids fall shut, the action increasing her focus on the kiss. The taste of his mouth seemed new and yet distantly familiar. She moved deeper into his embrace, lips inexpertly moving against his. His reaction to her response was immediate. His tongue moved slickly against the roof of her mouth, and he rolled her onto her back as he turned onto his side, leaning down over her, all the while his mouth locked against hers. Leia was momentarily overwhelmed by his sudden movements, but his lips were back against her neck, her ear, obscuring any doubts she had. At that moment, she trusted him implicitly, knew he would do nothing to hurt her. She was prepared to follow his lead, wherever that might take them. This is bliss, she thought dreamily as he nuzzled her ear.

His hand pushed through her hair, fingers trailing down the side of her neck, smoothing a path for the succulent kisses he bestowed. She didn't know what to do with her hands, then found a place for them at the back of his neck, encouraging his mouth's caresses. Moaning softly, her back and neck arched with pleasure as his tongue licked agonisingly slowly up the length of her throat. The experiences and sensations were indescribable, so foreign and yet as comforting and known as an old friend. She was floating, drifting, her spirit detaching from her conscious self, at one with the universe. The happiness and peace bubbled within her, filling up the cold, dark spaces that had been empty for so long. She had never wanted anything so much as she wanted this now. Not with any man ever. Not even with Luke.

Luke...

It hit her like a blow to the stomach, driving away her exhilaration, extinguishing the flame that burned within. Something wasn't right. For an instant she had felt inexplicably linked to Luke, had felt fear and anguish ripping through his soul. Then just as quickly, it was gone, replaced by a terrible, foreboding presence that ebbed towards her. A hazy blot that she struggled to focus on, determined to locate the source. She had experienced these predictive feelings before, and she was usually right. Was it the future, her current situation or Han?

Han...

What in the stars was she doing? This wasn't the way she wanted it to be. Not her first time. Not with someone she didn't --- couldn't --- love. Not with a smuggler. On his ship. In his bunk. How many women had he seduced and brought back to his cabin? How many women had he made love to in this bunk?

Made love?

But it wasn't love for him. It would just be sex to someone like Solo. He didn't love her and she definitely did not love him. How could she love someone like him? She had wanted her first time to be special, to be with someone she loved, in some romantic location. This way she would be just another conquest to him, another notch on his gun belt. And how could she possibly face him again if she continued? How could she face herself?

Pull out now before you regret what you've got yourself in to.

Leia opened her eyes with a start, realised that Han had already pulled away from her. His eyes were downcast and he could not hide the disappointment etched across his face.

"Don't worry, Leia," he said quietly. "We don't have to do anythin' you don't wanna do."

Leia frowned. Had he read her thoughts? She propped herself up on her elbows as he sat upright, and realised how stiff and tense her body had become again. No, he'd read her body.

He swung his legs off the bunk and turned his back towards her. "I'll leave you alone," he said as he stood up. "I won't bother you again."

The hurt in his voice hit her almost as hard as the foreboding presence she had felt earlier. Confused as to why she felt this way, Leia grabbed his wrist. She couldn't let him leave, not now, not like this. They had shared so much. It was just that... she didn't know why or what it was 'just that'. Why do things with this man have to be so difficult?

"Don't leave, Han," she pleaded. A moment ago she had cringed from him, had thought she wanted him to leave. Now all she wanted was to hold him, to be held. "Please. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..." She smiled at him weakly. "Just stay for a while longer."

He glanced down at her sceptically. "Are you sure that's what you want?"

The word left her mouth before she had time to analyse his question or to consider the wisdom of her actions. "Yes."

Those damn hazel eyes stared deep into her again, as if trying to determine the veracity of her response. Her hand moved down his wrist, took his palm in hers and squeezed his fingers. The corner of his mouth twitched up into a half-smile as she drew him back onto the bunk. Holding her hand, uncertain what he should do next, he sat down next to her and stretched his legs down the length of the bunk. Leia instinctively snuggled up to his warm body.

"Just hold me," she whispered.

He placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer, her body cradling the contours of his side. Leia murmured softly. The bad feeling she had sensed before had vanished as unexpectedly as it had appeared. Contentment and peace had returned. Even her feelings for Luke seemed distant and incomplete. There was now only herself and Han. She rested her face against his chest.

"No takin' advantage of me now, Princess," Han lamely joked.

Something was tickling Leia's nose. She sleepily twitched her nose, drifted back to sleep. It tickled her again. She moved her hand up to rub at her face and felt warm skin beneath her fingers. She awoke with a start and raised her head slightly.

In the darkness of the cabin, she realised that she had fallen asleep in Han's arms, her head resting against his chest. The last thing she remembered was that she had been talking to him --- actually talking to him instead of lecturing or scolding --- describing her life on Alderaan. As he had listened, he had shown genuine interest in what she said, even offering his own impressions of her home planet from the one and only time he had visited. Somewhere in there she had obviously grown tired and had drifted off to sleep. Now she lay pressed up next to him, his arms around her, his head to one side as he softly snored.

Leia absently rubbed his chest hairs between her fingers and laid her head down again. Her thoughts returned to what she had been thinking only hours ago. Had it really only been a week since the man in her arms had angrily stormed down the ice corridors of Hoth, intent on leaving both her and the Alliance behind. For good. A week since she would not even have given his departure a second thought. And now...

The hairs on his chest tickled at her face again and she wriggled slightly. The movement disturbed Han's sleeping pattern enough to rouse him. Leia quickly closed her eyes, and pretended to be asleep. Han gently stroked her hair, kissed the top of her head, then drifted back to sleep again.

A small private smile brightened her face. This was right. It would not progress any further and she would accept it for what it was, but somehow, some way, this felt right. The Princess and the Smuggler. She chuckled to herself. Sounds like some third rate holovid.

She listened to his heart beating slow and strong, a peace settling over her as she hovered between consciousness and sleep. Then, as if seeing something on the periphery of her vision that could only be seen by surreptitiously glancing at it through squinted eyes, Leia realised she was going to lose him. Logically, she knew he wasn't hers to begin with, but she had a terrible feeling about what lay ahead.

She mentally shrugged. Maybe it was just the fact that he would be leaving as soon as they rendezvoused with the rest of the Rebel fleet. She knew that. She doubted he would return to the Alliance once he left. She knew that too. This is what she had come to expect from him.

It would have been 'nice' to further explore whatever it was that was going on between them, but perhaps it would just have complicated things. This way was obviously for the best. This way, things would be less difficult.

Sleep weaved across her consciousness, ensnaring and tangling her thoughts as she lay safe within his arms.

You make things so difficult sometimes.

I do. I really do.

end

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