

[Back To Index](#)

Honor Among Thieves

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Working on his X-wing, Luke Skywalker looked up as a loudly arguing Han and Leia entered the busy Hoth Hangar Bay. Assisting Luke, Chewbacca straightened from examining the hydraulics beneath the small fighter. The wookiee's blue eyes gleamed merriment and Luke could almost read his mind, knowing they had discussed the idea many times. 'We could sell tickets. The problem there being that Han and Leia always hold their slanging matches in public places. For free. Luke sighed. And Solo claims to be a mercenary. I gotta talk him into setting up a venue.

The princess and the smuggler captain were indeed drawing the usual crowd. Luke turned, smiling, to regard the interested onlookers all of whom were pretending to be working and all of whom were edging closer and craning to listen. Gossip was at an all time high ever since Solo and Leia had returned months ago from an --- unscheduled -- mission to some smuggling hold known only to Solo. Speculation was the impetuous Corellian Captain had actually dared kidnap the Princess at least for a few days, furious that she had almost been killed by a double agent on Oceania. There was quite a lot of gambling on the outcome of their time together and new developments changed the odds. Today's argument was definitely the main attraction since the subject of "the Cove" had been raised.

Sure isn't any other entertainment on this ice ball!
Luke was betting Leia would get the last word, while Chewie, naturally, had faith in his Captain's verbal sparring talents.

"Han! Han? Stop I need to talk to you!"

Luke noted Leia was doing her best to look dignified while trying to chase after the tall Corellian. Han had opted to escape and was heading for the Falcon -- Luke was smugly sure of collecting his money. Chewie flinched.

But then Solo stopped, turned back, put his hands on his hips and said, "Yes, Your Mightiness?"

Leia only just managed not to crash into him. Somewhat breathlessly she demanded, "What were you thinking, saying things like that! Don't you ever stop and think before you open your mouth?"

Chortling gleefully, Chewie nudged Luke hard enough to make him stumble backward. The odds had just altered radically in the wookiee's favor. Solo was really steamed now -- judging by how far his jaw dropped and it was taking forever for him to find his voice. He'll never surrender now. Not after an insult like that. Luke fought the urge to groan -- maybe there was still hope. Leia looked just as adamantly angry.

Reclaiming his voice, Solo fired the next salvo. "And what am I supposed to have said to piss off your prissy friends this time?"

"I can't believe that even you would talk to General Dodonna so disrespectfully. He is most offended by your attitude."

"Funny how no one takes offense to what I say at the Cove."

"Well maybe that's the problem. You treat people there with some respect."

"Dodonna is a moron -- you said so yourself. And now you read me the riot act for giving him the truth!? AHH!" Solo turned on his heel and walked off in disgust toward the Falcon but yelled one final comment "No one at the Cove is a moron!"

Luke felt like cheering as Leia continued the battle, hands on hips, feet planted immovably.

"Don't you walk away from me Han Solo!" She stood fuming and sending murderous glares at his back.

It's a wonder some of the ice doesn't melt from the overheads, Luke thought with a proud grin as the wookiee dropped the hand he'd held out for payment and whimpered. Luke glanced upward, and blinked, frowned. That

almost looks like someone hiding up there. They couldn't possibly hear what's being said that high up.

Absolutely incensed, Leia yelled "I did NOT say Dodonna is a moron!"

Chewbacca whuffed a laugh, but Luke was only vaguely aware of the ripple of amusement from the onlookers and the scarlet hue to Leia's face.

Han turned back, victory in every line of his stance and a familiar smug smirk tugging at his mouth. The onlookers hushed to hear the expected punchline. Solo did not fail them. "Yeah, right I 'm sorry," he shouted back across the chilled hangar deck, "I remember now -- you said idiot, not moron."

There was a murmur of joy from the winners mixed with groans from the losers, and various techs and refuellers straightened from their 'work' to either collect or pay out. Luke was distracted from watching the gantry as Chewbacca nudged him and asked to claim a ten credit piece.

Solo looked back to see Leia's reaction but his gaze shifted, caught by movement high over her head. Suddenly he roared a foul curse and charged flat out toward Leia, sprinting like a madman. Everyone, including Luke, stared. Leia flinched, but had time to only take half a step back. There was a rattle of chains, a tearing of metal, and Luke felt the pit of his stomach churn to acid. The gantry frame, machinery and all, was crashing down in a blur toward Leia. Surely Solo had no chance of reaching her in time.

Then he was grabbing at the Princess, enfolding her in his arms, shielding her with his body, never slowing his forward momentum. The falling machinery clipped him on the shoulder, and he staggered. Spun forward by his own speed, Solo fell heavily atop Leia, both sliding and tumbling across the hangar deck. Leia hit the far wall head first, crumpled to lie unmoving. There was a thunderous crash and a rumbling tremor through the deck as the gantry impacted so close behind the fallen pair Luke was not sure it had missed them.

Abruptly, Solo stumbled to his feet, clutching his shoulder, white-faced as he stared down at an unconscious Leia Organa. Blood trickled thinly from a gash on her brow, just below the hairline.

"Get a medic!" Solo yelled. "She's hurt!"

Luke was already running toward them, dodging other concerned rebels also moving closer or checking damaged machinery. Parts of the gantry had

gone flying in all directions, sending everyone scattering. Chewie too was moving, but before the wookiee reached him, Han called, "Get him, Chewie! Up there!"

Reminded, Luke swiveled, looked up where Solo pointed. Whoever had detached those safety chains was now scurrying back into the shadows, seeking escape. "There are only two ways down," Luke said, grabbing at the wookiee's fur as Chewbacca snarled a response to Solo's plea and turned to the hunt. Luke blinked at the ferocity in the normally serene blue eyes and wondered if the wookiee had heard him. "I'll go right, you take left." Chewbacca nodded and veered away.

Impatient and angry, Solo was torn between wanting to make sure Leia was all right, continue to guard her, or go after the attacker. He eyed the small group gathering about him, all of them techs, all staring in horror at Leia, then catching Solo's fierce, suspicious expression, not daring to do or say more. Han was about to yell a second time for medical assistance when a young female Med-tech appeared at his side, scanner in hand. She bent and checked Leia, looked up at Solo and said, "Nothing serious, concussion."

Solo swallowed hard, nodded, and said, "Where the hell is the rest of your team?" Someone should have been there with a float pallet by now. "Is it safe to move her?" he demanded.

"Yes," the woman answered, "but the emergency team will take her. You've hurt your shoulder. Let me take a ..."

Wordlessly, Solo ignored the tech, bent down and carefully lifted Leia into his arms. Her head lolled loosely against his shoulder and her blood smeared his white shirt. Her face was waxen, still as death. He barely felt the jolt of pain in his torn shoulder nor the protests of the tech who began jogging to keep up with him. "Sick Bay's this way, right?" Solo asked.

"Yes, but..."

Solo continued striding as quickly as he dared along the icy corridors, ignoring stares from rebels working there, coming and going from cross-tunnels. The tech fielded their questions and fell further behind. One face was suddenly familiar -- Luke Skywalker appeared at a cross-junction and sprinted closer, skidding to a halt at Solo's side. "How bad?"

"She'll be okay."

Out of breath, Luke turned for confirmation from the tech who seemed irritated at having to continually repeat herself.

Solo shook his head, a little dazed now as shock began to set in. "There was someone up there, kid."

"I know. I saw," Luke said. Despite his injury, Solo was moving remarkably quickly. Luke jogged to catch up.

Solo winced as he turned his head quickly to meet Luke's gaze. "Could you ID him?"

"No. Sorry." Luke sighed. "He got clear in all the confusion, I think only you and I saw him in the first place. Chewie's still trying to track him by scent."

The Sick bay doors flew open at the head of the corridor and a medical team hurried forward, propelling a float pallet. Dark-skinned doctor Jara Oran led the team, insisting Solo leave Leia to their care.

The Corellian did so, but looked none too happy as he followed. Luke put a hand to his arm and said, "You did well to get her clear, Han."

"Yeah," Solo's voice was as flat as death, as dangerous as a primed detonator, "But I could have killed her, bringing her down so hard. The damn thing clipped me, threw me off balance." His voice shook, hoarse and raw with emotion, "The tech says she's only concussed."

Suddenly, they were inside the brightly lit medical ward and Leia was placed on a diagnostic table. Solo stood nearby, watching, rubbing at his shoulder.

"Come on," the Med-tech said softly. "They'll take care of her. You need treatment too." She looked to Luke for help and between them they herded Solo to a nearby bed. The Corellian sat down, began shrugging painfully out of his shirt, but his darkly concerned eyes never left the team working on Leia.

Finally Jarra Oran looked up and spared him a faint smile. "It's nothing serious, Solo," the dark woman said. "So will you please quit burning a hole through my back? She'll come round soon. I'll give her something potent for the headache and she won't feel a thing. In fact she'll be flying high, the meds will make her feel real cheery. I have to keep that stuff under lock and key or troopers would be stealing it. She'll be fine. A day or two to rest and she'll be back out there yelling at you again. Now will you relax?"

Solo nodded and looked hastily away at the farther wall. The tech had gone to fetch bacta lotion and Solo winced as she began applying it. "You have a nasty sprain," she shook her head, "Carrying the Princess didn't help."

Solo said nothing but watched as Oran supervised Leia's transferal to the bed closest to him and set up an IV feed line. Then the doctor took over from the tech and began examining Solo's shoulder and lecturing him all at once.

The ward door came open and Chewbacca entered, met Solo's gaze and shook his head sorrowfully. Close at the wookiee's side was stout balding figure of Commander Garbel, the Security Chief. He opened his mouth to ask questions, but Solo got in first.

"What kind of screwball operation are you running here, Garbel?" he roared. "Don't you check people before you issue passes for the hangar deck?"

"I resent that, Solo," Garbel's gray eyes narrowed. "You're not officially allied to us and you act as if you own the hangar deck."

"Oh, you resent that?" Solo sneered. He got threateningly to his feet, but Jarra Oran protested and Chewbacca moved closer, blocking his friend. Solo sat back on the bed. "I carry a pass. But someone out there today wasn't cleared! Or if they were they sure as hell shouldn't have been!"

"What the flame are you talking about, Solo?" Garbel yelled.

Oran turned sharply to him. "He's saying maybe this wasn't an accident. Why don't you go investigate instead of standing around yelling at my patients? Her Highness does not need all this noise."

Garbel's jaw snapped shut. "Of course." He cast a guilty look at an unconscious Leia Organa. "I'll go check around but I want to question you further Solo."

"I can hardly wait," Solo drawled sarcastically, then muttered, "Jerk."

"I need to strap your shoulder." Oran waved a hypodermic in Solo's face. "Stop antagonizing everyone, shut up, and keep still or I'll knock you out."

Solo gaped, settled back, then said, "Hey, Doc, have I ever told you I love you?"

The dark woman's eyes twinkled and her lips curved. "Many times. Along with every other female on the Base."

* * *

Adrift in a warm, fuzzy cloud of comfort, Leia Organa sighed and thought about staying in bed for the day. A distant, pleasant rumbling sound reminded her of an even more pleasant dream and she hoped she could reclaim it -- a very handsome man lay on his back in bed, his dark hair sweaty and tousled against the white pillow. He moaned her name and Leia's lips flamed with the heat she found as her mouth met his. "Leia, Leia," he called to her.

She smiled, stretched a little, then winced as muscle aches and a vague pain in her head shattered the dream. The rumbling noise was louder, resolving into distorted words. A man's voice, husky, deep, authoritative, demanding -- and very, very sexy. Then the words snapped into clear form and she frowned.

"And where the hell was he anyway!? I warned Garbel about unauthorized access again just this morning! Dammit! She could have been crushed!"

"But she wasn't," a woman answered, her light voice a mixture of soothing underlaid with irritation. "Calm down. She only has a slight concussion and some bruises. Those painkillers will keep her asleep if you..."

"Only!" the man repeated, louder than ever with indignation.

Leia flinched a little, her head felt strange and if that wasn't such a great voice she'd tell the owner to shut up. No chance of getting back to her dream now. She opened her eyes. Everything was blurry, even the two figures close to her bed, but she squinted and gradually they came into focus. Oh, my! Leia drew a gasping, appreciative breath and her lips curved into a smile. This is better than my dream! Wait -- it IS! It's the same man! All right then -- I guess I am still asleep. Gotta be -- that man is pure fantasy! Sheer male perfection. But why is he talking to someone else? And another woman at that? Looks like a doctor, judging by the long white coat. Leia, you have the weirdest dreams. Get that guy back into bed -- oh yes!

The dream man was seated on another bed, not far from hers. He was naked from the waist up, long legs clothed in blue pants the seams banded with red tucked into black boots. He was arguing with the dark-skinned female doctor who also looked irritated now. Good! Leia thought. This is my dream and I don't want any competition. You come back to me right now gorgeous. I want another kiss!

But despite all her efforts at willing the dream to change, the pair went on arguing, ignoring her. The man was waving one arm about, making it difficult for the doctor to bandage his left shoulder. She was trying to pass a roll of white bacta dressing about his chest and back.

Give up, Doctor. Your arms will never be long enough -- that is one wonderful, powerful chest. And look at the ridges of muscle, the flat abdomen, the curve of the hip. The way his chest heaves when he shouts -- it's almost worth the noise. The white bandage looks so good tight and smooth against that tanned flesh. I want to touch this picture!

Leia looked up to the face and found it a fitting crown for the torso. Strong-boned and ruggedly handsome, not perfect, or beautiful, but rather every line radiated independent, defiant masculinity. His nose is crooked -- probably broke it in a fight, given his temperament.

He waved his arm again, pointing this time, the forefinger directed to Leia's bed. That long lean forearm, the large hand, the firm, strong fingers, a little scraped and bruised. Leia caught the expression that went with the gesture and gasped at the fire in those golden brown eyes. You could be consumed by those eyes. Seared to ash and love every moment of it. Enough. Time to get that generous mouth doing something more interesting. Time to get this dream back where it started.

"Hi, gorgeous!" Leia called as the man's eyes met hers and widened in pleasure. "Come back to bed."

* * *

Han Solo was distracted from his arguing as he noticed Leia was awake and regarding him with a smile. Her eyes were slightly glazed and she was pale but other wise looked okay. He exhaled in relief and was about to tell the doctor the patient was awake.

Then Leia spoke.

Han blinked. He couldn't possibly have heard what he thought he heard. His jaw dropped and he blinked in utter astonishment. "Me?" he said. He got to his feet and hesitantly took a pace closer to Leia's bed.

"Princess!" Doctor Jarra Oran moved around Solo. "Welcome back. Just lie back and take it easy. You have a concussion. I need to check your..." she patted her pockets. "Damn, where did I leave that scanner?"

She turned away to find it and pushed aside a screen as she left. Immediately on the other side, Luke Skywalker and Chewbacca had been patiently waiting for Solo to get patched up. Presently, they were staring at one another in disbelief.

"What did she say?" Luke asked, blue eyes wide as he stared at Leia.

"I said," answered Jarra Oran, "I can't find my scanner. Did you see where I put it?"

Luke shook his head, his eyes never leaving Leia's face. The Princess was smiling in the strangest, make that creepiest -- manner he had ever seen. She was almost, well, hitting on Solo. Seductive. Yes, that was the word to describe that smile.

"Me," Solo repeated, recovered from surprise, his voice was now a low, rumbling drawl. He spread his arms wide and returned the smile in equal measure. "You called?"

Luke groaned. Chewbacca made a snuffling noise of sheer hilarity.

"Do you see any other half-naked men here?" Leia said, dropping her voice to a purring whisper, "Come back here and kiss me again gorgeous. Last time was soooo good."

"Last time?" Again Solo was so puzzled that his forward advance halted. He frowned momentary confusion, then reclaimed his slow, alluring smile. "Yeah, it was good, wasn't it. But that was just a warm up. This will be much better." He leaned toward her.

"What!?" Luke exclaimed, hurrying closer. "Han, you can't take advantage of her when she..."

Solo turned briefly aside, sparing Luke a deadly glare and a threatening forefinger. Luke blinked and shut his mouth with a snap. He'd never seen a more dire warning in his life. Solo turned back to Leia who was smiling dreamily up at him, arms lifted to embrace him. Luke frowned -- surely Solo wouldn't really...

Go for it, Solo! Chewbacca urged. Luke transferred his annoyance to the Wookiee.

The bed springs creaked as Solo placed the palm of his right hand on the mattress at Leia's side. She sighed contentedly and he leaned closer, his breath lifting the unbound hair spread over her shoulder. Bare flesh showed above the brief hospital gown. Solo leaned closer still, lips curving in a mischievous smile, golden brown eyes twinkling amusement and something deeper, more intense. His lips hovered, almost brushed, Leia's. She frowned, her eyes suddenly taking on sharp focus and then widening in surprise.

"Solo!" she exclaimed. "Get away from me!" She lifted a hand and pushed at his bare chest. He immediately backed off. Her face turned crimson and then disappeared as she snatched at the sheets, slid lower in the bed, and pulled the covers completely over herself.

Solo exhaled heavily and snapped his fingers in disappointment. He folded his bare arms across his chest and stood waiting for the Princess to reemerge. She didn't. Luke relaxed and elbowed Chewbacca who was snuffling and chortling, breathless with laughter to the point that Doctor Oran was eyeing him worriedly.

"Oh, Princess?" Solo called, "You can run but you can't hide."

"What do you think you were doing?" came a muffled, outraged voice from beneath the covers.

"What did you say?" Solo pretended to crane his head to hear. "Didn't catch it."

She peeked out, the sheet still covering her chin, her brown eyes embers of pure fury. It was a wonder the sheets weren't ablaze, so fierce was her glare.

Solo was completely unfazed. He grinned crookedly and replied, "Just obeying orders, Your Seductiveness. You asked me to kiss you."

"I did no such thing!" Leia denied, but the deep scarlet flush coloring her cheeks said she remembered those fateful words all too well.

Solo shrugged, then winced a little as his damaged shoulder grabbed at him. "Hey," he waved his good arm at the other occupants of the cubicle, "I got witnesses. Ask them."

Leia turned in the indicated direction and somehow managed to redden even further as she saw Skywalker and the Wookiee watching the scene.

Chewbacca was wiping a huge paw at tears of merriment filling his blue eyes. Luke waved, and simply said, "Hi, Leia."

Leia desperately wanted to go back into hiding, but that wouldn't be very dignified. Oh gods, she bit back a groan as full memory returned. I didn't just say kiss me -- I said kiss me AGAIN! I said last time was so good! Curse the man! She could feel Solo's smugness radiating like --- like -- a nuclear fallout. Wait, there was still a chance to contain the damage. Maybe. She just needed time to think. "I don't feel well," she said primly. "I would like to rest."

Solo frowned, his smile faded and he looked genuinely concerned. "Yeah, you do that. Take it easy. That was one mighty crack you took. Look, umm, I am sorry. I didn't mean to hit you so hard."

"YOU hit me?" she gaped up at him.

"He saved your life," Jarra Oran corrected as she reappeared with the scanner. "Pushed you out from under some falling machinery."

"Oh." Leia flicked a glance to Solo, met his eyes, then took full note of the bandage about his shoulder. He looked away hurriedly. Surely the great Han Solo isn't embarrassed? I thought he'd brag -- then again maybe he's not really the braggart he likes to pretend to be. He saved my life? Say something!

"Yeah, well," Solo mumbled, "I could have been more careful about it."

"Oh, please," Oran said. She took time out to give him an irritated stare, "don't be ridiculous. You're in shock too, Solo. Admit it or not. Now do as I tell you and go get some rest and take care of that shoulder. Go! Or do you want me to admit you."

"I'm goin', I'm goin'" Solo grabbed at a grimy shirt from the opposite bed, and walked toward the cubicle opening. "Rest easy, Princess. I'll be back to collect that kiss tomorrow." He turned and winked at her, then he was gone.

Oran sighed. "That man." She shook her head.

Leia smiled.

* * *

Leaving the ward, Solo tugged at Chewbacca's fur, stretched up and whispered, "What was that all about back there?"

The wookiee rumbled something concise and blunt.

"Very funny," Solo scowled. "You know what I mean.. Kiss me AGAIN? When did she ever kiss me? I thought I remembered after Oceania when I was feverish her being there with me. You don't suppose...?" Chewbacca replied and Solo was intrigued as he repeated, "Oh, you left the room, huh? So she could have --- taken advantage of me?" Solo threw those particular words at Skywalker who was trailing close behind and craning to listen. Luke rolled his eyes.

Chewbacca shrugged and whuffed another theory, his blue eyes brighter than ever with mischief.

"Oh. Her fantasy, huh?" Solo thought about that a moment, then smirked. "Understandable."

"Oh please," Luke groaned behind him. "I am going to throw up."

"Solo?" a voice hailed them further down the corridor. General Rieekan appeared from the shadows of the dimly lit, curving ice tunnel, and hurried closer, "How is she?"

"Awake. And talking." Solo snorted, then noting the fear in the man's eyes, amended, "Slight concussion. She's okay."

Rieekan let out a foggy breath of relief. "Garbel says you think it was deliberate? He says it's unlikely. " Solo muttered something uncomplimentary about the Security Chief's mental acuity. "Then you're sure?"

"Chewie says the chains were hacked through with a low power cutter," Solo said flatly, "And Luke and I both saw someone up there."

"By the time we got to the gantry access he was gone," Luke said apologetically.

"Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere less public," Rieekan suggested.

"I'm on my way to The Falcon."

"Sounds like a good place to be right now." Rieekan sighed and shook his head. "Spies on the Base -- just what we need."

They gathered together silently in The Falcon's rec room, Luke distributed cold beers, Solo sprawled in the auxiliary nav station chair and eased his shoulder. No one said anything until they had downed a few mouthfuls and thought things through.

"There are several possibilities," Rieekan said grimly, "but my feeling is it must have been someone who was working with Mathaze," Rieekan said grimly. He put his beer down on the chess table and regarded the other men from beneath lowered brows.

Solo's jaw dropped a little in dismay. "You think Mathaze has another contact here? "

"Mathaze?" Luke frowned puzzlement.

"The traitor who nearly captured Leia on Oceania," Han explained.

"Looks that way," Rieekan concluded. "We've been checking everyone he knew here. Intelligence has some suspects but no proof. Then, two days ago, we had word the bounty has been increased for her alive. No names on the contract but our sources say it's Vader's style."

Solo abruptly stood and put down his beer. He leaned forward, the heels of his hands on the nav table. Tension radiated from every muscle. Ghostly in the subdued lighting, the white bacta dressing pulled taut across his chest as he drew a deep breath. Then he exhaled slowly and said, "I gotta get her out of here."

"She won't go." Luke sounded tired and just as worried.

Solo swung about to face him, jaw set, eyes blazing determination, "She won't have any say in it!"

"What are you going to do --- kidnap her? She already said she'd shoot you if you tried that again." Luke sighed. "Force her to leave the Base and you'll be real popular"

"Wait!" Rieekan sat suddenly straighter, elbows on the table, " I have an idea."

Han eyed the General and smiled wryly. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Rieekan 's grin made him appear much younger. "We make her come to you -- ask you to take her off base. Then, Luke and I get the spy, and you handle Leia."

Han snorted amusement. "I like the sound of that!"

Luke and Chewie exchanged pained glances.

The wookiee whuffed some comment and Rieekan tilted his head for translation. "He thinks he's such a comedian," Solo grimaced plaintively. "He says how come we always get the most dangerous part of the job?"

Rieekan laughed shortly, but was deadly earnest as he concluded, "I'll back Garbel's report of accidental injury. Let our spy friend think he still has a free hand, flush him into the open. Only we four, and the members of High Command know about the spy. Let's keep it that way."

"Leia's High Command," Solo said softly.

"She's on Sick Leave," Rieekan flushed guiltily nonetheless. "I think it best we keep this from her --" Luke made to protest and Solo added, "It's the only way we'll ever get her out of here, kid."

* * *

"Oh, just say it straight out," Leia got to her feet and glared at the other members of the Rebel Alliance High Command..... Generals Dodonna, Rieekan and Major Berlin. "You suspect him, don't you?" It was only a day since her release from Sick Bay and her head still ached when she was angry enough to want to scream -- like now.

Dodonna was the only man to dare face her angry challenge eye to eye. "Why should that make you so angry, Princess? The man is a smuggler, after all."

"I am not angry," Leia said, fighting for calm and failing as she caught Rieekan smirking. Damn him, he knew too much of her growing emotional confusion over Han Solo. "I'm just --- offended -- that you think so little of all Solo has done for us over the past year." She was relieved to see Rieekan and Berlin nod approval of that defense.

But Dodonna was unappeased. "All he's done for us? Yes. But only at his own convenience. He refuses to ally himself with us officially. Don't

you ever wonder why he's still here? He has a ship and a smuggling business to maintain as he so often reminds us. So why IS he still here?"

Leia had wanted to ask Solo that many times -- and been afraid she might get a truth she didn't want to hear. She blinked, at a loss for explanation.

"Solo may be a smuggler," Rieekan put in, "but he's no thief."

"There's a difference?" Dodonna turned to regard his fellow general with the usual contempt.

"A major one I'd say."

"I do not agree."

"Obviously." Rieekan fixed the older man with the same stern reproof that left troopers under his command ducking for cover.

Dodonna, predictably, was unfazed. "Then where exactly do you think the missing medical supplies are going?"

Rieekan shook his head, jaw tight as he looked away.

"There's got to be another explanation," Berlin spoke up. "Han has had any number of opportunities to steal much more from us in the past. Why would he start now?"

"We're not to know what his business dealings are," Dodonna argued. "He may have creditors after him."

He DOES have creditors after him, Leia thought but he still wouldn't steal from us --- would he? A doubting voice in the back of her mind said, If he was desperate enough, if he could find no other way ... if he thought he could replace the supplies soon and have it go unnoticed. If he's thinking of it as only a temporary loan of sorts. Oh gods, it IS possible. But surely not medical supplies! Han knows lives could be lost for want of those. Stealing medicines is tantamount to murder.

"Solo prefers to be paid partly in medical supplies -- he's always trying to have us up that percentage," Dodonna continued. "Seems to me he's just decided to help himself. He certainly has the opportunity."

"And no one else does?!" Leia gaped in amazement of Dodonna's single-minded character assassination. Insanely, he almost seemed

resentful of the fact that Solo had saved the Yavin Base from the Death Star and proven Dodonna's attack plan as "more like suicide". Only a handful of pilots had returned that day. "Do you know how many middle men have a chance to diddle the supply figures before ever they're loaded to the Falcon?"

"No, Princess. Do you?"

"It varies from one supplier to another -- we have so many after all. But there would always be two at least, the original source and the vendor."

"Might I suggest," Rieekan intervened, "we have someone investigate that very possibility -- and," he sighed heavily, lifting a placating hand toward the older general -- "keep tabs on Solo's movements at the same time."

"I second that plan," Berlin said.

"I'd also like to know what Solo does with the extra supplies he takes as payment," Dodonna suggested slyly. "That could give us a lead."

"It's none of our business what Han does with his payment!" Leia struggled to keep hold of her temper.

Rieekan overrode Dodonna and said more diplomatically, "Solo obviously is finding a profitable market for the extra medical supplies. It would be a good source of information, a good starting place to find the true thief."

"Very well then, it's decided -- we need an undercover investigation?" Looking irritatingly smug, Dodonna eyed his team. Their were nods from the other men.

Leia's eyes flared bright anger. "You mean we're going to spy on Solo?"

"No, no," Rieekan assured. "He's scheduled to go on another supply run tomorrow. We need to check out the quality of the foodstores we're being provided from Ruthallia. Now's as good a time as any. Quarter Sergeant Jacobs has been assigned to go with him.."

Dodonna snorted. "You think Jacobs has the diplomatic skills to negotiate with the Ruthallian merchants?"

"No, but he does know exactly what we need."

"So does Princess Organa. And Leia regularly accompanies Solo. This mission would be better suited to her abilities."

"Oh no.." Leia began.

"It does make sense, Leia," Rieekan said smoothly. "Now wait, hear me out. Jan has made it clear he suspects Solo. Jacobs doesn't know him as well as we do. Jacobs is likely to buy into the shady smuggler image Han likes to project. We know beyond doubt that SOMEONE is stealing from us....and whoever that someone is they're likely to see Solo as the perfect scapegoat. If that's the case, you, Leia, are the best equipped to prove Solo's innocence. Or would you prefer Jacobs take on the case?"

Leia glared, then set her teeth, shook her head.

"Then you accept?" Dodonna asked.

"Yes. But only on the proviso that it be officially recorded here I am going along solely in an attempt to clear Solo's name of these ...these ridiculous allegations leveled against him by you, General."

"Fair enough," the graying man nodded. "I declare this meeting at an end. You will need to prepare for departure first thing in the morning, Princess.. I suggest you go over the supply figures.."

"I do know how to conduct an investigation !"

"Of course." Dodonna smirked and left the room, Berlin close behind.

"Oh damn," Leia kicked the table leg, then tried not to show pain as her foot spasmed. "Damn him!"

Rieekan came to her side, offered a sympathetic smile. "It will work out, Leia. You and I know Solo has a soft heart. He wouldn't steal medical supplies."

"Meaning you think he'd steal everything else?"

"No. I trust him. Do you?"

Leia wanted desperately to answer yes, but found her eyes moving away from Rieekan's knowing examination. "Of course I trust him." she said.

"But?"

Leia was silent a long moment, then she said defensively, "I'm not the only one curious as to what he's doing with all those extra medicines."

"Stocking up for the day when his many adversaries finally do him some damage?" Rieekan joked. Leia didn't smile. He patted her shoulder. "Go on, get some rest. You can check the figures on the way to Ruthallia. It's a four hour jump."

"Oh, fine." Leia rubbed the bridge of her nose. Then she jerked her head up, eyes wide, "I haven't even told Han I'll be coming along! He won't be happy."

"Another argument?" Rieekan fought a smile.

"It's not funny!"

"I'll tell him to expect you aboard at first light."

"thanks. At least I won't have to be there to see that particular explosion."

"Oh come on, he can't truly hate your company so much?"

Leia sighed heavily. "He does a good job at creating that impression. You should know he said he'd refuse to take me on any more missions."

"He what?" Rieekan gaped, then said, "Oh yes, of course, after Oceania. He is very protective of you , Leia. He carried you to Sick bay after the accident the other day, y'know."

Leia blinked in surprise. "No, I didn't know." Her lips thinned with anger as she tu "And Dodonna seems to think he developed a taste for medical supplies while he was there!"

"That is the time we first noticed the missing stock."

There was a silence, and Rieekan said, "Leia, he doesn't want you along because he blames himself for what happened last time."

"What!? That's ridiculous! It was my own stupidity led us both into an Imperial trap. I shouldn't have trusted Mathaze, we hadn't dealt with him before.... Han said he blames himself?"

"Yes -- for taking you there in the first place. He cares, Leia. That's the source of his anger." Rieekan shook his head. "And a fine task

I'll have convincing him to take you to Ruthallia now. Well, at least, it's a safe world -- or as safe as they come."

"True. It is a beautiful place." Leia smiled wistfully.

"Oh? Good then. That's how I'll approach Solo with this. I'll tell him it's a vacation for you."

"Vacation!?"

"Yes," Rieekan grinned at her expression. "Some much needed R and R. along with collecting the food shipment. You'd best practice smiling instead of scowling." He turned to the door.

"I do not scowl!"

She could hear Rieekan chuckling all the way down Hoth's icy corridor.

* * *

"Well?" Solo stepped out of the shadows of the Falcon's landing struts. Rieekan jumped and cursed.

"Dammit, Solo," he muttered, "bad enough we have spies all over the base without you prowling about in the dark."

Solo's lips curved in a wry smile and he cocked an amused eyebrow. "All over the base? As bad as that?"

"Not yet." Rieekan sighed. "Still I think I need that drink you offered earlier."

"Your wish is my command, general." Solo waved an arm, half-bowing and indicating Rieekan should proceed him up the Falcon's boarding ramp.

"I'm sure," Rieekan snorted. "Is Chewbacca aboard?"

"No. He's guarding the guard." Rieekan cast him a puzzled look and Han explained, "I sent him to watch Luke's back. Where did you and Luke hide the Med supplies anyway? Even Chewie wouldn't say."

Stepping through the hatch, Rieekan said gravely, "It's best you don't know."

Moments later both men were seated in the Falcon's rec room, Rieekan at the holo chess table, Solo by the auxiliary nav console. Rieekan took a long swallow of the liquor in his glass and leaned back contentedly. "I don't know where you get this brandy, Solo, but it's excellent."

Solo winked "Secrets of the trade." He poured himself a swallow and put the glass down on the console untouched. "She bought it then?" The tension was evident in his posture and all the humor gone from his voice.

Rieekan swirled the liquor and waited until the Corellian turned to face him, jaw set, eyes intent in the gloomy interior of the ship. "She's agreed to go with you -- yes."

Solo exhaled gustily, picked up his glass and downed the liquor. "Good."

"It's a clever plan," Rieekan said. "At least I know she'll be safe with you."

Solo cocked an eyebrow and Rieekan flashed a brief smile.

"So she's all set to come spy on me?" Solo turned away, fidgeting with the bottle, but couldn't quite find the casual tone he wanted.

"No," Rieekan drawled. He put his glass down on the chess table, again watching until Solo's eyes met his. "She insisted The Council make an official record that she carries out this duty only to guarantee you a fair hearing."

"Oh?" The forced casual tone slid upward with ill-suppressed surprise and pleasure.

"Indeed," Rieekan said dryly. "She defended you rather heatedly. She's suspicious of the entire mission. You'll need to watch yourself."

"I always do."

"Rieekan took another swallow and stared down at the inactive chess board. "I wish I didn't have to lie to her. I'm one of very few people she trusts."

Solo waved a hand. "You're not lying. You just haven't told her everything. And we're only doing this to keep her safe."

"Fine," Rieekan raised the empty glass for a refill, "I'll leave you to explain that to her when this is over."

Getting to his feet to carry the brandy across the room, Solo tensed. "Just as long as she's alive and well enough to argue with us."

Rieekan flicked a curious glance at the pilot as Solo poured more brandy into the glass. There was a fierceness in the man's tone that spoke of strong, deep emotion. Solo turned back to his chair but did not sit down, instead began a slow circular pacing of the rec room. Rieekan sipped his drink and watched in silence. yes, Solo would be an avid protector, had already cut the throat of the first Imp spy to try claiming the bounty on Leia Organa. It was a grim thought, knowing there were men -- or women -- even now plotting to take Leia alive to Vader. Sighing, Rieekan buried that image, and said half-jokingly, "By the way, why do you ask part payment in extra medical supplies?"

Solo saluted him with the brandy bottle. 'For me to know and Leia to find out -- if she's good enough." His lips twitched as he fought a grin, the whole prospect was apparently a challenge he was greatly anticipating.

Following Rieekan across the hangar bay to The Falcon the next morning, Leia felt a twinge of guilt. How could she spy on a friend? And Solo had been so generous too --- agreeing to take her to Ruthallia despite his oath. Actually, she frowned, that was strange. What HAD Rieekan said to make him change his mind so readily?

"Don't look so grim, Leia." Rieekan said as they halted at the access ramp. "It won't be as bad as all that. You're supposed to be on R&R, remember? Smile."

Leia showed her teeth, then heaved her carry-all higher on her shoulder-- she had brought her own towels, having prior experience of the state of Solo's housekeeping. "I'm still stunned he let you talk him into taking me."

Rieekan shrugged and followed her up the ramp. "He only swore never to take you into danger. Ruthallia is a safe world."

"Right." Leia sounded as skeptical as she felt.. "He thinks he's doing me a favor and all the time I'm playing Inquisitor for Dodonna. I don't like it."

"No," Rieekan said firmly, moving toward her. "You're more like defense attorney for Solo. You and I know he wouldn't steal from us. Prove it."

Leia's mouth twisted. "If I can."

"You will."

Rieekan sounded so certain that Leia looked up at him in surprise. Then she heard firm bootfalls approaching along the corridor and Solo called, "If you two are finished finding fault with my ship, I'd like to get outa here."

"Good luck." Rieekan squeezed Leia's arm. "thank you , Solo," he said as the pilot appeared. Han nodded and Rieekan turned swiftly away, exited into the morning sunlight, said another farewell to Chewbacca who hurried up the ramp.

"Your Highnessness," Han greeted. She nodded, said nothing. "I'm only doing this because Rieekan says you need some R and R on a safe world. Remember that." He gave her such an intent look that she shifted her gaze to regard the familiar interior of the rec room. There was an empty brandy bottle on the holo chess table.

The next hours passed uneventfully, Han set hyperspace jumps, then he and Chewie did some routine maintenance while Leia studied commercial and trading figures for Ruthallia. She left her cabin when Solo announced over the intercom that they were coming up on their destination. She strapped into the navigator's chair in the cockpit and Solo threw her a surprised glance. She usually sat back in the common room.

"Ruthallia is such a beautiful world, "Leia explained. "I'd like to see it from up here....if you don't mind."

"Fine with me." Solo said , turning back, busy with his flight board. He pulled back on the drive lever, and the stars settled into place.

Leia blinked, looked again, gaped. Stood and stared. "What kind of navigator are you, Solo? This isn't the Ruthallian System."

"And did I say it was?" He didn't look up at her.

Leia transferred her stare to him. "You said we were coming up on our destination."

"Uh-uh," he corrected. "The destination is what I said."

Feeling rising annoyance taking away her surprise, Leia threw up her hands and flopped back in her seat. "Then please reset for Ruthallia, Captain. That is your charter."

"Later. First we stop off here."

Leia drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, fighting to control her temper. "Then this is your destination, Solo. Don't expect the Alliance to pay for the fuel."

"Oh, I don't," he said casually. He conferred with Chewbacca about arranging communications contact and Chewie adjusted the com headphones. Solo looked up at her. "I have some business here. It was on the way."

"And I have business on Ruthallia -- they are expecting me!"

"Hey Your Mightiness!" Solo frowned and got to his feet to adjust some switches above her head. "You expect me to maintain this ship on the costs only basis you people are so generously providing? " He looked down at her, smirked and added, "You may be Royalty, but we peasants have to work for a living. I have a delivery to make here, part of the business I run in this sector."

"Business? That's not what I'd call it!"

"Oh?" he gave her a long, piercing stare. "What would you call it, Your Righteousness --- criminal activity?"

Leia blushed fiercely and looked down at her tightly clenched hands. "I was going to say smuggling, and that's not criminal activity, it's just the way the Empire has made things. You are paranoid."

"You're the one who's blushing like a supernova, Sweetheart. "

Leia was very relieved when Chewbacca interrupted to say he had made contact with the world rapidly growing larger in the viewport. It was just as beautiful as Ruthallia --- and oddly familiar. Leia peered at it a while. then slumped back in her seat as Solo returned to his pilot's chair. "You might have told me there was a change in plans."

"You didn't ask."

Leia ground her teeth and resisted the urge to reach out and wrap her hands about his throat. "Where exactly are we? It looks vaguely familiar."

"You don't recognize it?" Solo sounded genuinely surprised and maybe even a little miffed.

Leia took a closer look, frowning concentration. "A lot of worlds have that blue green atmosphere and a single moon."

Chewbacca whuffed something, and Solo responded with a chuckle. "Yeah, Fuzz Face, I'm sure Myra will have more nerf stew for you."

"Nerf stew!" Leia exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. "You took us back to The Cove?!"

Solo flicked a glance over his shoulder toward her, his lips curving up in that damned smug smile. "I thought you liked The Cove?"

"I do...but..."

"But what?"

Leia bit back the thought that almost slipped out. If you're selling stolen goods here I don't want to know. Instead she said lamely, "I don't like nerf stew."

Solo rumbled a laugh. "Give 'em the password, Chewie! We're coming home!"

* * *

Maintaining a bad mood is impossible in this place, Leia admitted silently, taking in the view from the speeder as Solo directed it along the winding roads toward the farmstead outside Cove Town. Even though I am entitled. Solo is making a habit of kidnapping me! I knew I shouldn't have agreed to go anywhere with him piloting. But...then again I can't deny I am glad to be back here. It will be good to see Myra again.

Spring had come to the Cove. The last time Leia was here it had been early winter and the Shredder storms were threatening. She was familiar with Season Turn on a dozen worlds --- but this -- this was magnificent, inspiring. Blossoms floated down from the surrounding orchards, dew-bright gold flowers dotted velvet green grass, white-brown nerfs fed in the pastures, birds sang, insects hummed. Altogether completely enchanting.

"So, you like it?" Solo drawled as he brought the rented speeder to a halt. Leia realized she had been so busy regarding the surrounding orchards that she hadn't noticed they'd arrived at the end of the drive before the long low log and stonewalled homestead.

"I'd like it more if I hadn't been forced to come here against my wishes!" she snapped, grabbing her bag and stepping out of the speeder. She saw hurt flash in his eyes and that only made her all the more angry.

She didn't want to be in this beautiful place, the nearest Solo had to a home, not while she was supposed to be spying on him. Which would mean spying on his friends too, people who had adopted her as one of their own.

"Ahh, loosen up," Solo muttered, hefting some packages from the rear seat. Chewbacca stiffly unfolded his bulky form and smiled toothily at someone on the porch. "We won't be here long. Enjoy it while you..." Solo left off as he heard a delighted cry and swung around to be engulfed in a warm hug. "Myra!" he exclaimed happily, returning the embrace.

"About time you paid as a return visit, lad!" she beamed, wiping moisture from her eyes. "And I'm glad t see this time ye managed to arrive undamaged."

"Not a scratch," Solo spread his arms wide, grinning broadly as he demonstrated his uninjured state.

Myra turned a little more shyly to Leia but held her arms out in an offer of embrace. Leia couldn't deny the warmth that flooded her. Only here did she feel truly at ease. And she really liked Myra -- nerf stew notwithstanding. She accepted the embrace eagerly, squeezing the old woman's plump body and holding on a long moment. If only it could be as simple as it looked.

"Yeah, yeah, Chewie, Just don't break her." Solo said and the wookiee stepped up to take his turn and Leia stood back. Solo translated for Myra. "He wants to know if there are fresh greens -- those umm, onion things -- in the stew." Solo snorted. "Wookiees, always thinking with their stomachs."

Myra chuckled and thumped the wookiee's belly. "It is spring, Chewbacca! Of course we have the shallons for the stew! And all the other fresh herbs. I made it fresh this morning when I heard you were coming in."

The reunion was like a home-coming, -- they'd already greeted Doc and Jessa at the spaceport. Now more people rushed out to welcome them, and Solo made introductions. So this was the boy, Willan and his father, Neal. And that another uncle and aunt, Myra's siblings. Leia was soon overwhelmed and found she had to leave the common room as emotion over-powered her. The last time she had been a part of such intimate, warmly exuberant greeting had been -- arriving back at The Organa Manse in the countryside outside Alder city for the Solstice gathering. Tears brimmed in her eyes at the memory and she hurried into the quieter hall, avoiding the crush in Myra's home. Bleary-eyed, she stumbled down the shadowy hall, trying to remember which room had been assigned her last

time she was here. It had been so wonderfully cosy, the huge bed with its comforter, the view toward the mountains.

Her throat constricted, her eyes burned and she fought for control. Yes that was the right door. She pushed against it, then jumped as a woman's voice called from inside, "I'm just feeding the baby, Myra. I'll be right out."

Of course. Spring. The whole clan must be gathered to do the planting of this season's crop. All the rooms must be occupied. Embarrassed, Leia turned about only to find Solo watching her from the end of the corridor where the sunlight backlit his lean figure.

"Leia?" he frowned. Noting her expression, he took a step closer. She turned her back and lifted a quick hand to wipe at her eyes. Solo's surprise had erased his usual teasing and the sincerely concerned tone and use of her name only made the tears well harder. Leia sniffed, furiously fighting for control.

"What's wrong?" Solo's footsteps echoed on the wooden floor until he stood right at her back..

"What's wrong?!" she snapped. "I'm supposed to be on Ruthallia right now! That trade contract is vital to our winter supply. How am I to insure our troops receive proper rations? We take it easy here while they go without!"

Solo sighed heavily, his breath rifling the hair at the nape of Leia's neck. He said nothing and slowly she turned about, eyes bright with fury now. How dare he be concerned for her emotional health! She could take care of herself! Solo caught that defiant expression, and his jaw tightened in reaction. He lifted both hands in a helpless gesture and turned half-away, shaking his head. Having problems with your temper, Solo? Good!

He seemed more in control as he turned back and said, "Well, you're here now and supper's ready. Myra's gone to a lot of trouble. At least pretend to appreciate her efforts. Bein' mad at me is no cause to take it out on these people. Myra's real happy to have you back, even only for a day. Don't spoil it for her, please?"

Leia blinked. She'd never heard Solo say please before. He turned away and strode briskly back toward the common room. Leia followed, muttering, "I cannot eat that smelly stew and pretend I like it!"

What she saw when she sat down at the table changed her opinion immediately. The table was beautifully decorated with fresh flowers and the platters of food smelled absolutely delicious. She blinked in surprise and whispered to Solo who sat opposite "This isn't nerf stew, is it? Chewie won't be happy."

"He's fine," Solo said, breaking off a portion of fresh crusty bread still steaming hot from the oven. "Myra made some stew for him and he's taken it outside to eat. Too cramped in here for him. Nerf stew is survival food -- for the end of year when nothing else is available. Hell they don't eat that stuff all year round!" He looked shocked at the thought. He reached for a dish full of some kind of spreadable berries and slathered them onto the hot bread. Leia's mouth watered at the sight. "I guarantee you'll like the main course this time."

"What is it?" Leia asked suspiciously, watching as Myra and another woman carried platters of some kind of golden brown meat into the room.

"Made this special for you, Leia," Myra said, putting it down before her. and smiling proudly. "Roast wherret hen and fresh spioza salad with talina dressing. Oh and I have a treat for dessert too."

Leia stared, blushing up at her. "You didn't have to make special arrangements ..."

"I've waited all winter for you and Han to return. And the lad says you don't like nerf stew." Myra winked and turned back for the kitchen.

Leia lifted a hand to cover her eyes. "Myra, nerf stew is fine really."

The old lady scoffed. "Only half-starved pirates and overgrown wookiees think that stew is delicious! Most people can't stand the stuff. Me neither. Too gamy for my liking, especially when there are no fresh herbs to spice it. We only eat it when there's nothing else in the larder." She called back over her shoulder, "But it was nice of Han to let me know exactly what you like best., wasn't it?"

Leia sighed, the old lady was waiting, teasing smile quivering at her mouth. "Yes, it was most thoughtful," Leia admitted and the old lady, finally satisfied, left the room. Leia took some of the spiced hen, took a bite and only just restrained a sound of pure delight. She swallowed and took another slice, never had she tasted anything so wonderful! She mopped up more of the delicious sauce with some of the bread.

Solo smirked. "Told ya you'd like it. Myra's' famous for this dish."

The more Leia enjoyed dinner, the more her conscience nagged at her. There was no way she could go through with this assignment. But how else could she prove Solo's innocence? Dessert was absolutely delicious -- but by then Leia was no longer in the mood for relaxation. Myra refused all her offers of helping with the dishes, and in fact, that task was assigned to the men. As Myra said, after all, the women had done all the cooking. At a loss, and feeling too guilty to join in the cheerful conversation, Leia found an excuse when Myra began telling the tale of Solo's and Leia's last visit .

"How is little Scruffy now?" Leia asked.

Myra chuckled. "Not little anymore, but he's now the family pet. We keep him outside in a special pen."

"I'd love to see him again."

"Of course." Myra turned and called young Willan to take her outside. There Leia at last found herself alone. The baby nerf Solo had rescued from the cliff-edge was certainly a baby no longer. Leia was rather taken aback by how quickly the creature had grown -- but then as the pet of the household it was no doubt very well fed. Leia unlatched the gate to its pen and stepped carefully inside -- the ground was slippery with deep sloshy mud in this corner. Scruffy looked up at her with big, soft brown eyes, all innocence.

"Don't you try that routine on me too," Leia smiled and squatted down to pat the woolly head, "you must have learned that from your rescuer."

"Learned what from his rescuer?" Solo's deep, amused voice asked at Leia's back.

Leia jumped a little but went on stroking the nerf's wonderfully soft woolly coat. Scruffy closed his eyes and gave a low rumbling sound of pure pleasure. "Don't you know any other way but sneaking up on people, Solo?" Leia didn't look up at him.

Solo chuckled and she heard the gate creak as he opened it and stepped inside, his boots squishing in the mud. He came round to stand in front of Leia and watch as she continued petting the nerf. "Sure I do," he drawled. "just ask Scruffy how we met."

"I was there," Leia said dryly. "That was some stunt you pulled getting him up that cliff ." Dangerous in fact, she recalled, almost

shuddering at the memory of the fall Solo had risked to save an injured baby nerf. Leia couldn't help but smile. Solo definitely has a soft spot -- as Myra says -- for anything "small, hurt and alone."

"He sure has grown," Solo commented. "I'm glad he wasn't this big when I had to carry him inside my shirt."

Leia snorted at that image and Solo squatted down to also pet the nerf. His large hands fascinated Leia as they moved through the soft, brown wool, parting it to massage the flesh beneath. Scruffy rumbled even louder with contentment. Leia's mouth went dry and her heart speeded up as she wondered what that must feel like -- those strong sure hands caressing , stroking up and down her spine.

"And what do you think Scruffy learned from me?" Solo persisted.

"The innocent look," Leia said, straight-faced.

"Oh?" Solo cocked an eyebrow and regarded her with pretend puzzlement. "Now which look would that be?"

"That one right there," Leia said, biting back a smile as she studied the exact Solo patented "who me?" look she referred to.

They went on caressing the nerf in silence, their hands brushing against one another occasionally. Tiny tingles of pleasure surged through Leia's body at every touch. Then they both spoke at the same time. "Leia." "Han"

They smiled self-consciously and Solo said, "You first."

"About before, in the hallway," Leia said hesitantly, "I apologize for snapping at you. I was just ... it was all too much. Too much like home." Her voice very nearly broke on that word.

"I know," Solo said, his voice a deep soft whisper of understanding. He closed his hand over hers briefly and squeezed in shared sorrow. Then he stood and looked off to the mountain-edged horizon. "It was like that for me too, the first time I came here. I was alone -- except for Chewie. You and I have some things in common, Princess. All my people were massacred by Imperials, though it was before Palpatine declared himself Emperor, so officially the attackers were 'pirates.'. They knew just when to strike, caught the entire Falcon Clan, every ship, every man woman and child, on the ground. We all gather once a year for -- well, a sacred ritual festival on our tribal lands. My father and I were sole survivors -- we were late getting back from a special errand off world. Then not much later, he was murdered too and I...well," Solo shrugged

self-consciously, suddenly uncomfortable with revealing so much and aware Leia was hanging on every word. "I went through some rough times before Chewie found me. Though nothing that compares with -- " he paused, "what happened to you."

"Thank you, Han. I mean, thanks for sharing your loss." She sighed heavily, "After all, you gave me a shoulder to cry on the night after that medal ceremony. " Leia got to her feet, went to the fence in front of Solo and stood admiring the view down the valley. "It's so beautiful here."

"Perfect view." Solo agreed after a moment and Leia blushed, knowing by the edge to his voice that he meant it was perfect since she had moved to stand before him. She asked him about the spring planting season here, how much work was needed, what kind of crops were most profitable. It was a pleasure to talk about such simple things, not war nor political intrigue, nor grief.

"Hey!" Solo suddenly stumbled forward as Scruffy butted him hard from behind. Apparently the nerf was not happy with the cessation in attentions paid to him. Solo slid in the mud and stumbled. Leia tried to steady him and they both went down, sliding in the oozing muck, covering their clothing in dark brown mud.

Leia sat up. "Oh, that's just fine!" Her white jumpsuit was no longer white. "I didn't bring a change of clothes from The Falcon."

"No?" Solo was a grimy as she. A smile tugged at his mouth and he scooped up a handful of muddy goo and smeared it on her shoulder. "You missed a spot -- now it's all brown. No one will ever know it wasn't supposed to be that color."

Leia's jaw dropped. "Why you....!?" She collected up a handful of mud and with her other hand, reached out and pulled at the waistband of his jeans.

"You wouldn't dare!" Solo said, eyes round.

Leia smiled sweetly and dumped the mud inside his trousers. He yelped as the cold met sensitive flesh. Then he grabbed more mud, reached out and rubbed it into Leia's braided hair. She muttered curses, grabbed more mud and flung it at him. He grabbed at her wrist and pulled her closer to prevent further attack and the next she knew they were rolling about, wrestling in the mud, laughing like children.

Finally, breathless, they sat up and regarded one another with bemused smiles. "I think we got a little carried away there," Solo commented.

"No?" Leia mimicked his earlier tone. "Whatever makes you think that?" He looked so comical, only his eyes were free of mud, his entire face was one big mud-pack.

"I suggest a nice, long, hot bubble bath," Solo said.

"Sounds good." She was impressed when he bowed with dignified grace and took her hand like a courtier leading her to the dance floor, then assisted her to her feet. It was so comical a sight with him covered in mud but chin held high and expression prim that Leia burst into laughter.

"Shall I show you where to find that bath, Highness?" Solo offered, still sounding almost as proper as Threepio.

"I would be most grateful," Leia controlled herself and bowed her head slightly in return.

"Grateful, huh?," he added slyly. "Then maybe we could share that bath, conserve water."

"Ha!" Leia pulled her hand free. "In your dreams, Fly-Boy!"

She headed for the gate and was latching it behind her when she heard Solo say, "Oh, all the time, sweetheart. All the time."

Face flaming, Leia pretended not to have heard. She began walking back to the homestead, but turned back when she heard a startled curse from Solo. Watching her, taken off guard, he had been hit from behind once more, butted into the mud by the nerf who was now licking mud from his face. Leia laughed all the way up the path to the homestead where young Willan stood staring, a shy grin lighting his impish face. It looked like she would be staying here the night now. And she was surprised to find herself very happy at that prospect. For once in her life she felt happy and the mission could be forgotten -- at least until tomorrow.

end part 1

[Continue To Part 2](#)

[Back To Index](#)