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Dinner

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

Leia Organa had just fixed the last pin into her hair when she heard the main hatch to her cabin slide open. As she was standing in the refresher ensuite at the time, she was unable to see who had entered, yet she both knew and sensed who it was. She smiled smugly at her reflection in the mirror; it was Han. Leia adjusted the clasp that held the thick roll of hair against the back of her head. *General Han Solo*, she corrected herself. And hopefully, he would look like a general, for he should be in his formal mess dress uniform instead of the habitual spacer clothes he insisted on wearing, despite his recently acquired rank.

"It's only me," Han's deep voice called out.

"Won't be long," Leia answered, touching up her make-up as she spoke.

"Take your time."

The stylus of the lip liner came to a halt, and Leia's eyes slid towards the living area of her cabin. She knew he wasn't looking forward to the next few hours. The eagerness she had for appearing at a formal function on the arm of her lover was not mutual. She could understand his attitude. After all, *she* was the one who had been invited to attend the celebratory dinner by Mon Mothma, not Han.

The guest list for dinner was rather impressive, comprising the upper echelon of Alliance military officers and civilian representatives currently assigned to this Task Force. As some now also had their spouses or partners collocated, they were also invited. Han would be attending as Leia's partner, not being senior enough to warrant a separate invitation. Although he was a general, Han's rank was a field commission assigned in the desperation of war, and now only 73

days old. Compared with Dodonna, Rieekan, Ackbar and Madine, Han was a 'wet-behind-the-ears' novice, as green as an Academy freshman.

Not for the first time, Leia wondered how much exposure Han had had to formal dinners such as the one they were about to attend. She had shared enough meals with him to know that he had table manners, and she expected his time in the Imperial Navy, short-lived though it may have been, would have exposed him to the ceremony of formal mess dinners. But it had been so many years since then, and she knew from past experience that Han had little time for airs, graces and social niceties. She was beginning to suspect that it might take quite an amount of effort from Han for him to survive. *Or behave.*

Leia ejected that disloyal thought from her mind. In that regard, Han had definitely changed in the time since he had been rescued from the carbonite, and particularly during the nearly two Standard months following the Battle of Endor. Granted, he may still wear the 'uniform' of a smuggler, but he had acquired a mantle of responsibility, if not respectability. The young fighter pilots now under his command respected him with a level of awe that bordered on hero worship. Han took his squadrons through their paces, providing instruction and training as the Task Force mopped up pockets of Imperial resistance. And although not comfortable with military discipline, Han inspired his men to readily follow and obey him based on leadership and example alone. Leia honestly believed he would channel those same personal qualities to help him make it through the evening, if not for his own standing then because he loved her.

Leia dabbed the small perfume bottle against her pulse points, an extravagance she had allowed Han to 'procure' for her. He had been elusive about exactly where he had obtained the perfume from, but because he took great pride in giving her something personal, and the scent was subtle but exotic, she had not questioned him further. Now, as the fragrance mixed with her own skin chemistry, a sudden surge made her feel sexy. Well, *seductive* at least, in spite of the long flowing gown that covered most of her body. Lately, she wasn't used to wearing so much clothing around Han.

She re-appraised herself with a critical eye. The dress wasn't *that* conservative, compared with some of the outfits she had owned. The bodice was low cut enough to display more than a glimpse of cleavage, the skin-tight sleeves showed the shapely length of her arms, and the skirt fell in soft pleats to the low slippers on her feet. Set off by a small silver chain that hung from her neck, the rich blue color of the dress would match perfectly with Han's uniform. At that thought, Leia smiled at her reflection and moved from the 'fresher.

Han was standing at the desk, absently scanning through a document on the data terminal. With his back towards her, he didn't notice her entrance and she took the time to stare at him approvingly. His broad shoulders filled out the smartly tailored, short cut jacket, the cut of the jacket, in turn, nicely revealing the

narrow hips and compact rear. The matching dark blue trousers were creased and well cut, and he had attached the red Bloodstripe down the outer seams, as he was entitled to do.

One day, she promised herself. One day she would find a way to ask him how he had won the infrequently awarded Corellian military decoration.

A sixth sense suddenly made Han aware of Leia's presence, and he turned towards her, offering her a smile that made her insides melt. What that smile couldn't get away with wasn't worth knowing about...

Han whistled at her appreciatively. "Look at you."

A coyness flushed her cheeks but she didn't let it discern her. "Look at *you*."

She made a scene of taking his hand and holding it out to gain a better view of him. He ducked his head with an uncharacteristic touch of embarrassment. The crisp whiteness of the high collar shirt contrasted well with the jacket, and the gold rank clasps complimented the hazel of his eyes. He had even affixed the miniature decorations he had received for partaking in the Battles of Yavin and Endor. For the first time since his commissioning, he actually looked like a general. However, although the uniform fit well, it appeared he had had some trouble with his hair. He had parted it dead straight (*a small miracle*, Leia imagined), yet the telltale signs of dampness suggested his hair had not given in easily, having to be tamed with liberal quantities of water. None of it mattered; in her eyes, he could be bald or as hairy as a Wookiee and he would still be handsome.

Leia dropped his hand, bunched her fists of her hips and regarded him with raised chin. "All right. Who are you and what have you done with my scoundrel?"

He smiled at her jest. "Gave him the night off. I tell you, Princess, you're wearing the poor guy out. His knees are giving out on him, and those carpet burns are a killer."

Delighted, Leia leaned forward and kissed his cheek, placing a print of lipstick that she was tempted to leave in place. Unable to contain herself, her hand strayed to the seat of his trousers. He allowed her to play for a while, before pushing her wrist aside. His gaze smoldered with barely contained desire.

"If you fondle the merchandise, sweetheart, you have to buy."

Her lips formed a petulant pout. "Can't I have a pre-emptive fondle? A taste for later?"

His smile was as false as her pout. "Nope."

Taking his hand, she pressed his palm against her breast, her fingers encouraging him to cup her firmly.

"What if I let you fondle me at the same time?" she suggested, her other hand returning to his backside.

The tips of his fingers caressed the bare skin above her low neckline. "You want me to make a mess of myself, don't you?"

"I like it when you make a mess of yourself." Her mouth formed a sensual smile as she stared at him through heavy lashes. The temptation to turn her focus to the front of his trousers weighed heavily on her mind.

"How 'bout we give dinner a miss." His voice was a warm rumble. "Eat in instead."

She squeezed him again. "We can't. We're expected."

"You mean *you're* expected."

Her hand immediately dropped and she turned away from him slightly, forcing his hand to slip away from her chest.

"We're *both* expected." She managed to contain her annoyance, for she had anticipated this reticence from him, yet this was the first time he had voiced it. "I accepted the invitation on behalf of us both."

"And what did the old bitch have to say about that?"

She let him have that one. Mon Mothma had not been overly warm towards him since it had become obvious that he and Leia were lovers. "You better not call her that tonight."

"Can I say it behind her back?"

"As long as she's not listening."

They shared a small grin, but he couldn't let the question go.

"So," he began, "she's lookin' forward to seeing me, huh? Gonna welcome me with open arms?"

Leia shook her head, slowly and fondly. "Han, I don't know what she thinks. Frankly, I don't care. And neither should you."

He pressed his lips together, sunk his hands into the pockets of his trousers and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't."

Leia laced her arm through his, loosely hugging him. "Then let's go, General." She tenderly wiped the smudge of lipstick from his cheek.

He grimaced. "Yeah."

"But before we do, there's one thing I *have* to fix."

Han rolled his eyes. *Women*. He should've known better than to believe that Leia was ready to leave.

"Are you going to be long?" He might contemplate a quick nap if she was.

Her smile was overly sweet. "Not long."

She stepped away from him, considered her task for a moment, then reached up and messed up his hair. He didn't seem surprised, accepting her grooming technique with resignation, his eyes staring upwards as if he could see what she was doing.

Leia raked her nails through his hair, settling it into the style, or lack of style, that she was more familiar seeing him with. She finished her work by teasing his fringe across his forehead, stepped back and eyed him critically.

"Finished?" There was a wry turn to his mouth.

She nodded and met his eyes. "Mhmm. It's the latest look for all the local nerfherders. They call it the 'scruff'."

"You know, Princess," he told her, his smirk a mix of benevolence and menace, "it's a good thing I love you."

Leia had to agree. "I know. You're a lucky man."

"Is that what you call me?"

"Amongst other things." She pushed a tendril of hair back behind her ear. "Shall we go?"

"You're the boss."

"Mm, I like it when you say that. You should try 'submissive' more often. It suits you."

With a long-suffering sigh, and hands still jammed in his pockets, he stuck out an elbow in offering. Leia promptly latched onto his arm and steered him out of the cabin.

The decks of the Calamari cruiser, *Azure Blue*, were always busy, but they seemed particularly crowded now. Organic and automata members of the crew moved along the corridors, undertaking their duties, returning to their quarters and heading off to the variety of mess halls and maintenance facilities. However, at the sight of the princess on the arm of the general, activity came to a stand still. People pressed themselves against bulkheads, granting the couple unhindered access and taking advantage of the clear view to openly ogle. Han chafed under the scrutiny of the stares, and took to returning them with a large dose of malice. In order to counter his temper, Leia's smile became brighter and friendlier.

"Lighten up, flyboy," she admonished, whispering into his ear but still maintaining her smile towards the crew. "They're just curious."

"They should mind their own business," he replied. "Haven't they got better things to do than to follow our sex life?"

"The Rebel Alliance works on rumor and gossip. You should know that best of all, because I can recall you contributing to the rumors about us."

"Me?"

Leia squeezed his arm as they continued down the corridor. "Besides, we're just confirming what the whole Alliance has known for years."

"Which is?"

"We've been having an affair since Yavin, and have now decided to bring it out in the open."

"Oh. That rumor." He turned towards her, a secretive smile lighting his eyes. "Nice thought, though."

They came to a halt at the turbolift, and Leia matched his smile. "What is?"

There was a distinctive glint in his eyes. "That we've been having an affair since Yavin."

The turbolift doors opened and they stood to one side to allow yet more curious crew members disembark. Han followed Leia into the empty car, the whimsical smile still on his lips. Once the doors had closed and she had selected the deck level, she tilted her head towards him.

"Are you going to grin like that all night?" she asked, failing to repress the amusement in her voice.

"I'm not grinning. This is a grin."

He bared his teeth as if in pain, and she chuckled, shaking her head indulgently. His smile slipped back into place and he pointed at his face.

"This is my reflective smile," he explained.

"Oh? And what are you reflecting on?"

"All the great sex we must've had on those missions we went on together."

Leia's mouth fell open. "What?!"

"Sure. We've been screwing around since Yavin. We must've been screwing around on all those mission as well. Right under Luke's nose. Sometimes, even sleeping next to him." His eyebrows raised dramatically. "Sneaky bastards, weren't we?"

Leia readily admitted, it was an attractive thought. Not so much making love to Han while Luke slept soundly besides them, but the notion of having discovered, years earlier, the real man who hid behind the smuggler's face. They both could have saved themselves years of arguments, aggravation and frustration, both sexual and otherwise, if they had gotten their act together sooner.

"If we'd been together since Yavin, I probably would've kicked you out by now," she quipped, the twist to her lips betraying her true sentiments.

Han's eyes sparked at the challenge. "Oh, you would've, would you?"

Leia placed a condescending hand on his forearm. "Darling, I'm only using you for sex. I thought you knew that."

His eyes smoldered with an intensity that still took her breath away. "Use me and abuse me, Princess." The baritone of his voice rumbled through her as he bent his head towards her neck. "I'll be your palace slave any day."

The pulse flicked at the base of her throat, and she swallowed at that thought. Surely every princess deserved at least one slave? One Corellian sex slave...
"Later tonight, perhaps?"

"Your wish is my command."

His lips found the erogenous zone behind her ear and she sighed at the hot, sweet touch of his mouth.

"Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

The open-mouthed kisses he pressed down the length of her neck were delicious. Leia closed her eyes and dropped her head back, enjoying the wash of desire streaming through her. Unconsciously, she held onto his forearms for stability and he stepped closer, his hands settling on her hips. The vaguely rational thought that she was necking with Han in a turbolift -- *on an Alliance cruiser!* -- flitted through her brain. *Good thing we're alone*, came the responding self-justification. However, with the sensations he was causing her body to feel at that moment, they could have been cramped in with a squad of stormtroopers and she wouldn't have cared less.

Han was now making his way up the other side of her neck.

"You sure you don't wanna go back to your cabin?" he murmured into her skin.

Part of her very much *did* want to rush him back to her cabin and take him up on his 'palace slave' offer; in the back of her mind, she was already composing several royal decrees for Han to enact. But there really was a time and a place for everything, and they *were* expected for dinner. She briefly wondered if his amorous attentions were part of a ploy to get out of the function. Regardless what his motives were, they had a dinner to attend, and if he was forced to wait until the evening finished, he may appreciate her even more -- if that was possible. At least the sense of anticipation might generate additional fire in their lovemaking.

Leia ran her fingers through the hair at the back of his neck. "Let's do it here. Now."

Han froze, pulled away from her quickly. Amazement creased his brow. "What? Here? Now?"

He stood there dumbfounded while she unfastened the front of his trousers.

"On the floor. Against the wall. Whatever." Her fingers tugged at his belt, and she dragged the tail of his shirt from his trousers. "But we've got to be quick."

In his experience, a 'quickie', especially in a public place with the chance of being discovered, was always a good option, but he couldn't believe his ears or his luck. His head was spinning, not quite sure if she was serious. This didn't sound like the Leia he knew and loved, but then, she had quickly developed into a rather proficient, and skilled, lover. Maybe she was also willing to give this a 'go' too.

He didn't notice her furtive glance towards the turbolift control panel until it was too late.

"Oops," she said rather brightly. "Too late."

The doors to the turbolift slid open, thankfully to an empty corridor. Leia slipped him a mischievous grin and moved out of the car. He stared at her blankly as she stopped a few meters down the corridor, an expectant cant to her head. He shook his head, glanced down at the state she had left him in. A self-deprecating smile softened his features.

"I'll get you for that, Organa," he warned playfully.

"Promises, promises."

He emerged from the lift re-fastening his trousers and tucking his shirt back in.

"You're a tease, woman"

Her eyebrow arched. "And you're not?" She turned her attention down the corridor towards the elaborately etched hatchway at the far end. Without looking back at him, she said, "Besides, you love it when I lead you on."

"Lead me on, yes," he agreed. "Leave me hanging there, no."

Leia glanced at him. "Your shirt's sticking out the front of your trousers. Or maybe it's something else...?"

Han readjusted himself again.

"Are you ready now?" She flicked lint from his shoulder and conducted a cursory inspection.

"I'll never be ready for this," he muttered.

Leia braced herself and ignored his remark. She settled back into the crook of his elbow, and, with a cleansing breath, they headed towards the door.

As the corridor only led to the ship's formal dining room, it was reasonably short and devoid of traffic. However, to Han, their journey seemed interminably long. He swallowed, fought the urge to tug at his tight collar, and wished away the touch of claustrophobia that had entered his psyche. *Damned carbonite.*

The double-doored hatchway before them was etched with an intricate Calamari design, recalling the ocean world that was home to these sentients. To take his mind off things, he tried to appreciate the beauty of it, yet he was more

concerned with what lay beyond than the doors themselves. He wiped the suddenly moist hand on his free arm down the side of his trousers.

"This seems kinda familiar," he said quietly, more to himself than to the princess.

Leia looked at him curiously. She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Walking arm in arm towards a set of doors. Heading off to dinner. Blissfully unaware of what lies in wait for us behind--"

"Stop it!" Leia drew him to a halt immediately in front of the hatch and pulled her arm from his. A flush of anger rose to her cheeks and eyes. "Don't you dare equate this to Bespin."

Han guiltily averted his eyes.

"We're going to dinner, not to some horrible fate. And if you can't cope with that just because I want you to be with me... you may as well head back to the *Falcon* now. Alone." Breathing heavily through her nose, she stared up at him, wondering if he would take her up on the 'easy out', and if he did, what her own next action would be.

His face was tilted downward and he looked up at her from beneath his eyebrows, contrition coloring his eyes. She did not respond to his meek half-smile.

"Sorry." He rubbed a hand across the scar on his chin. "I shouldn't have said that."

Leia simply nodded, trying to compose herself and to dissipate her anger. Bespin had been bad enough for both of them without Han resurrecting painful memories and treating it like a joke.

Without further words, she let her breath out through her nose and touched the entrance sensor. A chime sounded somewhere behind the doors. She moved her lips as she tried to find her smile again, and ended up settling for an unsatisfactory facsimile of it. *So much for that wonderful night out*, she thought sourly. *He's deliberately ruined everything*. Regardless of his apology, there would be some particularly harsh words between herself and Han once the night was over. For now, she just hoped she could make it through dinner without getting more upset and annoyed with him.

The movement of his hands as he wiped them down the seams of his trousers caught her eye. Han didn't notice her attention was back on him, for his gaze was locked on the doors. He slid a finger down the side of his collar, loosening it enough to swallow deeply, his larynx bobbing with the effort. She watched the

muscles in his jaw bunch beneath the skin as he chewed on the inside of his mouth, then he wiped his hands on his trousers again. Leia reached out and felt the aura he generated in the Force.

A surge of empathy engulfed her. The reason behind his reticence at attending the dinner was suddenly and blatantly obvious to her, and she chided herself for her earlier lack of perception. Han was more than a little nervous, and probably with good cause; for the first time in years, he was way out of his depth.

Leia only had time to offer a glance of understanding and forgiveness to him before the doors opened and a white protocol droid ushered them in. The droid asked them to kindly wait in the tiled lobby while it fetched its mistress. With the droid gone, Leia slipped her hand into Han's.

"You'll be fine," she whispered, squeezing his fingers. "I'll make sure they don't eat you alive."

"I'm not nervous," he said defensively.

Leia smiled and leant towards him. "I know." She kissed his cheek, brushing away the lipstick mark almost as soon as she left it. Their eyes met and he voiced his unspoken gratitude.

"Leia. How lovely to see you. Thank you for coming."

The intimacy between them fractured. Leia quickly pulled away from Han as the Supreme Commander of the Alliance addressed her. Mon Mothma approached them, her hand outstretched in greeting and a smile stretched across her face. Although she was dressed in a long flowing gown of ivory, to Han, Darth Vader had seemed friendlier. He made certain he didn't voice *that* opinion to Leia.

Mon Mothma pressed her cheek against Leia's, imitating an affectionate kiss, but ensuring that neither of them disturbed their make-up in the process.

"You're looking elegant tonight, my dear."

Leia tilted her head in deference. "As are you, Mon Mothma. Your gown is superb."

The material of her dress seemed alternately matt and burnished, catching and reflecting the ambient light, with highlights sparkling off randomly stitched beads. It was about the most festive costume Leia could recall seeing her wearing, so distant from the drab formal attire she used to wear when she held senatorial office. There were even traces of carmine through her otherwise severe hairstyle.

"It's a pleasure to relax and dress up for a change," Mon Mothma explained, an uncharacteristic levity in her voice. Her gaze turned to the patiently waiting Corellian, her trained eye quickly assessing the accuracy of his uniform. "Good evening, Han."

Han took the elder woman's out-stretched hand, not certain whether to kiss it or shake it. He opted for a shallow bow over the top of it.

"Ma'am."

She blanched at the informal title but did not chasten him. "The uniform of a general actually suits you. You should consider wearing it more often."

Han's eyes instinctively narrowed, searching for sarcasm or condescension in her tone. He found none, only a slight amusement. Then he realized he had missed the opportunity to graciously thank her for her appraisal, the silence between them now an awkward gap he was obliged to fill.

"Uh. Thanks."

Bemused by his discomfort, Mon Mothma's eyebrows raised. Leia repressed a grimace and quickly changed the subject.

"Are we the first to arrive?"

"No," Mon Mothma replied, her attention returning to Leia. "The other guests are already here."

Leia frowned. If anything, she thought they would have been early. "Oh? I didn't realize we were late."

The Supreme Commander smiled and ushered them towards the door she had just appeared through.

"You're not late. There was a last minute agreement to convene early for pre-dinner drinks. My staff tried to contact you, however I understand you had the privacy filter set on your comlink."

Leia checked the rush of blood to her cheeks and caught Han's eye. Immediately following her work shift, Leia had spent an enjoyable 30 minutes or so with Han in his cabin onboard the *Falcon*. She had been slightly more than uncontactable.

Han's eyes widened mischievously and Leia's blush returned in full force.

They followed the elder woman through the doors and into an anteroom peppered with the dinner guests, perhaps 20 in all. Faces, both strange and

familiar, immediately turned towards them. Leia knew at least one half of each couple, and in some cases both, having mixed with both civilian and military members of the Rebel Alliance since its inception. However, she knew that apart from Mon Mothma, Han would only be familiar with the military officers, and definitely none of their partners or those of the civilians. They, on the other hand, would all at least have heard of Han -- the Corellian smuggler Princess Leia had taken as a lover.

With a turn of her head, Mon Mothma immediately commanded the attention of the gathering. "Our final guests have arrived."

Leia recalled an adage her adoptive father, Bail Organa, used to say: *If you wish to make a lasting impression, ensure you arrive last.*

"Nothin' like being late to make an entrance," Leia heard Han mutter.

They moved towards the gathering, hoping to disappear into the guests as quickly as possible.

"Leia!" Carlist Rieekan stepped forward, grasped the princess by the shoulders and pressed a kiss against her cheek.

"Carlist! When did you return?"

Leia enthusiastically hugged her old friend -- her father's old friend -- unconcerned with the inappropriate display of affection. Not long after the Battle of Endor, the Alderaani general had departed to collect his wife from whatever hiding place she had been sequestered away in since Rieekan had become an active member of the Alliance. Wherever it had been, it had ensured she was safe and protected from the violence of the Empire. With the Imperial forces dealt a decisive blow at Endor and the Emperor gone, the families of Alliance members were now coming out of hiding, electing to be re-united with their loved ones, regardless of the dangers still posed by remnant Imperial elements.

"Not two hours ago." The greying general patted his midriff. "I was lucky the dress uniform still fit."

"And Iris?"

As soon as she mentioned the name of Rieekan's wife, a middle-aged woman stepped up from behind him. The hair was greyer and cut short, the Alderaani braids no doubt removed to hide her origins, but Leia recognized the sharp-featured face. Her blue eyes sparkled like cut topaz. Iris Rieekan, academic and university lecturer, was still a handsome woman.

"Leia."

The two Alderaani women embraced, reveling in the bonds of friendship and kinship they shared. In that moment, their contact spoke more than words, comforting each other for things lost: time, innocence, friends, family -- a whole world. Leia held at bay the emotions threatening to overwhelm her, choosing instead to focus on the joy and happiness in her life. And now, with Irris back, here was proof that life could return to normal.

Momentarily absorbed in the reunion, Leia glanced at a major factor in her life that now provided her with great joy. Rieekan followed the track of her eyes, his mouth pursing in contemplation. Han stood awkwardly to one side, uncertain what part he should play, his face showing his discomfort; he was still getting used to expressing his feelings to Leia, let alone dealing with the emotions of others.

"Irris," Leia touched the elder woman's arm, "allow me to introduce you to General Han Solo. Han, Irris Rieekan. An old friend from way back."

Irris smiled fondly and patted Leia's hand. "Not that far back, thank you, Leia." She turned from the princess to the Corellian general, her face lighting up in recognition. "General Solo. I've heard a lot about you."

"Don't believe a word Carlist has told you," Leia advised, amusement in her voice.

"I never do," Irris remarked. She extended her hand towards Han. "General, a pleasure."

Han returned the firm handshake, his discomfort dissipating slightly. "Please, ma'am, call me Han. I keep looking over my shoulder whenever someone calls me 'General'."

Standing nearby, General Crix Madine overheard Han's remark and snorted into his drink. Rieekan cast a sidelong glance towards the blond Corellian general.

"Well, Han, and you can call me Irris. None of these formalities between friends."

Carlist Rieekan met Han's eyes and the two men shook hands.

"I suspected there was something going on between the two of you just prior to Endor," Rieekan told him, his eyes twinkling with humor. "Hell, I suspected something was happening back on Hoth."

"Ord Mantell," Han offered helpfully. "That's about where it all started."

"It was Yavin," Leia interrupted.

Han's eyes widened in consternation, wondering if she was willing to perpetuate the myth amongst the few they could call friends. Leia linked her arm through his and leaned closer to Carlist and Irris.

"Right from the very beginning," she said quietly, "he couldn't keep his eyes off me."

Han made a pained face. "Back then, if I even looked at her wrong, she used to bite my head off."

"Aah," Irris interjected, "then it *was* love at first sight. The first time I met Carlist, I detested him."

Leia hung onto Han's elbow but clutched Irris's arm with delighted fervor, ignoring the two men.

"That's exactly right. I hated Han too. Or, I thought I did. He was the most arrogant, conceited, ill-mannered man I'd ever met."

Han rolled his eyes; he'd heard this all before.

Irris suggested, "I bet he went out of his way to annoy and aggravate you."

"Yes!"

"But he also liked to encourage rumors that you were seeing each other."

"Mmhmm."

Irris nodded knowingly. "And that's exactly what Carlist was like."

"And at this point," Rieekan declared, taking Han by the other elbow, "I think Han and I shall mix with our colleagues while you ladies compare notes."

With an uncharacteristic smirk on her lips, Leia let go of Han, allowing Rieekan to usher him away.

"Be good," she whispered, but Rieekan was already introducing Han to the Mon Calamari admiral at Ackbar's side.

Irris sidled up next to Leia. "I'll grant you this much, Leia," she told her, "he's gorgeous."

Leia blushed and turned back to her friend. "He certainly is."

The elder woman's face became serious. "And he's good to you?"

Leia gave Irris a reassuring smile, unperturbed at the maternal concern.

"He's wonderful. You don't have to worry. He may have been a smuggler but he's been raised well. Whoever his parents were."

Irris's eyebrows raised in interest, but she simply took note of the frustration in the princess's tone and did not pursue things further.

"Carlist likes him," Irris assured her. "I just wanted to make certain that you did too."

Leia took a moment before replying. "Han's my best friend."

"That's good enough for me."

Leia's eyes tracked warily around the room as the women accepted a glass of wine from a droid waiter. Irris followed her gaze, knowing Leia had more to say.

Leia took a sip of wine. "If only it was good enough for everyone else."

Irris nodded once in acknowledgment. "I heard a few opinions expressed earlier."

"Yes?"

"Nothing to me direct, of course. I'm a relative new-comer." Irris's smile became bleak. "I just overheard a few distasteful remarks. From both the civilian and military sides of the house."

Leia's grip on the glass increased as she attempted to calm her rising annoyance.

"When all is said and done," the princess said, "in some regards we are no different than those we oppose. I'm afraid there are as many xenophobes and elitists in the Alliance as there are in the Empire."

"We're just a little more discrete about it, and self-righteous," Irris suggested. "But I do know this: Bail would be proud of you."

At the mention of her father, Leia's attention returned to her old friend, and she felt slightly foolish for focusing on the ill-informed beliefs of others.

"Your performance as a leader of the Alliance has been admirable, and your judgment unquestionable. I'm certain Bail would approve of your General Solo. He'd be pleased that Han makes you happy. And he'd respect your right to select a partner of your choice, regardless of what others think."

Leia's smile was small and gracious, but inside, she bloomed with warmth and gratitude.

"Thank you, Irris."

The blue eyes gleamed. "I'm only reminding you what your heart already knows."

Together they looked towards their men. Carlist appeared to be deeply involved in a discussion with Crix Madine, and Han was undergoing an interrogation from the elderly General Dodonna, a scowl bunched across his forehead.

"I think I should rescue Han from old Dodders there," Leia explained. "From the very beginning, they've never liked each other much. Besides, it's about time I introduced him around to the others, so they can meet who it is who has captured their interest lately. You never know; they may actually like him."

"And I need to catch Carlist's attention before he wallops Crix Madine," Irris added.

Like the skilled practitioners they were, both women managed to disentangle their respective partners from potential confrontations and escorted them through a series of introductions and polite, inconsequential small-talk. Alert to any sneers or derisive comments, Leia had to grudgingly admit that her colleagues were impeccably behaved. It was difficult to determine exactly who was friend or foe.

Mon Mothma eventually entreated the gathering to adjourn to the formal dining room where dinner would be served. Leia linked her arm through Han's elbow but held him back while the other guests moved into the adjacent room. She smiled at him fondly, watching his pensive grimace as his gaze followed the crowd.

"Chin up, flyboy," she told him quietly. "You're doing fine."

He tilted his head towards her, his eyes blazing disbelief. "This is painful."

"It's character building."

"It's *still* painful."

She couldn't contain an impish smile. "I never said it wouldn't be."

He sighed deeply. "I think you owe me something for this."

"Weren't you the one who wanted to be the palace slave?"

Irris unexpectedly slid her arm through Han's other elbow. She smiled across at her husband, who stood on the other side of Leia. If she had heard any of their conversation, she wasn't admitting to it.

"Aah, young love," Irris sighed. "Carlist, do you remember when we were like this? Whispering sweet nothings to each other."

"My dear, you never whispered anything to me in your life," Rieekan replied playfully. "More like, issued instructions and barked orders."

"That's because, darling, you enjoy the discipline and you're hard of hearing." Irris considered the younger man she held onto. "Now, Han, on the other hand, looks like the sensitive type." She tried to ignore the smirk on Leia's face. "I'd imagine he'd ply the ladies with poetry and prose. A regular silver tongue."

Leia couldn't contain a giggle, and the sudden blush that reddened Han's face encouraged the giggle into a laugh. He suspected Irris was joking, but not being familiar with her sense of humor, was uncertain exactly how to react.

He almost glared at Leia when she commented, "A silver tongue all right."

"And seeing as he's the only handsome, eligible human male available tonight," Irris continued, "I thought you wouldn't mind sharing him around."

Leia smiled gratefully at her friend and released Han's arm. Perhaps Han would be more readily accepted if someone other than herself was seen socializing with him.

"Only if I can have Carlist."

The elder general smiled brilliantly. "A fair swap, I should say." Carlist extended his arm for Leia to take, but leant towards Han in a conspiratorial manner. "Good luck, friend. She can be quite a handful."

The Corellian nodded grimly. "I should give you the same warning."

"Do you get the feeling," Irris asked Leia, "that sometimes they talk about us as if we're not here?"

Leia replied, "I suspect they think we switch off to their ramblings."

"What did I tell ya," Han said.

Following Carlist's lead, Han escorted Irris into the dining room with a bearing that suggested he attended formal dinners every day. He was aware of critical eyes observing his every movement, so he approached the formalities with

cautious dignity. He successfully held out the dining chair for Irri, tucking it in as she sat down. Leia took the place on the other side of him, and she gave his knee a gentle squeeze as he seated himself. It wasn't as though he didn't know what to do or how to behave; it had just been an awfully long time since he attended a function that even bordered on this high level.

Once they were all seated, Mon Mothma formally received her guests, paying tribute to all whom had fought and died bravely at the Battle of Endor, and throughout the years in service of the Rebellion against the Empire. Then she saluted the recently arrived spouses and partners, thanking them for their unceasing support for, and belief in, their other halves during this time, and the depth of courage that they had displayed through such adversity. Finally, Mon Mothma welcomed the new partners of these upper echelon members to the table, nodding individually at them in a gesture that, to Han anyway, contained a hint of condescension. His glance at Leia suggested that she did not think likewise.

"You're just being overly-sensitive," she whispered to him, answering his unspoken question.

He considered agreeing with her. *Perhaps*, he thought, *I'm just pissed at being lumped in with Madine's blond and that ditsy Bothan.*

Madine's 'partner', if the term could be used that loosely, was more like his 'latest conquest' in a steady stream of them: a voluptuous young woman, perhaps half the age of the fair haired Corellian general, who's dress rode high and low in all the right places. Han had noticed she had even succeeded in flushing the cheeks of the almost celibate Dodonna. She had certainly attracted his *own* attention, much to Leia's chagrin.

The 'ditsy Bothan' *belonged* to Borsk Fey'lya, the Bothan leader Han had heard so much about over the years but had only met tonight. The violet-eyed Fey'lya had brought his Bothan faction into the Alliance after the Battle of Yavin. Han knew from Leia that Fey'lya had manipulated his way into a position of power within the Alliance, and that for some unfathomable reason, Mon Mothma trusted the Bothan implicitly. As soon as Han had accepted Borsk Fey'lya's handshake tonight, he was overcome with the temptation to escort the Bothan politician at gunpoint to the nearest airlock, and quickly and cleanly space him. Leia had not disapproved of his idea when he told her, and had even offered to set off the airlock's cycle herself.

"Sweetheart," he had admonished, "you have *definitely* been hangin' around me for far too long."

Han managed to make it through the soup and appetizer courses without spilling anything on himself, using the correct cutlery and pacing himself with the wine.

He was fortunate that Irris surreptitiously coached and encouraged him with minor head movements, gestures and glances. At first he had been offended by her belief that he needed schooling, but when the seafood appetizer arrived still in its shell, he gratefully followed her lead as she showed him how to use the shell cracker and fork to remove the delicate white meat. He looked at the Mon Calamari admirals jealously as they dispensed with the human cutlery and chomped into the appetizer, consuming the crustaceans shell and all. Now *that* was the way seafood should be eaten.

He was also fortunate Irris was an easy conversationalist. By the time the main meal arrived, Han was nicely relaxed and almost enjoying himself. As he was effectively sandwiched between the Rieekans and Leia, it was almost as if they were holding their own private dinner party, other conversations failing to penetrate their intimate bubble. He heard snatches of discussions that appeared to be generating some intensity -- words such as 'smugglers' and 'mercenaries' that made his ears prick up -- but on the whole he stayed as far out of any trouble as he could; a first for him, Leia would have said. He was safe and comfortable with talking only to his immediate dinner partners for the whole night, if need be.

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The wine was changed to a red to accompany the dark meat and roasted vegetables. With Carlist now seriously conversing across the table with Madine, Ackbar and Fey'lya, and Irris chatting with the woman to her left, Han took a moment to appreciate the rich flavor and aroma of the vintage wine.

"Was that a sigh of content I heard from you, General?" Leia suddenly asked.

"Maybe," he admitted grudgingly

"Maybe?" Leia leaned towards him, a grin lighting her face. "Be careful. You may start enjoying yourself."

Han bent his head and placed his lips close to her ear. "That's what happens *after* dessert."

A delicious sensation ebbed through her and she felt his hand rest possessively on her thigh, hidden by the edge of the table and the linen that covered it.

"You can't enjoy yourself before then?" she whispered, vaguely wondering if anyone might guess what they were discussing.

His eyes smoldered. "A man has his limitations, sweetheart. If I enjoy myself here, I could run out of enjoyment for later. And then what sort of a palace slave would I be?"

"Oh? So we're back to the palace slave again, are we?" A part of her relished the *wickedness* of talking to each other like this at a formal function. And the knowledge that no one else would dare to be so flagrant as her Corellian.

"That, or we could play 'Pirates' again. Your choice. You know I'm easy."

Leia glanced towards Madine and his partner -- *What was her name again...?*

"As easy as Madine's new friend?"

His voice rumbled, "Easier."

His fingers stealthily eased up the hem of her dress and she shifted in her seat, allowing the fabric to slip over her knee. For a moment, Mon Mothma caught Leia's gaze, but Leia quickly returned her eyes to Han's honey-colored stare.

"You do this sort of thing all the time, Solo?"

"What?"

"Seduce princesses over dinner?" She suspected Mon Mothma knew this was what he was doing. "And under the table?"

He winked at her. "Only Alderaani princesses."

Her thigh was now fully exposed and, despite the heat of his hand, she shivered in anticipation as he returned to caressing her again.

"You're very good at it," she admitted, wondering how much longer the dinner would last. The way she felt now, she *would* jump him in the turbolift on the way back to her suite, regardless of the other passengers.

His fingers massaged her inner thigh. "I haven't even started, sweetheart."

"What's your opinion on this, Solo?"

Borsk Fey'lya's strident voice cut through their interplay like a vibroblade. The hand on Leia's thigh ceased moving as Han's gaze slid from hers and moved across the table towards the Bothan, his eyes suddenly cold and hard. Fey'lya's cream colored fur rippled at the level of hostility the Corellian directed at him, but a satisfied smile twitched on his lips.

"My opinion on what?"

Leia clutched at Han's hand that lay hidden beneath the table, a warning to curb his temper. The tone of Han's voice caused most other conversations to cease. The gathering's attention shifted between the Bothan and the Corellian.

Fey'lya sipped at his wine. "We were just discussing why your smuggler friends have suddenly decided to tuck their tails between their legs and flee from the benevolent protection and employment of the Alliance."

Han squeezed Leia's fingers and returned his hand to the tabletop. "They're not my 'smuggler friends'," he replied tightly. The Bothan was right, though. Not long after the Battle of Endor and the destruction of the second Death Star, a majority of the smugglers in the employ of the Alliance had ceased all operations and returned to their previous occupations. Han didn't have personal knowledge of why this was the case, but he had a fairly good idea.

"My apologies," Fey'lya purred, "I had assumed that because *you* are a smuggler that you would have counted these individuals as friends and would be in their confidence."

A faint smile turned Solo's lips. There were many ways he could respond to this assertion, many ways that Fey'lya and possibly even Mon Mothma would expect him to react, but he wasn't biting. And he wasn't about to deny his past either, especially when it wasn't that long ago.

"Even when I *was* smuggling for the Alliance," he explained slowly, "me and my partner usually worked on our own, kept to ourselves."

"Apart from Princess Organa," Fey'lya opined glibly.

Han bristled and Leia touched his arm in a calming gesture. Admiral Ackbar seemed not to understand or notice the exchange between Bothan and Corellian, and he leaned across the table towards Han.

"General Solo," the Calamari said gruffly, "if you have knowledge of why the smugglers left, perhaps you could inform us all."

Han's gaze switched to the Mon Calamari admiral. Calamari were death on smugglers, perhaps even worse than Mon Mothma had been when she was the Chandrilan representative in the Imperial Senate. Why was Ackbar a sudden champion for them now? If anything, he should have been happy to see them leave.

Perhaps sensing the former smuggler's wariness, Ackbar added, "Despite my own personal feelings, the Alliance continues to need freighters and experienced pilots to help with the final effort against remnant Imperial forces. We need to bulk transport refugees, displaced persons, soldiers, weapons, supplies and

other logistical requirements. We have the funds to pay the smugglers for their efforts, and yet they turn on us just as the war is drawing to a successful conclusion."

The lazy, crooked smile slipped up the side of Solo's face. "That's where you're wrong, Admiral. No smuggler ever signed up to your cause, so how could they 'turn' on you?"

Mon Mothma raised a sculptured eyebrow. "Indeed."

"Spoken like a true smuggler," Dodonna muttered.

Solo sat upright and favored the elderly, white haired general with a spurious smile. "I'm one of the 'good guys' now, remember. See? I got the uniform and everything."

A few good-natured chuckles rippled around the table, dissipating the tension slightly.

Carlist Rieekan, ever the diplomat in a soldier's uniform, attempted to draw things to a conclusion without further slurs. "We'd appreciate any insight you might have on this, Han."

Solo nodded his gratitude to Rieekan. "I don't know for sure what's happened," he began. "Take this as my best guess."

His glance strayed to Leia's pensive face. *I'm a big boy, sweetheart*, he wanted to tell her. *I can deal with these clowns*. She might have read his thoughts, for she decided as this was his 'specialty', she would allow him to handle it as he thought best. Any interference on her part would only emasculate him in the eyes of his colleagues.

"Profits are what drives a smuggler," Solo began, slipping into the parlance with an ease that disturbed her slightly. "They're in it for the money, plain and simple. They obviously see no gain in continuing to run ops for you--us."

Leia winced at his slip, and noticed the knowing look that passed between Fey'lya and Mon Mothma.

"What do *they* want, then?" Madine asked, his emphasis including Han in with the smugglers. "An increase in haulage fees? Alliance protection for their spice smuggling operations?"

Dodonna's voice quaked with outrage. "Don't they understand how close we are to ending Palpatine's tyranny once and for all?"

Han shook his head wearily. He thought they would have understood this by now. "They don't care if we're trying to blow away the Empire." His eyes swept around the faces of the politicians and military officers seated at the table. "One government's the same to them as another. Smugglers are only interested in bypassing laws, customs duties, excises and tariffs." His gaze returned to Fey'lya. "And that's not something that's gonna go away just because the flag flying over Coruscant has changed. They probably figure it's a good bet the Alliance will form the next legitimate government, and as that time's rapidly approaching, they wanna get a head start."

The Bothan's nose twitched distastefully. "A 'head start'?"

"Distance themselves," Han explained. "Cut all ties with the new government before you try to curtail their smuggling activities."

"Surely that's a bit pre-emptive," Madine scoffed.

Han shrugged. "A smuggler's always gotta think three steps ahead of the opposition. Besides, things are pretty much in turmoil at the moment. What better time to take advantage of trade routes when the chances of being stopped by an Imperial blockade are minimal?" His eyebrows raised speculatively. "Sounds rather lucrative to me."

Leia heard Dodonna mutter into his wine, "It would."

Borsk Fey'lya's fur ruffled, and he curtly shook his head at Mon Mothma in disbelief.

"Thank you for your thoughts," the Bothan told him, then added in a tone that reeked of disdain, " *General*. However, I am more inclined to believe that the smugglers are holding out their services to the highest bidder. There are reports of smugglers conducting operations for Imperials in the Meridian Sector."

Solo raised a shoulder in concession and interrupted, "They must be paying more than us then."

Fey'lya's violet eyes sparked. "Which is precisely my point. Before it was a case of beggars not being choosers. The smugglers stayed with the Alliance because we protected them and were able to offer a flow of easy work."

Only the touch of Leia's hand on his knee stopped Han from rising to his feet. "Easy?!" The Kessel Run had been kid's play compared to *some* of the operations he'd been on with the Rebellion.

The Bothan ignored the outburst and continued. "Now we have some competition out there with the stragglers offering haulage contracts as well. It would

be in the best interests of the smugglers if they used this as a bargaining point to broker higher fees from us. Perhaps even coerce the Alliance into paying them for *not* running operations for the Empire."

There was a murmuring of agreement from people around the table, and a few additional conversations on the same topic erupted. Han shook his head in disgust and looked towards Leia.

"That's not the way it is," he told her, uncertain whether he was annoyed at not being believed, or because the motives of the smugglers had been seriously questioned, or because most here considered him a smuggler in a general's uniform.

She regarded him sympathetically. "That's Fey'lya's view of things. And, by default, probably most around the table see it that way as well."

"Why'd they even ask for my opinion if they weren't interested in what I had to say?"

Then it dawned on him that he had been asked precisely so his opinion could be discounted. Perhaps the topic had even been chosen to highlight the fact to all that he had been a smuggler, and probably still thought and acted like one now.

His eyes hardened as he regarded Leia critically. "I don't know how you can stomach this sort of crap on a daily basis."

Leia pushed away her initial offense at the look he gave her; he really had a lot to learn about how much political imperatives influenced military direction.

Han took a swig of his wine, mumbled something unintelligible in low Corelli. Leia pursed her lips, considering some platitude to offer him.

"Think of it as a game of sabaac," she suggested. "You aim for the best cards closest to Pure Sabaac. If that's not possible, you bluff out your opponents until you're the last player standing and you win the pot. Even then, you never have to reveal your hand."

He huffed dismissively. "More like dejarik chess. And I know *exactly* which two-faced creature Fey'lya is."

Leia repressed a laugh against the back of her hand.

"General Solo." Fey'lya was calling him again.

"Round two," Han muttered as he placed his glass on the table. His gaze returned to the Bothan, to show he was listening. Fey'lya's posture insinuated he

had been conversing with his neighbors, Mon Mothma and Dodonna. Han had a bad feeling about what would transpire next.

"Solo, what would you say to a mission to convince the smugglers that it would be in their best interests to scorn Imperial approaches and return to the employment of the Alliance?"

Fortunately, Han did not voice his immediate reaction: *I'd tell you to blow it out your furry little ass*. Instead, he moistened the inside of his mouth, choosing his response more carefully than he was known for.

"I'd say 'no way'."

Leia momentarily closed her eyes. It was better than what she had anticipated from him, but an astonished hush fell over the rest of the dinner guests. Mon Mothma blinked visibly and Dodonna pursed his lips in a grim fashion, almost as if expecting the Corellian's reaction. Even Rieekan rubbed a hand over his open mouth.

"'No way'?" Fey'lya repeated, his Bothan accent finding it difficult to reproduce the Corellian flippancy.

Han grimaced, fully aware he needed to explain his blatant insubordination.

"There's no point. The smugglers will do whatever it is they wanna do. And if they've got it in their heads that they want nothing to do with the Alliance, then nothing I say will change their minds."

Fey'lya's smile was predatory and triumphant. "Aah! But you said you don't know for certain why they have left. What if your 'best guess' is wrong? What if *I* am right? What if all they need is some *persuasion* to return?"

The Corellian's fists tightened involuntarily. "They won't take to threats."

"What threats? I'm suggesting you remind the smugglers how profitable the relationship between us can be. And elaborate on what may happen to them once we assume government and they're caught on the 'wrong side'."

Solo shook his head, not afraid to show his aversion. "Doesn't matter. They won't listen to me."

Fey'lya turned his palms outwards in disbelief. "Why wouldn't they listen to you, Solo? You're a fellow smuggler. A colleague. Honor amongst--"

"They won't trust me," Han interrupted. "They *don't* trust me."

"But you're one of their own kind."

"I was never one of them before." He tugged at the lapel of his jacket. "I certainly ain't one of them now."

"Which side *are* you on, Solo?" Madine sniped, his tongue loosened by the wine.

Compelled to show his support for Han, Rieekan growled out a warning, "Madine..."

Solo speared a sidelong glance at his compatriot, before the Bothan captured his attention again after briefly conferring with Dodonna.

"Regardless of your opinion, General," Fey'lya said, "would you be willing to lead a mission to initiate this action?"

A loaded question -- and one that could be answered a number of ways. There was no way he would ever be 'willing' to lead such a mission, but if he said 'no', it would only prove how difficult and ill disciplined he was. Knowing the Alliance High Council, it would also reflect badly on Leia. Besides, he would never agree to going on such a poorly considered mission, particularly one that had a high probability of failure and the potential loss of his life. With Leia in his orbit, he now had too much to live for.

Conscious that the gathering was awaiting his response, Han put on his most pleasant smile.

"You've got no jurisdiction over me, Borsk."

He felt Leia's hand squeeze his knee in a mixture of encouragement and caution. He knew she wouldn't want him goading Fey'lya or pushing his luck too far.

The Bothan's fur quivered. "I may not have, but Mon Mothma does, and so does General Dodonna, Admiral Ackbar, Madine, Rieekan. Shall I continue?"

Han had made his point, and now so had Fey'lya.

"Gentles," Rieekan suddenly interrupted. "Dinner is not the place to discuss strategies and tactics. Borsk, if you would like us to consider a variety of solutions to tackle our transport and logistic problems--"

"Thank you, Carlist," Fey'lya cut him off, "but what I want is General Solo to answer my question."

There was no use in delaying things. Han knew what he wanted to say, but he was very much aware of the young woman seated next to him -- the *Princess* by

his side. Here was a new factor in his life he now had to take into consideration. Here was a woman whose respect and love he required.

"You *order* me to go," he said quietly, "I'll go."

Fey'lya smiled through thin lips. "That's all I wanted, General."

The tension in the room seeped away as the guests returned to their meals and previous conversations. The warmth of Leia's hand left his knee as she collected her fork and picked at her vegetables. His appetite now gone, Han's gaze dropped to his own food cooling on the plate. *Is she gonna say something?* he wondered. *Or did I sound like such a pathetic moron that she'd rather ignore me for the rest of the night?*

"A very sensible response." Irris Rieekan told him. When he said nothing in reply, she tried again. "What else could you have said?"

Han shook his head ruefully. "Plenty I *could* have said."

"But you wisely kept your tongue in your head."

"For once," Leia piped up next to him.

There was a barely perceptible cringe from Han as he reached for his wine again. Leia nearly regretted having made the remark. She knew it was probably a slightly spiteful thing to say, but he had come close to saying, or doing, something, they both may have regretted. He really needed to learn how to deal with people on a more civilized level than he was used to. Not arguing with fellow dinner guests was only the start.

The rest of the evening was comparably uneventful. Han sat quietly, picking at the remains of his meal while half-heartedly responding to questions from Irris and Carlist Rieekan. Leia took his silence as recalcitrance, and decided it was probably best to leave him to chew over what had occurred. Consequently, the previous intimacy between them failed to re-generate.

Following the dessert course, which he politely declined, Han excused himself and departed for the ablutions while the guests adjourned to the anteroom for refreshments. After five minutes or so, Leia became aware Han had failed to return. Despite being involved in a very interesting discussion with Rison-Rha, the Alliance faction leader from Rhinnal, Leia tried to keep the entranceway in view. *Keeping an unnecessary eye out for him*, she tried to convince herself. He was a grown man, after all. *A grown Corellian smuggler*, she reminded herself.

Not ten minutes later, Irris made eye contact with Leia. The Princess followed the elder woman's gaze to the large transparisteel viewport that formed one wall of

the anteroom on a slightly raised level. Han stood side-on to the viewport, his eyes absently staring out into the starfield, rubbing the knuckles on his right hand.

Leia took the advantage of a lull in the conversation to excuse herself, and moved up the few steps towards Han. His eyes flicked towards her as she approached, then returned to the view. She stood next to him for a moment, appreciating the majestic sight of Alliance Task Force ships moving silently through the vacuum of space, the colorful running lights and insignia contrasting starkly with drab greys and whites of their hulls.

"Would you like to leave now?" Leia asked softly.

He made an indifferent face but didn't look at her. "You seem to be enjoying yourself."

Leia breathed heavily through her nose, not wanting to let his dour manner annoy her. Perhaps she had made a mistake in not talking to him throughout the rest of the dinner. He'd obviously taken her silence as punishment. Taken and accepted it, albeit resentfully. But she hadn't *meant* to punish him. Simply to give him space and time to think.

She noticed Han wince and realized he wasn't so much rubbing his knuckles as cradling them. She wondered what, or *who*, he had hit. A quick scan of the gathering accounted for of all those whom she would have expected him to single out, and she released a relieved sigh.

All right, she admitted to herself.

Maybe I did want to punish him. I did to Han what I always hated my father doing to me. The 'Bail Organa silent treatment'. She had always hated that; the silence being far worse than any stern words. And she had promised herself she would never treat anyone she loved in the same way.

"We need to say good-bye if we're leaving."

Han nodded woodenly, his eyes still fixed outside the cruiser. Leia took his good hand and he allowed her to lead him back to the other guests. In her broad experience of dinner parties, it was the quickest departure Leia had ever made. Apart from a whispered farewell and hug for Irris and Carlist Rieekan, the remaining guests received only a brief nod of acknowledgment from her. She did, however, formally thank Mon Mothma for the invitation and bid her good night. Mon Mothma easily detected Han's discomfort as he shook her hand and mumbled his own leave-taking.

"You're most welcome," the Supreme Commander intoned in her refined voice.

Despite the fact they held hands, the journey back to Leia's cabin was strained by the silence hanging between them. A few times Leia attempted to talk to Han, but he responded with non-committal grunts and shrugs of his shoulder. *My treatment of him reversed, she considered ruefully. And I probably deserve it.*

Han lingered behind Leia while she keyed open the hatch to her suite. She was not surprised when he failed to follow her in, choosing instead to lean against the rim of the hatchway. She turned to face him, slipping her feet from her shoes at the same time.

"Might sleep in the *Falcon* tonight," he explained.

"Oh?" she asked guilelessly. "Why's that?"

Leia steeled herself for the inevitable angry words. She didn't want to fight with him about what had happened over dinner, but at the same time she was still prepared to put forward her point of view.

Han looked down at the deck, as if searching for an answer in the carpeted floor. When he eventually spoke, his voice was soft and contrite. "Sorry I messed up tonight."

Leia smiled at him sadly, suddenly regretting the way she had behaved towards him.

"You didn't mess up, Han." She moved in front of him, touched the arm he still cradled until his eyes raised to meet hers. "Welcome to the dirt and glamour of the Alliance High Council."

He made a huffing, half-laughing sound in his closed mouth.

Leia tenderly took his right hand in hers, for the first time seeing the extent of the grazing and bruising across his knuckles. Nothing a little kiss couldn't fix.

"What did you punch?"

His grimace was self-critical. "Not Fey'lya's face." He shivered as Leia brushed her lips against the back of his fingers, shook his head. "I dunno. A hatchway in the heads."

Leia shook her head indulgently. *Nerfherder.* She slid her hands under the lapels of his jacket and leaned her weight forward, pressing her hips against his.

"You don't really want to go back to the *Falcon*," she asked coyly, "do you?"

The smile came easily to his face. It was difficult to stay angry and annoyed with himself when Leia was pressed up against him like that.

"S'pose not." His arms encircled her and he glanced behind as someone passed in the corridor, curiously looking into the Princess's open cabin. "You gonna shut the hatch, or do me against the bulkhead in view of the public?"

Still holding him by his jacket lapels, Leia pulled him away from the hatchway, shut it with a push of the switch, and gently forced him against the closed door. It was difficult not to feel his body's reaction to her advances.

"Does that palace slave want to come out and play?" she enticed, her fingers working on the fasteners on his shirt.

She felt him press a kiss against her forehead.

"Will a plain old Corellian do?"

Leia looked up from her task. A simplicity lit his eyes, the face of a man suddenly tired of the many roles he played. She rested her head on his chest and he held her closer.

"A plain old Corellian will do very nicely."

end

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