

[Back To Index](#)

This story was written just for fun and is not an attempt to make money or infringe on any copyrights or trademarks. Only the original ideas contained within the works on this nonprofit web site are the property of their authors, and please do not copy or link these stories to any other website or archive or print without permission of the author.

Games

by [Cheree Cargill](#)

There were times when Leia Organa forgot her femininity, when she was just another soldier, a guerilla fighter, a warrior. In those times, she worked as hard as any of the men around her, ate the same food, shared the same miserable conditions, pushed herself to endure as much or more than any of them. At those times, mud replaced makeup, sweat became her sweet perfume, and the ability to field strip and rebuild a carbine laser-rifle was more desirable than a chest of precious jewels. There were times when her regal upbringing seemed a million years in the past, when the thought of a hot bath or a soft bed were things she couldn't ever remember experiencing.

But at other times, when things were quiet and there was a lull in the war, she would sometimes find herself sitting before the small mirror in her quarters, brushing out the long hair she normally kept tightly braided, wondering at the tired circles under her eyes and the lines that were appearing on her face. Her cheeks had hollowed and sharpened and any adolescent plumpness she had once carried had long since melted away from a lean, hard frame. She had been one of the most eligible young women in the Alderaani court, she remembered. She was still young, but the youth had gone from her eyes. Battle and the loss of so many loved ones had replaced the young girl with a tired, often bitter woman.

She wasn't sure she liked that image at all.

Sighing, and with an unaccustomed longing threading its way through her heart, Leia pulled her brush through the shining lengths of brown hair and began to think about her surroundings. There were more women here on the command

ship than on the ground bases and she had begun noticing that romantic interactions were developing between some of them and the male pilots and technicians. Often she had sat alone in the officers' lounge and watched couples strolling past the door on their way to their stations or to the pilots' mess. They laughed and talked and sometimes held hands, looking at each other affectionately.

How could they feel this way about each other when there was a war on? she had wondered. How could the women still find an interest in looking pretty, in flirting, in hoping for marriage and children?

With self-revelation, she stared at herself in the mirror and pondered, *No, when did I stop feeling that way? When did I put my life and my womanhood on hold?* She'd been too alone and had protected that aloneness fiercely, not allowing anyone to get close to her.

She admitted that there was still a bit of vanity buried deep inside her. Why else would she keep her impractical long hair? It would be much more logical to cut it short and not worry with it. She'd told herself that it was a symbol of lost Alderaan, that she must maintain the elaborate hairstyles of the Court in order to remember. But when she was honest with herself, she knew that it was because she felt pretty with long hair. And long hair was a mark of royalty and the good life. She remembered her mother -- her real mother -- with flowing dark hair rippling in the wind. And her stepmother, Bail's wife, was one of the most beautiful women she had ever known, her thick, shining hair arranged in braids and curls of burnished gold.

She blinked back sudden tears and was surprised to find that there were still such feelings inside her. She missed the Court and its silly intrigues, missed real friendships and even an occasional romantic liaison. As much as she missed the things of her childhood, she also missed the company of other girls and women, of intimate little chats in the garden, missed winter snow sports and summer outings. Missed her aunts and cousins, even the palace servants and courtesans. There were no other women of her rank she could talk to here. The other officers were all men, and Mon Mothma -- when she made a rare visit -- was too busy and Leia had never gotten to know her well. In any case, Leia thought of her more as a mother figure than a friend. The other women here were crew members, but she found herself longing to get to know them.

She took a deep breath and decided it was time to crack the ice a bit. She'd test the waters anyway. With new resolution, she set about brushing her hair up and twisting it into a softer style. Not too much. She still had an image to maintain, but not so harsh. Once she had arranged her hair to her satisfaction, she put on a clean khaki uniform and decided to take her evening meal in the pilots' lounge for a change. It would be a start, at any rate.

* * *

There was a sudden hush in the crew mess as the Princess stepped through the door, a questioning expectation from those present. Was she here to issue orders? Make an announcement? What was an officer doing in crew territory? The murmurs started again when she hesitated and then went to the food replicators to dial up a meal.

Once she'd selected her food, she turned and surveyed the room a bit self-consciously, looking for a place to sit. For a second, she considered fleeing but she was committed now and marched toward a table where one of the female techs was sitting. She was an older woman with her brandy-colored hair pulled back in a loose knot at the nape of her neck.

"May I join you?" Leia asked, trying to keep both the tremor and the authority out of her voice. This was meant to be a social endeavor.

The woman at the table hesitated and then replied, "Of course, Your Highness. Please, sit down."

Leia did so and smiled. "Thanks. I thought I'd join the crew this evening for a change. I don't seem to get much of a chance to meet any of the pilots or techs and I like to know the other people on the ship. I've seen you, I think, on the bridge."

"That's right," the woman answered. "I'm Nola Enterean. I'm on third shift in the control room, navigation console."

"Oh, yes, I know you," Leia responded. "I've seen you there sometimes when I go up at night. Well, it's not really night, I know, but third shift anyway."

Introductions out of the way, conversation lagged uncomfortably for a moment while the two tried to think of something to say next. Leia was saved when a group of pilots entered the mess and crowded around the replicators, talking as they got their food. One of them was the Corellian, Han Solo. He wasn't really one of the Alliance pilots, of course, but seemed to like the company of the other men and women on the command ship and was inclined to take many of his meals here. Luke Skywalker was also in the group.

"Who's the pilot standing next to Captain Solo?" Leia asked Nola. "I don't think I've seen him before."

"He's new. Just transferred in," Nola replied. "His name is Lee Nightbringer. I don't know much about him except that he's from Tatooine and I think used to run freight out of there."

"That must be why Captain Solo and Commander Skywalker are so chummy with him, then," Leia mused, taking a forkful of her food. "I think the commander and General Kenobi first contracted with Solo on Tatooine." She shook her head and frowned. "What a backwater *that* is. The General used to call it 'a hive of scum and villainy.' I think he was being charitable."

Both women laughed at that and turned their gazes on the group of pilots, only to find the men looking quizzically back at them, wondering what was so amusing.

As the men began to disperse into the mess hall and find places to sit, Han Solo happened to stroll past the Alderaani's table and paused to give her a long, appraising stare. "Well, well, look who's come to mingle with the peasants," he drawled with a lop-sided smile. "Sorry we don't have any velvet cushions for your chair, Your Worship."

Instantly, Leia's good humor vanished. "I don't require any, Captain," she replied frostily.

Solo shrugged. "Just didn't want your royal backside to get bruised. Evenin', ladies," he nodded to the two women and continued on his way.

Leia fumed silently as the Corellian seated himself several tables away and continued his conversation with the other pilots. Nola glanced back and forth at the two for a few seconds then said, "Don't let Han get you so steamed, Princess. If he knows he's getting to you, he'll just keep it up. Ignore him."

Organa took a deep breath, ashamed that she'd let her agitation be so obvious. "He can just be so infuriating sometimes," she conceded.

"Sure he can," Nola replied. "Hell, all men can be that way. Personally, I think most of 'em should be kept in a barn unless they're carrying a heavy load or warming your bed. But Han's not a bad sort once you get to know him. In fact, I think we're pretty lucky to have him on our side."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, if I was in trouble, I know I could count on Han to do something about it."

The image came to Leia's mind of Han Solo, knee deep in garbage and foul liquid, lifting her up out of harm's way as walls closed in on them, of him boldly charging a group of stormtroopers, yelling at the top of his voice, of him blasting his ship into a formation of TIE fighters over Yavin. She frowned unconsciously, though. But hadn't Luke Skywalker been just as brave or braver? He'd been in the garbage masher, too, had held off stormtroopers, and had been responsible for the torpedo that destroyed the Death Star. And he was nice and polite, always treated her with respect. Nearly worshipped her, in fact. Something about that

bothered her. She didn't want to be worshipped. Han was just the opposite of Luke -- cocky, self-assured, not hesitating to take her down a peg if he thought he could.

"I don't like Captain Solo," the Princess finally said. "Maybe he's a good pilot, but he's not a part of the team. You never know what he's going to do."

"I suppose not," Nola agreed.

"If he had any loyalty, we'd know we could count on him whenever we needed him."

"I haven't seen him leaving," Nola pointed out. "He seems to be a pretty permanent fixture around here."

"He's impertinent," Leia argued. "He won't follow orders."

Nola shrugged. "He's a Corellian. And a Free Spacer to boot. I don't know much about Han's background, Your Highness, but I think there's a reason he calls himself Solo. I don't think he was born with that name."

That caught Leia's attention. "Really? Why do you say that?"

"I'm Corellian and Solo isn't a Corellian name." Nola looked over at the group of men laughing and talking across the room. "I don't know. He's a puzzle. He wears the Bloodstripe and that's a Clan symbol, but he doesn't use a Clan name." She shook her head. "Just a gut feeling, I guess, but something tells me that Han Solo is a good man and I'd want him at my back in a fight."

The technician stopped and studied Leia for a moment, then smiled gently. "Your Highness, I'm going to say something pretty presumptuous so just slap me down if I've gone too far." She paused and then said, "I'm going to guess that you haven't had much experience with men."

For a second, Leia drew herself up in royal indignation then relaxed. Nola had hit it pretty close to the mark. "No," she admitted. "Not the way I think you mean. I've dealt with men on a military level, across a negotiating table, as my father's emissary, and on a formal social level on Alderaan. I've debated men on the Senate floor, my Senate staff was largely composed of men, and there have been times when I was the only woman present in councilar situations, so I've had an enormous amount of experience with men, but..."

"But you've never had a man as a friend," Nola finished for her.

"No, not really."

"Have you ever been in love?" the older woman asked softly.

Leia was silent then shook her head. "No. I never had that luxury. There was never the time nor the opportunity." *That's not entirely true*, she scolded herself. *There was Jessen. No, I was never in love with Jessen. That was just a summer infatuation. I can't even remember what he looked like.*

She sighed and looked over the faces of the men at the other tables in the mess hall. As her gaze moved over them, it paused on that of the Corellian spacer and she was caught by the good natured roughishness she saw there. He was laughing, his eyes crinkled up, and his generous mouth showed a flash of white, even teeth. As he sobered just a bit, he caught her looking at him and their eyes met across the room for the briefest of seconds. In that instant, she saw something in his face she'd never seen before -- candor, affection, hope, maturity, longing, things she couldn't identify. For an instant, he wasn't the wise-cracking, rough-edged, smuggler she'd known.

Then the moment was broken as he grinned lasciviously at her and waved. Feeling her face redden, she hastily glanced away and was struck by the contrast that the young pilot next to him presented. Blond and a bit slighter than Solo, Luke Skywalker seemed too young and innocent to be a fighter pilot. He smiled at her but it was a friendly expression, a bit shy, nothing like the provocative smirk of the Corellian.

Han suddenly leaned over and said something to Luke, then arose and made his way directly for the Princess' table. Skywalker seemed uncertain but got up and followed Solo's lead.

With a ceremonious bow, Han presented himself. "May we join you ladies?"

Nola glanced at the Princess for permission. Leia seemed to have drawn herself up but then nodded and said formally, "Please do, Captain Solo." She looked up at the other man and her expression changed slightly to one of more friendliness. "And you too, Commander. Please sit down."

Luke grinned self-consciously and said stiffly, "Thank you, Your Highness. It's an honor."

"Please, there's no need to be so formal." She smiled warmly at him. "I understand that you just returned from a supply run to Tatooine. How did it go?"

"Pretty well, Your Highness," Luke replied. "The squadron and supply ships were able to make it there and back without encountering any Imperial ships. I really thought the Tatoo system would be swarming."

"That *is* unusual," the Alderaani mused. "We'll have to step up surveillance and see what's going on. Any change in Imperial activity does not bode well. Other than that, how did it feel to return home? I don't think you've been home for some time, have you?"

Luke looked down at his lap and cleared his throat. "Well, I don't know that it's home anymore."

"I'm sorry," responded the Princess sincerely. "I forgot for a moment that you lost your family there."

"Yeah, the day I shipped out with Han and Obi-Wan. Imperials killed my uncle and aunt and destroyed our homestead. But it wasn't the first time they'd done something like that. Other families got hit, too."

"Tell me about it," Leia invited him and her graciousness and interest in him got him to talking.

He hesitated uncertainly, then began, "Well, I had a friend who worked as a ship's third mate out of Mos Eisley, you know? They mostly hauled out whatever was available, but the incoming freight was stuff the locals needed, anything from vaporator parts to seed. They hauled in a lot of other stuff, though, like medical supplies, dry goods, school tapes for the families living out on the fringe farms. My buddy said they'd get stopped and boarded for inspection now and then, but it was more of a hassle than anything else. But it kept getting more and more frequent and the Imperials started confiscating stuff they took a fancy to. Or things that were beginning to be banned. It was finally those edutapes that broke it for them. They got boarded as they were making a final approach in and it seems that the Imperial captain who came aboard took exception to the titles they were carrying. He jettisoned the entire cargo." Luke paused and shook his head. "There wasn't anything that was all that bad, but I guess the Imps had decided that Republic history hadn't happened the way it'd happened. Anyway, more than that, their captain was counting on that cargo to get 'em over a financial hump. He'd had to do some repairs to the ship and that cargo was gonna pay for it. As a result, he defaulted and lost his ship. None of the crew got paid either and some of the families went hungry. They went into Mos Eisley and protested loudly to the Imperial port authority." Skywalker shrugged. "When most of them got back home, they didn't have homes or families left. The troopers had been there already." He nodded towards a far table. "Lee Nightbringer over there is one of them. He lost his wife and two small kids. He joined the Rebellion as a result."

"How very sad," Leia commiserated. "Without meaning to degrade your experience, that has happened more than I can say. I'm glad that we have you with us now. Such evil will not be stopped until good people join together to fight it." She paused and looked around the table. "I'm sorry. I was beginning to make

a political speech." Smiling, she looked to Nola. "What brought you into the Rebellion, if I may ask?"

The woman looked down. "My story's about the same as Luke's. My father was a small businessman on Corell. He had a factory that made a part used in the guidance systems of starships. When the Empire took over the Corellian shipyards and began building the Star Destroyers, they also decided that it was ... inconvenient to have to deal with independent parts suppliers. So they also took over his factory and locked him out of his own business. He threatened legal action and they threatened his family. His heart couldn't stand the strain of it." Her mouth tightened. "He had a heart attack and died ten weeks after the takeover."

Leia was silent and then noticed that Han was watching her steadfastly. "And you, Your Highness?" he asked. "We know the official version. About how you took on Darth Vader one day in the Senate for military abuses. What's the real story?"

"That *is* the real story, Captain. I was raised in the Rebellion. Alderaan sounded the first call to arms."

"And promptly got squashed by the Emperor," Han replied. "The House of Organa had real power before it was suspected of fomenting rebellion. Your father was damned lucky he wasn't executed for treason."

"He was most careful of his position, Captain. The Emperor suspected but never had any proof of his involvement."

"And what about yours? You were on the news often enough about things you'd said and done in the Senate."

Leia sighed. "It's very complicated, Captain Solo. I doubt you'd understand all that is involved in political situations. You haven't told us *your* story."

Han raised an eyebrow. "I don't intend to, Your Worship. I'm *not* involved in your Rebellion. I told you that before. I stick around because they pay me to haul stuff for them. This is strictly a business deal."

"Why do I doubt that?"

"Don't doubt it, Your Royalness. You hung a medal around my neck for Yavin, but that don't mean shit, if you'll pardon my crude and lowly language. I'm an independent spacer in the business of hauling cargo. That's the *only* reason I stay."

There was a moment of strained silence then Luke broke the tension by clearing his throat again and getting up. "I'm gonna get some dessert. Anyone else want any?"

There was a general negative answer around the table and Nola changed the subject as Skywalker moved away towards the dispensers. "What's the story with Luke? Is it true he's a Jedi? I thought they were all killed during the Great Purge."

"I think that depends on who you talk to," the Princess replied. "Luke says he's not a Jedi, but if not, then he's as close to it as we are likely to have. General Kenobi had been teaching him before his death -- Obi-Wan Kenobi was a great Jedi during the Clone Wars, you know -- but now I'm not sure what Luke will do. The only other person I can think of who can claim to be a Jedi is Darth Vader."

Nola made a face. "If *that's* a Jedi, then I'm glad they're all dead."

"It's a great loss for the Galaxy," Leia responded pensively. "The Enclave on Alderaan was a fountainhead of learning and justice before it was destroyed by the Imperials. Of course, the Purge happened when I was a baby, but my father often told me stories of how things were. The Galaxy will never recover from the loss of knowledge. My father said that it was the destruction of the Enclave that made them realize how bad things had become and that it would take a long, drawn out conflict to halt the Imperial advance."

"I remember the Jedi," Han commented softly and Leia was surprised to see how serious he was. "I was real little but I remember seeing Jedi healers working. I thought it was just a lot of magic tricks." As if suddenly realizing that he was completely out of character, his sardonic smirk returned. "I *still* think it's a lot of tricks and nonsense. I told ol' man Kenobi so."

"Luke would disagree with you," Leia replied coolly.

"Oh, he *does*. He believes whole-heartedly in that crap. I'll still put my faith in a good blaster anytime."

"I think you're wrong, Han," said Skywalker, returning with a steaming bowl of arcberry cobbler and sitting back down at the table. "I saw a lot of things on Tatooine that made me wonder."

"Aw, you sandcrawlers *all* believe in the boogy man," Solo retorted. "Too much dust between your ears."

"Too much space between *yours*," Luke answered back, but there was no malice in either man's words.

The two men got to talking about the various models of blasters and the merits or lack thereof with this one or that one. A service droid rolled by and they all dumped their disposable dishes into its recycler, then Nola got up and came back with a tray bearing four cups of hot kleven. Leia sipped hers, feeling better than she had in a long time, surrounded by happy camaraderie and feeling, at least for the moment, part of a tight-knit community rather than an outsider.

Someone started a lively music program on the entertainment system and several couples shoved back tables to clear a space, then began whirling to the music in a complicated pattern. Han startled her by pushing his chair back and asking with a twinkle in his eye, "Your Worship, would you care to dance?"

Surprised, she blurted out, "No! I mean, no, I don't dance."

"Really? Somehow, I find that hard to believe. What with all those royal balls on Alderaan."

Leia's expression stopped him. He'd gone too far, stepped on a raw nerve. "That was a long time ago, Captain Solo," she said softly. "Now, I don't dance."

"Sorry," he said awkwardly and they stared at each other for a second, trying to decide what to do or say next. Han abruptly swung around to Nola. "What about you, Noly, m' dear? Care to dance with me?"

The technician shrugged and rose. Han pulled her along to the cleared space and they swung into the pattern. Leia watched them, uncertain that she would call it dancing, but lacking a better term for the activity. She became aware that Luke Skywalker was sitting rather uncomfortably in silence.

"Oh, I do beg your pardon," the Princess said. "I'm ignoring you. Do you dance, Luke?"

"No. Well, not like this anyway. There were dances we did at home on Tatooine when I was a kid but that was farm dances. I'd feel like a bantha in heat if I started clomping around doing them here."

Leia couldn't help chuckling. "That's not very graceful, I take it."

Skywalker laughed, too, his blue eyes merry. "No, Your Highness. I'd say that's an understatement."

"We had lovely dances on Alderaan when I was growing up," she reminisced softly, her gaze turning inward. "Han was right about that. As children we weren't allowed to attend, but we would sneak out onto the upstairs landings and watch the women in their beautiful dresses and the men in their velvets and medals."

The music was so magnificent and I used to think I could take off and fly. I couldn't wait until I was old enough to finally attend a dance."

She fell silent and a memory surged up in her, of a young girl dressed in blue, swirling in the arms of a handsome young prince. She wasn't supposed to know it, but she had figured out that their parents had brought them together to test out their feelings for one another. If things went as intended, Jessen would become her betrothed mate. He was all that she could have hoped for, handsome, intelligent, a bit mischievous, and so romantic it swept her heart away. As the music soared around them and soft light sparkled off chandeliers, she was whirled by her prince out of a double door and into the moonlight of a garden. There she was kissed for the first time, kissed by the tall, tousled haired man with laughing green eyes, his strong arms folding her close. They danced again along garden paths, the movement of their passage stirring perfume from the exotic flowers that bloomed in the night. Her prince bent to kiss her once more and, when he lifted his head, Leia was startled to see that, in her mind's-eye, it was Han Solo to whom she clung.

Her sudden inattentiveness made Luke pause and study her. "Your Highness? Is something wrong?"

She came back to herself abruptly. "No, I'm sorry. That was rude of me. Go on. You were telling me about your folk dances. I think that's an extremely interesting subject. Do you think there are tapes in the library of Tatooine dancing?"

At that moment, Han and Nola returned, both slightly breathless. Nola plopped down in her seat. "Force, I'm too old to do that!"

Solo sat down as well and grinned. "Noly, you can dance me under the table any day you want to and you know it."

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" the technician teased back. "Dance you under the covers is more like it, you rogue."

"Why, darlin'! I didn't think you cared!"

"I don't. So don't go gettin' any ideas."

"Ideas are all I'll ever get from you," he answered and took her hand to kiss it gallantly.

"Exactly right," Nola replied, pulling her hand back. "You'd have better luck with Her Highness here."

Leia's shields went up immediately as Han swung his gaze to his new target. "Say, *there's* an idea!"

"I have no interest in you, Captain," the Princess informed him. "Other than your piloting skills, that is."

"Your Worship! You wound me to the quick!" he answered. "Do you mean to tell me that you've never had designs on my fabulously sexy body?"

"None whatsoever." Leia was tiring quickly of this topic of conversation.

But Han was just getting warmed up. "That surprises me! Most women have a tough time keeping their hands off me!"

"Do they have weapons in them at the time?" Leia inquired coolly, her eyes narrowing.

Nola laughed out loud. "Oooh, she gets ten points for *that* one, Han!"

"No female teaming, Nola," he scolded. "Come on now, Your Royalness. Do you mean you can actually say that you've never fantasized about getting me into bed?"

She simmered for a moment, unable to find a suitably scathing reply. "Captain," she finally responded, "I have more interest in my droid than I have in *you*."

This caused Han to perk up in delight. "Why, Your Worship! You never mentioned you were into *that* sort of thing!"

She could only shake her head. "What a deluded, nerf-brained bloodslug you are!"

"Why? What's the matter? Don't you like guys, Your Highnessness?"

"I like guys just fine, Captain Solo. I just don't like *you*."

Luke Skywalker was feeling the tension building between the two. "Come on, Han. Lay off already."

"No," Solo insisted stubbornly, his smile becoming a bit feral as he locked gazes with Leia. "I'm really curious. Surely you must have an interest in *someone*, Your Worship."

"I don't think that's any of your business, Captain Solo," the Princess answered.

"Who is it? Wedge? General Rieeken maybe? Don't tell me it's ol' Dodonna! Oh, no, I get it. There really *isn't* anyone because we're all so far beneath you." Han crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, satisfied. "The Princess of

Alderaan may deign to mingle with the commoners at meals, but not on truly -- uh, how shall I say? -- *social* occasions."

Leia stared at him for a minute then shook her head sadly. "You know so little about me, Captain. You think because I'm not attracted to *you* that I must live a very lonely and solitary life."

"Oh, is that so? I'll bet there's not *one* guy you can name that you'd get physical with."

Leia paused, then slipped her hand around Skywalker's arm and looked adoringly up at him. "Oh, I don't know about that. I happen to think Commander Skywalker here is extremely attractive."

Luke's startled eyes widened but he didn't pull away. Han's grin faded as he glanced uncertainly back and forth at the pair. "Come on now," he finally said. "You've hardly spoken to him since the award ceremony back on Yavin."

"That doesn't mean anything," Leia shrugged. "Captain Solo, why do you think that I'm some sort of virginal innocent? The Court on Alderaan was an extremely sophisticated place and I was not kept in seclusion there."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that your ideas about me are wrong. I am not opposed to taking a lover into my bed. But I do so with discretion. The man has to be someone I enjoy being with. That is an honor *you* will never have." Han had shut up but she decided to twist the knife a little further. Turning to look up at Skywalker again, she purred seductively, "I've really had a great time this evening, Luke. I'd like to get to know you better. Would you be interested in coming by my quarters a little later? We could have a drink and, um, continue our conversation in private."

"Sure. Uh, do you mind if I clean up a bit? I haven't been off duty long."

"By all means. It's cabin D-27. I'll see you at, oh, 1930? Good, I'll be waiting for you." She looked at him meaningfully. "Don't be late." She rose, trailing her fingers along his arm. "Thanks for letting me join you tonight, Nola. Captain Solo." She nodded in dismissal at him, smiling a bit smugly as she turned and strolled from the room.

She hadn't gone more than a few steps down the corridor when she heard, "Princess!" and turned to see Han Solo striding briskly toward her. Luke and Nola stood in the doorway to the mess hall, both looking dumbfounded.

Han rapidly caught up with her. "What do you think you were doing in there?" he demanded in a low voice.

"I don't know what you mean," she responded, regally.

"You know exactly what I mean," he answered. "That performance. That was the biggest load of bantha crap I've ever heard. Taking lovers to your bed whenever you wanted."

She clenched her teeth to maintain her control. "I don't see how any of this concerns you, Captain Solo. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment to get ready for." She turned away.

Quickly, he reached out and grasped her upper arm. "Leia, don't *do* this," he pleaded, a note of desperation in his voice.

So startled was she by his actions that she never noticed he'd addressed her by her first name. Instead, she jerked her arm away and snapped, "Let go of me! You're not my Kinsman!"

Han flinched in surprise and caught his breath. Then his brows lowered and he responded angrily, "No. No, I'm not. If I *were* your Kinsman, you'd behave properly."

"Oh? And how is that? As a Corellian clanswoman or an Alderaani noble? You forget yourself, Captain Solo. As you pointed out, I am Princess of Alderaan and you have no right to govern my actions or my morals."

"Then govern them as an Alliance officer," he growled.

For the first time, Leia noticed that they had attracted quite an audience of stunned crew personnel. But she couldn't back down now. "You're not a member of the Alliance," she reminded him coldly. "You have no right to criticize my behavior there either."

"Then bed the whole goddamned Alliance for all I care!" he exploded. Spinning on his heel, he stalked off down the corridor, people hastily getting out of his way.

Leia pounded off in the opposite direction, toward her quarters.

Force, what a stupid thing to do! she chided herself. For Goddess sake, she'd just invited a man to her room for an implied sexual encounter! All to show up a loud-mouthed, micro-brained spacer she didn't care about anyway! And then had a fight with him over it in front of the whole crew! Well, enough of the crew, anyway. Now Luke was going to appear at her door expecting a tumble and, if she didn't follow through, he was sure to go right back to the mess hall and broadcast the fact to everyone within hearing range. She'd be the laughing stock of the Alliance fleet and possibly the Galaxy, if word leaked out, which it was sure

to do. Han Solo would make sure of *that* Her standing as an Alliance leader would be absolutely ruined, her effectiveness at an end.

Well, there was nothing for it but to give Luke Skywalker what he was expecting. A single sexual rendezvous meant nothing and she could shrug that off in the long run. If anything, it might enhance her reputation as a sophisticated, no-nonsense leader and get rid of that stupid Virgin Princess aura she'd somehow picked up. She'd just make sure that he was assigned far away where she'd never have to deal with him again. Hoth. Yes, the new base on Hoth would be ideal.

Leia began taking the pins out of her hair as she hurried back to her quarters, eliciting curious looks from people in the corridors, both because of the Princess' determined expression and because they had never seen her with her hair down before. She ignored them, of a mind to go through with this because she had initiated it and to get it over with.

She changed out of her uniform and into her silky dressing gown and began brushing her long tresses, but she couldn't get Han Solo out of her mind. How *dare* he behave like he owned her! He was acting, as she'd said, like a Corelli clansman with his subordinate female relatives. On some parts of Corell, underage females were viewed as the property of the highest ranking male, to be used or sold as chattel. She hadn't meant to strike him verbally like that; it had just popped out, but she was glad now that she had. It had stopped him in his tracks. She had put up with him as long as she intended to, had put up with his infuriating grin, his sarcasm, and the way his eyes changed color from green to gold sometimes when the light hit them just right, the way her heart leaped when she heard his voice over the intercom--

Roughly she shook her head. What was she doing? She couldn't stand Solo! He was impertinent, obnoxious, everything she hated. He had proven it again tonight in the mess hall. And he obviously loathed her, too, or he wouldn't go out of his way to be so rude to her. He showed her no respect, either for her rank or her authority. She wished she could ship him off to Hoth too.

To calm herself down, she poured a glass of wine, drank it too quickly, then poured herself another. She began to feel better and, using her ingrained discipline, dismissed Solo from her thoughts and began to prepare for the encounter ahead.

She was still brushing her hair when the door chime sounded. Her heart pounding, she put away her brush and opened the door to find Luke standing there. He was dressed in a clean uniform and suddenly seemed taller and more muscular than she remembered him. It struck her that he didn't look so young and innocent anymore, but more like the battle-tested pilot he was. And there

was a decided air of sexual hunger about him that caused her to wonder suddenly what she had gotten herself into.

Involuntarily, she moved back as he stepped into the room and the door slid closed behind him. Then he had taken her in his arms and was kissing her, not brutally, but thoroughly and longingly. His lips were soft and insistent on hers, his arms about her firmly but not crushingly, more as if he couldn't believe she was real and was determined to hold on to her reality. It went on for what seemed like a very long time, to the point where she began to melt against him and respond. She let her lips part against his and her tongue moved to explore his mouth.

Abruptly, he broke the kiss and released her.

She blinked in confusion as she looked up at him. The hardened pilot had been replaced by the nice young man she had first encountered and he was smiling gently and sadly at her. "Don't get carried away, Your Highness. I just did that so I could say I'd kissed the Princess," he explained softly. "I'm sorry if I startled you." He ducked his head and then looked back at her. "You don't have to worry. Nothing is going to happen here. And I won't say anything about it, either."

"What?" she finally managed to say.

"You don't want *me*. I know that. You're in love with Han."

"Han?" she echoed, still fumbling to orient herself. "Are you serious? You've seen how he--"

"Your Highness, what I've seen is how you look at him," Luke answered. "I know you did this to make him jealous. And I went along with it because he was being a jerk tonight."

"No--" she protested.

"Yes," he nodded, cutting her off. "I'm not stupid, Princess. You're in love with him. And, moreover, he's in love with *you*. He should be here instead of me. Call him. He'll come. Don't throw away something special. You're a very beautiful and desirable woman. I wish you *did* feel that way about me but I know it's not true. Han's a lucky man. I envy him that." The young pilot smiled and bent to softly place a lingering kiss on her cheek, then stepped back, the door sliding open behind him. "Good night, Your Highness." Then he was gone.

Leia stood silently for a moment, her mind whirling as it readjusted to the sudden turn of events. Then it sank in what Luke had said. *Call him. He'll come.* For an instant, wild hope flared of its own accord, making her breath catch, then she shook her head in denial. No, he wouldn't. He was too proud, too stubborn. If he came, it would be to taunt her. She couldn't bear that, couldn't face the

humiliation of it. She was shamed enough as it was. She'd made a fool of herself in front of the crew and in front of Han. Love her? Never in a million years. That was impossible. He'd made that abundantly clear.

Another woman would have leapt at the chance of love. Another woman would have railed bitterly at the loss of it. Leia was not that woman. She had borne too many losses already and was practiced at shouldering the burden of them. With steel determination, she crushed down the heartache and went to bed. But she kept seeing the haunted look in Han's eyes just before she slapped him down in the corridor, the look of a man about to lose the one thing he loved more than life itself. She denied it with all her soul but the look of fear stayed with her and finally the tears squeezed out of her burning eyes.

It took her a long time to fall asleep.

* * *

In the pilots' lounge, Han Solo sat with a cup of klevan before him that had long ago gone cold, watching the chron on the wall click off the minutes. His insides felt as stone cold as the klevan. He had walked the corridors of the ship for over an hour before he finally gave up and came back to the lounge to wait. For what, he didn't know but it was deserted now and the solitude made it seem the place to be.

He had seen Luke sauntering down the corridor half an hour before, coming from the direction of Leia's quarters. The other pilot had smiled at him and jerked his thumb jauntily in the direction he'd come. Did that mean he'd been with Leia and left her already? Han knew he didn't have any right to feel possessive of the Princess. She'd made it perfectly clear that he had no claim on her. Yet the thought of another man with her twisted his guts so tightly that he had to grit his teeth to stand it.

On the other hand, maybe Luke hadn't been with her at all. Something in Han's soul couldn't believe that she would actually go through with her threat. He'd caught her watching him too many times, a little smile on her lips, her expression unknowingly affectionate. It wasn't just an outsized male ego that made Han believe she wanted him. Maybe that's what Luke's gesture had meant to say. Maybe he was telling Han to get up and go to her. That the Princess needed him and was waiting for him.

But why didn't she call him if that was so? Why didn't she let him know?

Han took a sip of the cold klevan, not even tasting the bitter liquid as it slid down his tight throat. How many times in his dreams had he kissed her lips and breasts, loved her, held her, protected her? How many times had he ached when she'd put herself in the path of danger and then marveled at her courage and

resourcefulness? A Princess and a guy like him... It was impossible. She was right. She could have any man she wanted and he couldn't say a word about it.

He buried his face in his hands for a moment, then looked back to the chron. The display clicked past another minute.

Miserably, he shoved himself away from the table and left the lounge. For a moment he paused in the corridor outside, his feet turning of their own accord in the direction of Leia's cabin. With a force that surprised him, his heart urged him to go in that direction, to run to her, to pull her into his arms and never let her go again.

Almost involuntarily, he took a step, then another.

Then, clenching his fists, Han swung around and strode quickly in the opposite direction, back toward the docking bays and his solitary quarters on the *Millenium Falcon*. In the early hours of the morning, he finally put a pillow over his head and managed to block out the name pounding through his brain.

... leia ... leia ...leia ...

End

[Back To Index](#)