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Resolutions Part 3

by [Martha Wilson](#)

* * *

After the final day's session of the conference and another interminable formal dinner, none of which Leia felt she could skip without endangering their cover, she was released to go back to the guest quarters. The dome "night" had fallen and as Leia stepped onto the porch of their guest house, she remembered Han might still be asleep. She turned the knob and pushed the door open, not stepping in, and said, "It's me." At his acknowledgement, she started in, then saw the Yerandin across the way, on the porch of his guest house, staring at her. *Dammit, find something else to look at*, she thought tiredly.

As she entered the room, Han was sitting up and replacing his blaster in the holster, which had been lying next to him on the bed. Guessing right about that made her feel a little better about the state of her apparently rapidly failing wits; she thought he would have woken up fast enough to avoid actually shooting her, but she just didn't feel like having any guns pointed at her at the moment. She said, "I spoke to Lianis this afternoon. The man called her back and the meeting is arranged."

Han stood up and stretched, and Leia looked away. *I've got to do something about this. I have so little concentration I'm in more danger of killing myself by falling off the slidewalk than I am from Imperial bounty hunters. And all I can think about is--*

"How much time have we got?" Han asked.

Leia turned the question over, and decided it was far too vague to be an innuendo. She cleared her throat. "We should leave in about an hour."

Han was looking at her oddly. Leia couldn't blame him for it. He headed for the bathing room, saying, "I'm going to clean up."

"Fine." *I'll just sit out here and bang my head against the wall.*

She paced impatiently, occasionally going out onto the patio to check the level of activity along the paths, waiting for the other delegates to settle down. It was a little ahead of the time they needed to leave, but everything seemed calm enough that they could safely make their way across the park to the secret hatch the Vitarin had shown them.

"All right," Leia said, stepping back in from the porch. "Let's--"

Han's comlink beeped urgently. He pulled it off his belt and checked it, then grimaced and showed her the readout. The trace showed the listening device was coming from the direction of the Yerandin's guest quarters. Of course. Leia sighed in resignation.

They made inconsequential conversation about the conference, for a time, or at least she did. Han watched the readout and the chrono and made noncommittal noises. After a while Leia began to find it a strain. There were plenty of other things she could have talked about for hours; worries about the Alliance, thoughts and concerns about Luke, Rieekan, Wedge Antilles, the *Tantavie*, but that would be far too dangerous. Frustrated, she finally waved to catch Han's attention and mouthed, "What is he waiting for?"

Han looked thoughtful, then grinned suddenly and reached for her datapad. Leia frowned, watching him type. By this point she was sitting propped up by the pillows at the top of the bed, and he was draped across the bottom. He slid the pad across the tumbled covers to her and she picked it up. He had typed, "He's a voyeur. Why else would he listen to us so long, this late at night?"

She stared, then rolled her eyes. Han was right, of course. She looked at him. He was grinning at her, eyes alight with mischief, an expression that changed his whole face. He thought this was funny, of course. Well, it was a little funny. She found herself grinning back.

She took the pad and typed, "So what do Yerandins know about humanoid sex?" and tossed it back to him.

When he slid the pad back to her the answer was, "Apparently not as much as this one wants to."

She snorted. She leaned over the pad to answer and Han eased across the bed so he could watch as she typed. His shoulder brushed hers and, impossibly, she was aware of his body heat through several layers of clothing. The thought she had been trying to formulate dissolved in confusion and she had to fiddle with the pad's resolution to buy time. This close she could tell he had been using the aromatic soap in the bathing area too, though mixed with his own spicy male scent it was a great deal more interesting than it had been in the bottle.... After a moment she managed to collect herself and type, "I think it's me he's more interested in--"

Han gave her a look of mortally wounded reproach, so perfect she grabbed a pillow and smacked him with it. He fended off the pillow with one elbow, though she got in a couple of good whacks. Han pulled the pillow away from her and suddenly they were very close.

He had wonderful eyes, intent and green-gold in this light, and his hair was tousled, revealing the red and chestnut highlights. She looked down at the pad, trying to get her thoughts together, but her brain refused to cooperate. All it wanted to do was take in more sensory data concerning the warmth and nearness of Han's body. Then he leaned down and she felt warm breath just before he kissed the nape of her neck. No, Leia decided, the word "kiss" didn't really describe it. He was doing something with his tongue, and his teeth, and.... *Oh, my*. She felt her tenuous control slipping. She looked up at him, meaning to say something though she wasn't sure what. But he leaned toward her and brushed his lips against hers.

Leia froze. *Just this once*, a voice in her head was saying. It sounded remarkably like her own voice. *For once in your life, do something just for you. Since you were a child, everything has been for duty, for responsibility. Do this for yourself. Just this once, it won't change anything.* She knew the voice lied. It wouldn't be just once, and it would change everything.

It wasn't as if no one had ever made a pass at her before. She had perfected the icy rebuff during innumerable, interminable senatorial receptions. But she knew what she felt was far too powerful to be just a sexual attraction.

She turned her face away, pulling back from him. She was still close enough to Han to feel him tense, and her heart twisted inside her. She heard him let out his breath, then he drew back, climbing off the bed and walking out the door.

* * *

They caught the slidewalk outside the Vitarin Enclave. This section of the hub, near the large commercial enclaves and far away from the entertainment and port areas, was mostly unoccupied except for droids and a few passersby. It was a long, silent trip.

Great, Leia, she thought, as she gripped the walk's railing and tried not to look at Han. You've survived everything from an interrogation by Darth Vader to the Emperor's annual dinner reception. Now Han Solo makes a pass at you and you have a panic attack and your life flashes before your eyes. What the hell is wrong with you?

After Han had left the room, she had jumped up and down on the bed, with occasional accompanying shrieks and moans, for about twenty minutes. It hadn't helped her work out her frustrations, but perhaps it had helped the Yerandin work out his, because a few minutes after she had stopped, her comlink showed the listening device switch off. Now they had to hurry to get to the brokers' offices to make Lianis' meeting with this mystery man.

Despite her resolution not to, she snuck a look at Han anyway. His expression was grim. If he had planned that moment, he would have done it at a better time, not right before they had to leave for the meeting, and not with a Yerandin peeping at them with a listening device.

He doesn't care about the mission....

That's ridiculous. If he didn't care about the mission, he wouldn't have searched the station hostels all night, looking for this idiot.

The walks and galleries had become busier as the slidewalk neared the outer port ring. Leia began to watch worriedly for Ishataran Security. That would be all they needed right now.

She had had the sense, since Alderaan, that she was no longer the same person, that when Alderaan had died she had died with it.

That when Alderaan had died it had broken her.

Some broken things became stronger once they were mended....

That this person living in her body was someone entirely new, someone she didn't know yet. Maybe all the conflict and indecision came from the urge to hold onto the last remnants of that past life, that Leia Organa who had died with Alderaan?

There was a curious freedom in that thought.

Maybe there was nothing curious about it at all.

They took the exit at the brokers' offices, which were in a large cylindrical structure in the junction of a tube and the port ring. There would be offices there for every major factor in the station, and most were open all hours. The Vitarin's offices would appear to be closed, though Lianis and several armed assistants would be inside. They took up a position across the way from it, where there was a station for the intersystem shuttle.

They waited for a time, not looking at each other. A couple of tube shuttles came and went, but the station stayed comfortably crowded so their presence wasn't obvious. Then Leia, hypersensitive to Han's every move at the moment, sensed him come to attention.

There was a human walking up the ramp to the entrance of the brokers' offices. Leia was glad they had found the holoid in the terminal for that first hostel; it would have been damned hard to identify him otherwise. It helped that most of the passersby were nonhuman; in a mainstream human crowd the man who had registered at the hostel as "Sirot" would have faded right into the background. He disappeared inside the doors.

He didn't look like any of the Imperial agents Leia had seen caught or questioned. They tended to be young human males from the inner worlds, recruited from the Imperial Navy or ground combat corps, and some of them were sent on assignments before their hair had even grown out from a military cut. It was because the Emperor tended to execute his Chiefs of Intelligence every year or so, and purge any subordinates who had displayed too much loyalty. But the Empire also tended to hire independents who didn't fit the profile, such as the bounty hunter who had been working with the two Imperial saboteurs who had stolen the *Falcon* and tried to kill Han during the Yavin evacuation. Just because this man wouldn't look out of place hanging around a downport didn't mean he wasn't working for the Empire.

Their quarry came back out of the brokers' offices, looking frustrated. He stood there a moment, then made for the slidewalk.

"There he goes," Han said. Leia jumped a little. It was the first words either of them had spoken since Han had walked out of the guest house. "Come on."

* * *

The Kukal Hotel was in the lower ring section, near the port. It was obviously prosperous and had a large transparisteel bubble standing out from the tube wall containing an Itell'an rockflower garden. There was a great deal of traffic in front of it, sentients going in and out the big main entrance, droids making deliveries, and mobile vendors had set up a forest of stalls to catch the crowd, at least until station security drove them off again.

Han and Leia stayed on the other side of the tube, below the gallery, following Sirot as he approached the hotel. Han was finding it hard to keep his mind on the job at hand, and not the expression of growing panic that had been on Leia's face before he had left the guest house.

He hadn't even intended to do it in the first place. But as soon as he had gotten close enough to her to feel her warmth and smell her hair, instinct had taken over. *Okay, so she doesn't like you, you knew that, and now you know she doesn't even want you. It's happened before, it'll happen again, get used to it.* It had happened before, but it hadn't ever mattered this much.

Their quarry paused outside the hotel, talking to somebody from a species Han didn't recognize right off. Han pretended to be studying a schedule board for the interhub shuttle and Leia sat down on a nearby bench to adjust her boot. The nonhuman was bipedal, skin a muddy gray, tall like the Vitarin but heavy-set and without their natural grace, hanks of gray-green hair braided back from a mostly bald skull, nice array of fangs.... *Gamorki, maybe*, Han decided finally. It looked this way, towards them, and Han added mean eyes to the description, and noted a very fancy leather weapon harness with metal studs. *A professional bodyguard*, Han thought. A showy one, not the deadly serious kind that faded into the background until they were needed. *A go-between, maybe. Now we're getting somewhere.*

The bodyguard gave Sirot a shove to the shoulder, that might have been interpreted as friendly. Han thought it looked more like a warning. The human made assurances, then the bodyguard passed him something that Han was too far away to see. *A credit chit?*

The Gamorki moved away, heading hubward down the walk, the human turning back to the hotel entrance. "Well?" Han said softly. "You take the human, I'll take the Gamorki?"

Leia hesitated, but only for a second. "All right." She stepped off the walk, heading for the crossover under the slidewalk.

Han stayed on the far side of the slidewalk at first so he wouldn't be obvious, but then the Gamorki took one of the side passages that led into the wall. Cursing, Han found one of the overpasses for the slidewalk and crossed it quickly. He went down the walk as if he was heading for the lift tubes, mixing with the crowd, then slipped past a group of slow-moving Squida and into the passage the Gamorki had taken.

The corridor was wide to accommodate large droids and the light was low, but Han gave the Gamorki a lot of room. He hadn't seen any "no admittance" signs anywhere, so he assumed this was a back way those familiar with this part of the station used. He passed a couple of maintenance droids, and a few other people, some kil'tarka and Tkiro. One of them had a station Transport Supervisor badge welded to its carapace, but it didn't comment on Han's presence.

Far up ahead he saw the Gamorki turn into a cross corridor. Han reached it quickly and stopped at the top of it. This was definitely a maintenance passage. There was an airlock at the junction, and the corridor beyond was more narrow and even more badly lit, the metal walls stained and dingy. Han turned down it, swearing quietly to himself. *The worst part is you know better and you do these things anyway.*

There were no droids, no other foot traffic in this corridor. He passed several more airlocks and blast doors. About twenty feet down the corridor curved and the righthand wall opened up into observation bays, looking out on a giant well with a set of cylindrical conduits running up the middle of it, part of the station's circulation system. They would carry coolant and other fluids, methane, nitrogen, water and oxygen. The air around them was alive with tiny maintenance droids, flitting around the controls and junctions, searching for leaks, checking the flow regulators. The air smelled of ozone from all the repulsars.

Han paused. He could hear voices.

He drew his blaster and put his back against the far wall, moving even more cautiously. The corridor was curving again -- from the subsonic hum travelling through the wall behind him, he suspected it was curving around another part of the circulation system. Almost at the top of the curve, he heard them. They must be standing on the balcony outside one of the observation ports and they were speaking chakk-tongue, a trade language used mostly in the Tion Hegemony.

"He says he need more time. The Vitarin won't meet with him again. Vitarin bitch he talked to wouldn't say enough for vocoder." The guttural voice might belong to the Gamorki.

"That's what he said last time. Is he paying you off?" A lighter voice, not human.

"No! He no pay. You pay me." From the tone, Han thought the Gamorki was protesting just a bit too much.

"You remember that," the other said, apparently satisfied. "Tell him he has three more station days to get me something on the Vitarin, or I'll drop him and this ridiculous plan out the nearest airlock. I'd do so now, but I suppose he's already spent most of the credits I've given him. Damn greedy humans."

Han had to risk a look. He eased forward another step, and got a quick view of the next observation bay. He saw a profile of a large, slender biped with reddish skin and a long prominent nose, dressed in a hooded robe. Han eased back. An Idori. *Huh. That almost makes sense.* The Idori ran a large trading concern in the Hegemony that was being gradually forced out of business by the Imperial sanctioned companies. *They need room to expand.* And the Vitarin shipped the same kind of cargos as the Idori: food staples, tools and replacement parts for starship maintenance, power sources and regenerating fluids for air systems. *There's not enough room in this sector for both of them, and the Vitarin have all the contracts.*

The Idori seemed to turn and step out into the empty air of the conduit, then Han saw a small lift platform move up past the port. So that was how he had gotten here, through the airspace of the open well itself. Han was already drawing back along the wall, ready to beat it out of here.

Something grabbed his wrist, trapping his blaster hand. He turned, throwing a punch, but it impacted on the unyielding surface of a Gamorki's face, and the instant return blow slammed Han back against the wall, momentarily stunning him.

The Gamorki twisted the blaster out of his numb hand. It couldn't have gotten around behind him, Han was thinking, sliding down the wall, his head ringing from the blow. Then it dawned on him that this Gamorki was somewhat smaller and uglier than the one he had seen outside the hotel. This was a second Gamorki, who must have been following him all along. It snarled something in its native language and grabbed his arms, and Han decided not to wait for a translation.

He broke the Gamorki's grip with a quick twist based on speed and leverage. Instead of trying to push forward, he dropped, letting the Gamorki's fist strike the wall above him instead of his face. As his opponent roared in rage, Han punched him in the groin. The roar turned abruptly to a shriek and Han rolled sideways and grabbed his fallen blaster.

The other Gamorki rounded the corner suddenly and Han switched his aim to him, since the first one was still staggering, clutching himself. The first Gamorki saw Han and reacted with deceptive speed, grabbing his stumbling companion

and shoving him toward the Corellian and right into the line of fire. Han was already squeezing the trigger, but he managed to jerk the gun sideways enough that the energy bolt only grazed the second Gamorki in the side. Han scrambled, trying to get a clear shot at the first one.

The uninjured Gamorki shoved his companion forward again, blocking Han's second shot. Han swore, diving back the other way, and too late saw the muzzle of a weapon appearing over the dying Gamorki's shoulder.

He fired again, just as the corridor seemed to fill with light. The last thing he was aware of was the cool metal of the floor under his cheek.

* * *

Leia followed the human into the lobby of the hotel. It was a large area, with couches and chairs designed for the comfort of various species arranged in groups around more of the Itell'an rock garden formations, and with a large bank of monitors that showed the schedule of ship arrival and departure times for the port ring. That gave her something to walk up to and stare at without appearing conspicuous, and she could watch Sirot's movements in the reflection in the monitors' screens. There were several other humans in the lobby, spacers studying the ship schedule or cargo factors waiting for meetings, just enough to keep Leia from uncomfortably standing out.

She saw the man go toward the lift tubes. *It would have been easier if he'd had a meeting with someone, like Lieutenant Vagran or the Yerandin, down here. That would have made the situation much simpler,* Leia thought, heading for the lift tubes. But she wasn't that lucky, and anyway a hotel room made a far better place for a secret meeting.

She gave the man a few moments head start by pretending to adjust her wrist chrono, and then stepped into the tube after him. This was getting a bit close. The hotel wasn't so crowded with humans she could follow the man down a corridor to his room without being unnoticed. No, she would see which floor he got off on, and note the room if she could do it without leaving the lift tube foyer, but then she would return to the lobby to find an unobtrusive spot to wait for Han. No sense in taking a risk; if this man held Kifar Itran prisoner somewhere, it wouldn't be here, where an organic employee or housekeeping droid might stumble on her, but in one of the automated rent hostels.

Others got off or on the lift tube at various floors, and Leia's view of her quarry was blocked by a Squida who was slowly ascending the tube. She bit her lip, trying to keep her frustration from showing on her face. It was a well known axiom in most cosmopolitan ports that if someone was in your way, he was probably a Squida. It was partly the size of the big slug-like nonhumans, who resembled Hutts except that their temperaments and personal habits tended to be far more pleasant, and partly a culture that discouraged hasty action.

When the Squida left the lift tube, Leia found herself wishing it had stayed. She was the only one in the tube now except for Sirot, though he was still a couple of floors above her. He glanced down at her, though without apparent interest. */// get off at the floor above his*, Leia thought, though she had a qualm about that casual glance. She could see which corridor he took when he left the tube, but she wouldn't take the chance of following him any further.

Finally he stepped off the tube and Leia saw him taking the corridor to the right as she continued up. She took the exit onto the next floor, feeling some relief.

She crossed the landing to the tube going down but before she could step into it, someone grabbed the back of her jacket and she felt the muzzle of a gun between her shoulder blades. A voice said, "So there's two of you."

* * *

Han knew he wasn't dead. His body seemed to be numb, but there was the painful tingling in the extremities that meant he had been hit by a stun blast. He didn't try to move. It would make the stun harder to throw off, but at this point he felt drawing attention to himself would be a serious mistake. He could hear somebody standing over him, breathing heavily.

Then the somebody kicked him in the ribs and he twitched involuntarily.

Han felt himself lifted. *Uh-oh*, he thought. He was being dragged, not up or down the passage, the famous Corellian sense of direction informed him, but toward the side with the open observation bays. *Oh yeah, this is bad*.

Han felt the air change, smelled the ozone from the repulsars, and knew they were out on one of the balconies over the giant conduit. *Oh, fuck*. He was lifted again and suddenly swung out over empty air.

He yelled in pure reaction, but the Gamorki didn't drop him. Not yet, anyway. It was holding him just above the knees, dangling him down over the railing above the conduit.

Wow, Han thought, able to blink and open his eyes now. *I didn't know it went down that far*. The conduit seemed to curve away to an infinite distance. He realized this must be the junction between a tube and the ring, and he was looking down the full length of the tube toward the hub. No wonder there had been so many airlocks between the main area and this section. Unfortunately the gravity seemed to be pointing in the wrong direction, for him, at least.

The Gamorki said, "Now you tell me, who sent you follow me? You got anyone else helping you?"

Yeah, sure, Han thought. It didn't speak basic any better than it spoke chakk-tongue. It was probably lousy at Gamorkian, too. Han took a deep breath, felt an answering twinge from his ribs. The adrenalin coursing through his body had cleared his foggy brain instantly. Now the blood running down this way was causing the stun to wear off almost immediately. He flexed his hands experimentally and then stopped; he didn't want the Gamorki to know he was rapidly regaining a full range of motion.

"Who you work for?" the Gamorki demanded again.

Some distance below him was a large floating droid, the flat surface of its upper side at least two meters square. It was drifting slowly up the curving wall. Han saw the small droids dart toward it and vanish somewhere underneath, then drop out of it and flit back to their task on the pipes. It must be carrying extra powercells. The maintenance droids docked with it in its undercarriage somewhere, exchanged their old powercells for new ones, and went back to their work. It was about twenty feet below him, though not quite directly below. Some extra weight might make it about right, if that was really twenty feet. If he was judging the distance wrong and it was too much more, he would be in trouble. Of course, he was in trouble now.

He lifted his head to look speculatively at the Gamorki. It shook him a little, possibly angry at his failure to give in so it could murder him in peace. It said, "You tell me who you work for, Corellian. Vitarin send you? They know about us?"

Han let his head drop back to see the droid again, making sure the shaking hadn't changed his projected trajectory. *No, still about right*. It was the "about" part that was tricky. And he would have to do it with no warning, no swinging back and forth to build momentum. He looked back up at the Gamorki. It snarled in frustration at the delay.

Han said, "You want me to tell you?"

"Yes!" It shouted.

Han contracted every muscle he had that was still working, curling his body up and grabbing the Gamorki's shoulder harness. Before it could jerk backward, Han flung his weight back. Overbalanced, the Gamorki came with him.

Han let go of the harness as soon as he felt the Gamorki topple forward. Fortunately it was too startled to let go of his legs and grab for his arms, which would have killed both of them. Han was only planning on one of them failing to survive.

He struck the surface of the droid with almost stunning force and started to slide off. It dipped alarmingly and Han clawed at the surface, desperate for something to hold onto. He caught a raised edge along the side at almost the last moment and hung over empty space, the Gamorki still hanging on to him by one leg. It was roaring in terror and rage. Han's fingers were slick with sweat. Han kicked at it with his free leg, feeling a particularly satisfying crunch when his bootheel struck the dome of its skull. A second later the weight was gone.

He listened to the roar get fainter and fainter, then stop abruptly, in time with the thump of a heavy impact. Han hung there a moment, gathering his strength, then dragged himself up on to the droid's flat topside.

He sprawled there, panting, and listened to the slow-witted machine beep in distress. In a minute he would have to sit up and break into its control systems, so he could tell it to float back up to one of the bays.

Then he remembered that he wasn't sure how much time had passed, and that Leia might be walking into a similar setup. He struggled to sit up, ignoring the pain in his ribs.

* * *

Leia's first impulse was to try to leap forward and drag them both into the lift tube; it was a better chance than being taken prisoner, and if he meant to murder her outright, she wanted it to at least happen in front of witnesses. But he had a height and weight advantage on her, like most normal-sized humans, and halted

her forward rush by bracing his feet and jerking her backward. "Don't try anything, I'll blow your head off!"

Leia started to snarl, "Go ahead then, set alarms off all over the hotel," then changed it at the last second to "Who are you, what do you want? I don't have any credits on me." If she could make him think he had made a mistake, even for a moment, he might drop his guard.

"That won't work, I know you were following me. How else did you know what floor my room was on?" He pulled her blaster out of her holster and tucked it into his belt.

"What?" Leia said. He was prodding her down the corridor, which was unfortunately empty at the moment. *How did I know.... Wait. He got off the tube a floor early, to see if I'd get off on his floor. Gods Below, it's pure luck I'm not an innocent bystander. This idiot is a menace.* It explained how an operative as clever as Itran's record suggested she was had been caught by this amateur. Bad luck and the sheer stupidity of her adversary must have caught her off guard. "I don't know what you're talking about," Leia said, bracing her feet and making him drag her. "My room is on this floor!"

"Then where's your codekey? What room number is it?"

All right, so he's not that stupid. "I'm not going to tell you that!" she blustered, knowing it sounded lame. If she had had the full course in Intelligence Operations, instead of just the limited one for diplomatic personnel who might be called on to carry sensitive documents or be trailed by Imperial Security, or who might be subject to assassination or kidnapping attempts, she would probably have a better idea how to talk her way out of this. As it was, common sense and training both suggested that she scream her head off and make herself a dead weight, forcing him to either shoot her out here in the corridor, where help could be quickly summoned, or abandon her. Letting an opponent get you into a locked room or a secluded area was something to be avoided at all costs. But if this man suspected she was from the Alliance, the last thing she wanted was the hotel or station security to get a hold of him.

So she didn't fight him when, still holding the blaster on her, he stopped at the door of a room and slipped a codekey into the lock. He shoved her inside as the door slid open.

"Don't look for your Corellian friend to get you out of this," he said, locking the door from the inside. "He's dead by now."

I doubt it, Leia thought, backing away from him. If Han was going to be taken out, it wasn't going to be by a dirty little schemer like this man, no matter how much help he had. There were two rooms, a seating area with a couch and a couple of

conform loungers, some blue and pink feathery-looking plants in ornamental containers, a holoivid setup, and a bedroom beyond.

"I saw the Corellian follow the Gamorki, so I sent the other one after him." Sirot motioned her to keep going, back into the bedroom. Presumably so anyone passing by in the corridor wouldn't hear her screaming.

So there were two Gamorki. "What do you want, an award?" she snapped. She backed into the bedroom, keeping a distance between them. There was a platform bed attached to one wall, a desk and chair, a table with a small version of the hotel's signature rockflowers. There was another door, but presumably it led only to the fresher.

"I want to know who hired you. Was it the Vitarin?"

Who hired me? Doesn't he realize...? No, he didn't. He didn't know she was with the Alliance. *Dammit, I should have made a stand in the corridor.* No help for it now. She said, "My employers know all about you."

He nodded, as if pleased by the answer. "I knew somebody was after me. The Idori didn't trust me, so they gave me two Gamorki watchdogs, but I paid them off. I'm their boss now, me, Sirot, not the Idori. I set a trap, met with one of them in front of the hotel, in case you were watching it. They'll take care of him, just like they took care of your other friend."

"Took care of who? What do you mean?" Leia demanded.

"You know what I mean. Your other friend, the Mulari woman."

"What Mulari woman?" Leia felt cold. He was describing Kifar Itran.

"Oh, they'll find her body eventually, in one of the station waste units. Or the pieces."

"You killed her?" The rage was surprising. She had never met Kifar, only seen a holo of her, and she should be afraid for herself. But whatever fear she felt was overwhelmed in a red tide that seemed to be rising up behind her eyes.

"The Idori sent me a message about her. She was poking around in the station records, and they knew she found out about my plan. Paid me extra when I took care of her." He was proud of it.

Leia stared at him, the rage growing. *She was an intelligence operative, she knew the risks,* a voice in her head said, small and far off. *Yes, from the Empire. But this piece of filth killed her for money.* She wanted to scream.

"The Gamorki did it," Sirot said, sounding uncertain suddenly. His face was working, as if he was the one who was afraid now. "Not me."

"And you sent them after the Corellian." The rage turned cold, a hard knot lodged just under her chest.

He nodded warily.

The knot seemed to explode in slow motion, sending cold tendrils all over her body. *I've never been this angry before*, she thought calmly. *Not ever*. If it was anger. She knew what she had felt when she had seen Alderaan destroyed. That had been a devastation so pure it had cleared her mind of any other thoughts. The anger had come later, anger so intense that when she found herself with a blaster in her hand during her escape she had had to hand it back to Luke, because she couldn't trust herself not to run mad looking for Imperials to kill. No, anger was an old friend. This was...something else. She needed to find out a few more things before she killed him. She asked, "Why did you tell the Vitarin you wanted to speak to the Alliance?"

"I had a vocoder, was going to get enough to make a recording that sounded like the Vitarin were dealing with the Alliance. Then the Idori would be able to force them out," Sirot spoke almost as if hypnotized. The expression in his eyes was a little desperate, as if he couldn't stop himself and didn't know why. He was holding the blaster loosely, as if he had forgotten it.

He's probably mesmerized by his own stupidity, Leia thought, her lip curling in contempt. "Whose idea was this, the Idori's?"

"No, it was mine." There was a trace of his former bravado in his voice, but just a trace. He was still speaking like an automaton.

"You idiot. It would have brought the Empire down on you. They would have taken over the entire station." She needed to distract him, just for a moment. "Who's that at the door?"

Unbelievably, it worked. His head turned toward the door as if he was a puppet jerked by a string. Leia leapt forward and slapped the gun out of his hand. He threw a punch at her but she ducked it and scrambled for the fallen blaster. He grabbed her and she fell into one of the tables. The table turned over, taking both of them with it, and Leia landed on the piece of rock sculpture. She grabbed it, twisted lithely in his grip and slammed him over the head with it.

He went limp and Leia struggled to her feet, lifting the sculpture for a second blow. She realized that all she was holding was the wooden base: the rock was soft and the sculpture had disintegrated on impact. She threw it down with a

curse, looked for something else to hit him with, and seized on the chair at the desk.

Leia lifted the chair over her head. And stopped.

She had killed before, and ordered others to kill, but not like this. Something inside her was as disgusted with herself as she was with Sirot.

She wanted to kill him, very, very badly. But she knew it wouldn't change anything, it wouldn't make anything any better. *And I'm used to denying myself the things I want.* That wryly ironic thought brought back the moment in the Vitarin guest house with Han, the warmth of his skin, the touch of his lips against hers. The hard coldness in her chest dissolved with the memory, leaving her exhausted and faintly sick. *I'm not going to do this.* And the chair was really heavy.

She stumbled back a step and dropped it with a loud thump. She gasped and carefully rubbed her shoulder. *Pulled muscle, that's all I need. How did I hold that over my head?* It must weigh more than she did.

Shaking her head, she went into the other room and started toward the door, reaching for her comlink to try to call Han. She froze, staring at her right hand. On the back of it was a two centimeter square of some sort of light-colored plastic. It was a contact patch, used for administering drugs that could be absorbed through the skin.

Hurriedly she peeled it off. The skin underneath it was red and irritated. *That slimy little...* When he grabbed her hand in the hall, he must have put the patch on her. It probably had some sort of local anesthetic mixed in with whatever drug it delivered, to keep the victim from realizing it was there until it was too late.

There was a stealthy noise at the door, someone working on the lock. Sirot's Gamorki friends might have another codekey, and the management would have a bypass code.

The door came open suddenly and she raised her blaster, but lowered it in relief a second later. "Han!"

He came into the room blaster first, looked around rapidly, saw she was alone and demanded, "Where is he?"

"The other room. He's not going anywhere." Han had come up against something all right. He had a large, fist-shaped bruise on his cheek and he seemed to be favoring his right leg. "How did you get the codekey?" she asked.

"Found it with the room number on the Gamorki I could still get to. Lucky it wasn't on the other one." He was looking closely at her, his expression worried. "You all right?"

"Yes...No." She supposed it wasn't worth asking what happened to the other one, not right this minute, anyway. She showed him the remains of the contact patch. "He got me with this."

Han steadied her hand so he could look at the patch. His knuckles were bruised and raw too, she noted. His face was an interesting study. His brows knit, and he asked, apparently casually, "He say what it was?"

"No. You don't recognize it?" She was pretty sure he did recognize it.

"Maybe." He eyed her worriedly. "How do you feel?"

"A little dizzy, but I also got a knock on the head."

Han's expression hardened. "He probably has the container on him." He strode for the inner room.

I should have thought of that, Leia berated herself. She followed, her steps wavering a little. Her body seemed to want to drift to the right. She gave up and sat down on the couch nearest the bedroom door. "Is it toxic?"

"Huh? No, it's not toxic."

"Good." *So I won't die. Not right this minute, anyway.* Han seemed to be taking a long time to look for the container. "Is he dead?" she asked, remembering she had wanted to kill Sirot and suddenly unsure whether she had gone through with it or not.

Han leaned out the door. "Yeah."

There was a low pain-filled moan from the room behind him. Leia frowned. Han looked annoyed. He said, "Give me a minute," and ducked back inside.

"Han, wait." She stumbled hastily to her feet and steadied herself on the door frame. "If he's alive, we should let the Vitarin deal with him."

Han appeared in the doorway again. "You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Han swore under his breath and said persuasively, "Leia, there's a real convenient maintenance disposal chute right around the corner."

"Even so, Han," Leia said tiredly.

He sighed. "All right." He ducked back into the other room.

"Thank you." She sat down heavily. She was far more dizzy than the bump on the head could account for. "It was the Vitarin he was after all along, not us. He didn't realize they had a connection to the Alliance, it was just a coincidence. He killed Kifar Itran--"

There was a muted thump from the other room. Leia suspected it was Han's boot impacting on Sirot's ribs. Considering what she had almost done, she could hardly take the high moral ground. She realized with a start that she hadn't asked Han about the Gamorki associates Sirot had claimed to have. What the hell was wrong with her? "Han, he said he had two Gamorki working for him, did you--"

"Yeah. Took care of them."

"Oh, good." She subsided. She remembered Han hadn't told her what the drug was yet, either. "Han, did he have the container?"

"Uh, yeah."

Silence. She prompted, "And?"

"It's not toxic."

"Oh." *Well, that's good. Wait, he already told me that.* But Han in full evasion mode was too much for her at the moment and she was too weary to get up to look for herself. "I'm just going to lay down here for a minute."

In the other room, Han pulled the comlink off his belt and sent the call signal, pacing agitatedly. He had searched the room for the antidote, but of course the bastard didn't have any with him. And why should he? The stuff would have worn off in a few hours anyway. He paused to kick Sirot again.

There was a grumble from the comlink as Chewbacca answered. "Chewie, we don't have any terocyn or micab-3 on board, do we?" Han asked without preamble.

The Wookiee barked an answer and Han let out his breath in resignation. "Yeah, I know, why the hell would we have that? I just had to make sure." Steris was classified as a tranquilizer, but it was used more in brothels than medcenters. It tranquilized you all right, but it also dissolved inhibitions and made you extremely suggestible. Sirot might have used it because it was all he could get, but somehow Han doubted it. "Wait, what was that?" He thought he had heard an unfamiliar voice in the background noise. Chewie told him he was playing the

station's entertainment channel on the ship's speaker system. "Oh. Look, this bastard we were looking for slapped Leia with a steris patch. Yes, I know that. I know." Han gritted his teeth. The last thing he needed was a lot of Wookiee hindsight. "No, there's no time to get her to the ship. I got maybe a quarter timepart to get her out of sight and the Vitarin Enclave is closer. We can't stay here." He couldn't call the station's med facilities; steris was a proscribed drug in most civilized systems, and bringing Leia in doped to the eyebrows with it would lead to unpleasant, unanswerable questions.

Signing off from Chewie, he went to the desk console and called the number the Donya had given them for the Vitarin broker's office. Han was relieved to see Lianis's worried face appear on the screen.

"Captain? Something is wrong?"

"No, but we just located that package you were looking for." He didn't want to elaborate further on an unscrambled com. He gave her the hotel name and room number. "If you could come and pick it up for us. And, uh, it's heavy, so bring a couple of friends."

Lianis was nodding rapidly. "At once, Captain."

"And Lianis, you don't happen to have access to any terocyn or micab-3?"

"I don't think so. We don't carry medical supplies for humans. Is there a problem?"

"No, it's okay." Han considered asking for help. But he knew Leia wouldn't appreciate the Vitarin seeing her in this condition, or the condition she would soon be in. *Even less than she'd appreciate you seeing her like that*, he thought sourly. Unfortunately, he was all that she had at the moment. "Thanks."

Han cut the comm and stepped back into the other room. Leia was curled up on the couch. He leaned over her. "Hey, how're you feeling?"

She said something that sounded like, "Mmph."

Uh-huh, Han thought, hauling her to her feet. *That's what I thought.*

* * *

Han got Leia back to the maintenance entrance to the Vitarin Enclave just as the real loopiness had started to set in. He propped her against the wall to get a free hand to punch in the lock code. "Hey, Leia, you okay?" She sagged back against him, giggling quietly to herself.

The hatch slid upward and Han caught her around the waist and pulled her through. It was still "night" in the dome, though there was an emergency light over the hatch, and more lights outlining the paths were visible through the screen of foliage. Leia leaned on him, still giggling. *This isn't too bad*, he thought. Not too much worse than dealing with a happy drunk. Maybe this would be as bad as it would get and she wouldn't experience any of the worse effects of the drug. Then as he was sealing the hatch behind them Leia twisted nimbly out of his grasp and bolted off across the park.

Han caught up with her at the flower border and they crashed through it. He staggered on the uneven ground beyond and just managed to turn his fall so he pulled Leia down on top of him instead of landing on her with his full weight. Not even winded, Leia struggled to get away from him, shrieking with laughter. "Leia, dammit, listen to me!" She got her hands under his jacket and it suddenly became more important to capture her wrists than her attention. "Leia, don't tickle me, I'm serious--"

"What is going on--" A Vitarin voice demanded, the speaker invisible in the darkness and the rustling foliage, then, "Oh, excuse me!"

As footsteps hurried away, Han said, "Wait-- Oh, shit." *What were you gonna say? Help me, I'm being overpowered by a 110 pound woman who's so high her head's bumping the ceiling.* Leia buried her face against his chest, still snorting with laughter. At least she wasn't serious enough about getting away to knee him in the groin. And considering how his body was responding to her at the moment, it would have been extremely painful. *The really ironic thing is I think I've had this fantasy before.* But it hadn't included Leia being as loopy as a dreamstim addict. "This is great," he muttered.

"What?" Leia said, her head still buried against him.

That was the first coherent word she had said since they had left Sirot's room. Encouraged, Han said, "Leia, we need to get back to our quarters, okay? And we need to be very, very quiet, so we won't wake everybody up." *And so you don't embarrass yourself far worse than you had ever dreamed possible.* Han could've cared less if everyone in the dome thought he was coming back drunk from a night on the town, but he knew how Princess/Senator Leia Organa of Alderaan would feel about it.

Leia sat up on her elbows, causing Han to gasp, since one of them was planted firmly in his solar plexus. "All right," she said, sounding almost normal. "I'll race you."

She twisted away abruptly. He grabbed for her but caught empty air. She leapt to her feet, dodged his scrambling attempt to tackle her again and ran for the stone path between the outbuildings.

He was faster than her on open ground, but with her size advantage she was better at broken field running, though Han had thought he was pretty damn good at it himself. Her real advantage was that with the drug coursing through her system she had absolutely no fear of falling or running into things in the dark.

She stumbled over more bushes and he caught her on the porch of a guest house. Unfortunately, it wasn't their guest house. The glow globe floating there switched itself on as soon as it sensed their movement and abruptly the door swung open. It was the Yerandin.

"Yeah, yeah," Han told him, while part of his mind was trying to register the fact that Yerandins evidently slept in flowery print robe things. "It's us again. Don't worry, we're just passing through." He pried the giggling Leia off the pillar she had entwined herself around and dragged her back out to the path, all under the astonished gaze of the Yerandin's goggling eyestalks.

* * *

Leia woke slowly, aware that she lay on her side on the well-padded Vitarin bed. "Morning" dome light filled the room, and the air was cool, but for some reason she felt quite warm and comfortable. It took another few moments for her fuzzy mind to realize that she felt so cozy because Han was curled up against her back, his arm around her waist holding her firmly, his face buried in her hair.

Oh, my, Leia thought. She could tell from his breathing, warm on her neck and ear, that he was deeply asleep. She remembered last night all too clearly. Her training in the resistance of interrogation drugs had been extensive, and most thoroughly tested by Darth Vader onboard the Death Star, but she had never had an experience like this before. Her consciousness had been in some sort of altered state, no inhibitions, no control over her actions at all.

She remembered Han having to practically sit on her to keep her from throwing herself in the canal. And she remembered talking -- no, downloading -- to him for hours, about Alderaan, about that horrible moment when it had dissolved before

her eyes, about the other Alderaanians coming to her with their fears and their pain, all the things that in her right mind she would never say.

About her belief that if she had given Tarkin the real location of the rebel base, he would have spared Alderaan.

That thought had haunted her subconscious ever since; it was a relief, somehow, to be able to think it openly. She knew it wasn't true. Not even the Grand Moff Tarkin would destroy a planet on his own authority. He had been ordered to the Alderaan system with the specific purpose of eliminating the Emperor's most vocal, politically powerful, and resourceful opponent. Just like the Emperor had ordered the military occupation of Corellis, when he had discovered that world was funneling the money from the shipyards into the fledgling Alliance. The goal had been Imperial possession of those shipyards; the association with the Alliance had only been an excuse.

Han had said all this to her too, last night.

So it was out in the open. She thought the destruction of Alderaan was her fault. *Had thought?* she wondered. She turned it over carefully, examining it like she would any other tactical problem. Now that she knew what the problem was, she had a chance of working through it.

Despite the wild night, the drug, and the current sluggishness of her body, her thoughts were very clear. Maybe more clear than they had been in some time. She thought about the strange cold rage that had come over her with Sirot. She remembered all of it, though it had a dreamlike quality now, as if she was remembering something that had happened to some other person. *I was going to kill him, and I was going to enjoy it.* She was glad she had decided against it. She felt instinctively that giving in to that kind of anger would have opened her up to...something. She wasn't quite sure what.

In the meantime, she seemed to have something else to deal with, though it was of a quite different nature. *So what does Princess Leia do in this situation?* She should be calm and cold, that was how that ice and stone monument to dead Alderaan should react to this. *Maybe she just lies here and goes back to sleep.* Except she didn't exactly feel like sleeping anymore.

Oh, damn. More proof she wasn't made of stone. *Leia, this isn't going to help your concentration any. And stop smiling.* Without waking, Han made a noise deep in his throat, suspiciously like a moan, and pulled her more firmly against him. *That didn't help.*

Just think how annoyingly arrogant he would be if he knew he had this effect on you. Just think what would happen if he woke up right now. That's not helping, either.

Realistically, after his fight with the Gamorki and a night of keeping a crazed and hyperactive Alderaanian from throwing herself in the canal or bashing her head into the walls, he was probably exhausted. *No, really, I have to get up.* She had to report to the Donya and they had to get back to the Fleet. *Tell them about poor Kifar.* She sighed reluctantly, and applied gentle pressure to Han's ribs with her elbow. After a moment, he moaned again and rolled onto his back. Leia sat up, but instead of climbing out of the bed she found herself looking down at him.

He was sprawled on his back, thick hair tousled, bonelessly relaxed. She was finally willing to admit to herself why she had been so angry at Degoran's suggestion. It wasn't Han she didn't trust; it was herself. Every time she saw him, spoke to him or, gods help her, bumped into him in a corridor, he reminded her that she wasn't stone, she wasn't ice, that no matter how hard the Empire had tried to kill her or destroy her soul, that she wasn't dead yet. She still had a life, and it was a life that could conceivably hold joy. She had hoped the effect he had on her would fade, but as she got to know him better, it had only become more pronounced, harder to ignore. It was why she had instinctively tried to keep him at arm's length or drive him away altogether.

And the most terrible thing of all was that she wanted that life. If she had any true feeling at all, she should have wanted to die with Alderaan, but she didn't. Despite everything, she was fiercely glad she had survived. It was distressing to her enemies in the Alliance's various factions, she knew. *I would have made such a wonderful martyr,* she thought, aware she sounded just as cynical as Han. It was probably the reason there hadn't been more opposition to her risking herself on the *Tantavie* and in diplomatic missions. They were hoping she had a death wish. It would be easier if she had. Living was a damn sight harder than dying.

No time for sorrow. Those words kept coming back to haunt her. *No time for pain, or at least not yours.* No time to renew yourself with a Corellian smuggler who could probably make you forget you were supposed to be a monument.

Don't even think that. This is as close to sleeping with him as you can afford to get, Leia. Then Han turned his head a little, restlessly, and as the light shifted she saw he had a black eye. He hadn't had it when he had found her in Sirot's room, despite the bruises from his battle with the Gamorki. "Oh, no," she said aloud.

He sat bolt upright. "I didn't do anything! What? Oh, shit." He fell over on his side, wrapping his arms around his head.

"Sairsa's Freehold," Leia prompted sympathetically.

Han groaned. Leia climbed off the bed, because the view from this angle wasn't helping her concentration either, and started to look for her boots. One was on top of the tallest wooden cabinet.

By the time she had managed to retrieve it Han had stopped moaning and sat up. He ran his hands through his hair and looked around, bleary but coherent. She said, "Thank you for discouraging me from taking my clothes off and jumping in the canal."

"Well, it was against my natural inclination but I wasn't sure if you could swim." He stood up and stretched, easing the kinks in his back.

Looking for her other boot, Leia noticed they both had scratches everywhere. "That last bush?" she asked, looking at her hands.

"Yeah. It must have been some kind of native Vitarin hardwood," Han said, limping across the room. "It didn't have much give to it."

He definitely had a black eye, it hadn't been just a shadow. Leia winced in guilt. "Did I hit you?" she managed to ask finally.

"Huh?" Han looked baffled.

"Your eye," she explained. "It's starting to swell."

He felt it gingerly. "Ow. No, that was from the back of your head. I didn't know you were going to stand up. Just caught me at the right angle, that's all."

"Oh." An inadvertent blow from the back of one's head was better than a deliberate punch, and she doubted that she had had the coordination to manage such a maneuver intentionally last night. Still.... "I'm sorry, Han."

"I'll live," he assured her, limping painfully.

"No, I mean, for everything."

"Okay. Next time I get crazy drunk and go rampaging around the ship I don't want to hear any backtalk from you about it."

Leia sighed and gave in. "All right, it's a deal. Though I may have to enlist help to keep you from taking your clothes off and jumping into the canal."

Han glanced at her sideways, a lopsided grin tugging at his mouth. "I can swim."

Leia choked and buried her head in her bag, pretending to be looking for something. If she started to laugh, she would just burst into tears.

* * *

Leia located her other boot at the bottom of the bathing pool, then went to the Donya's rooms to give her and the others a synopsis of events. Lianis and a couple of other Vitarin had retrieved Sirot from the hotel last night. Leia told her it didn't particularly matter what the Vitarin did with him, but explained that he had been responsible for Kifar Itran's death. The Donya had nodded quietly, and assured her that Sirot would be taken care of. "The Idori," the Donya had said grimly, "We can handle, now that we know they are challenging us." They also arranged a cover story for Leia's absence from the rest of the conference: Ascalon would suddenly call Leia Danthil back, and hints would be dropped that she had been skimming profits. The Donya was reluctant to make these implications but Leia assured her that it would fit the persona she had established very well.

They arrived back at the *Falcon* and Leia had never seen a more welcome sight. She dropped her carryall onto the deck and sat down on the couch, sinking into the worn upholstery with relief. Chewbacca came out of the companionway as Han followed Leia into the lounge. The Wookiee hooted with alarm, as if surprised to see them.

Han frowned at him. "Of course we're back, what did you expect? Get the preflight started while I see if I can get us a launch time."

Chewbacca mumbled something, avoiding Han's eyes. "What the hell is wrong with you?" Han asked him irritably, starting up to the cockpit.

Leia leaned her head back against the cushions, sighing wearily. She noticed Chewbacca sidling down the companionway and frowned at him, puzzled. "Is something wrong, Chewie?"

He paused, eyeing her uncertainly, and seemed about to say something when Han suddenly reappeared, standing in the entrance to the lounge. Leia glanced up at him and his expression made her ask, "What's wrong?"

Chewie saw him and made an alarmed yelping noise. Han didn't answer. Leia watched as he and the Wookiee locked gazes, until the Wookiee groaned and lowered his head, muttering something.

Smiling, Han said, "What do you mean, 'Don't hit or yell?' Why would I want to do that?" It was a very dangerous smile.

Chewie shifted and whimpered again. Leia watched in increasing bafflement.

Han's eyes narrowed. He said, "I only have one question."

"It was great," Chewie said, apparently as an attempt to lighten the mood.

"Funny Wookiee," Han said, grimly. "Funny, dead Wookiee."

Chewie quailed.

Han swore, staring at the ceiling in an effort to regain calm. Finally, he said, "Is she still on board?"

"She?" Leia asked, confused.

There was a thump from the companionway behind the Wookiee, then Leia heard a cabin door slide open. Before she could react, the Thetaran Portmaster stepped into the lounge, combing her mane with her fingers, giving Chewie a casual pat on the bottom as she passed him. Leia's jaw dropped.

"Sorry to intrude. I oversleep," the Portmaster said, looking around innocently.

Leia was on her feet before she quite knew it, intercepting the Portmaster halfway across the lounge and steering her toward the passage to the main hatch. Leia knew she made polite small talk as she walked the Portmaster out, but she couldn't remember later quite what was said. The Portmaster gave Chewbacca a casual goodbye, said something about being late for her shift and that they should be sure to let her know the next time they came to Freehold. Leia waved goodbye from inside the hatch, and managed not to hit the button to seal it and retract the ramp with impolite haste. She went back to the lounge, still a little dazed.

Han was standing with his arms folded, staring at Chewbacca, saying nothing. Leia could read fury in every tense muscle. Chewie made the mistake of breaking the long silence by grumbling some excuses. One of them was that he hadn't said anything about the rebellion, that the Portmaster still believed they were from Ascalon trading. Leia felt her stomach unclench a little at that. Then Chewie muttered that it wasn't his fault the Portmaster had realized he was male; the Thetaran was woman enough to feel the natural call of his powerful masculinity. At that Leia had to bite her lip to keep her face straight, but one glance at Han's expression and the impulse to laugh escaped her.

Han, whose eyes had never left his partner, said, "I gave you a direct order."

Chewbacca shifted uneasily and pointed at Leia, grumbling. She stared at him in astonishment, and he at least had the grace to drop his eyes guiltily.

"Yeah," Han agreed. "She said it to you, but you knew it came straight from me."

Chewie, apparently grudgingly, admitted that this was so. Leia wouldn't have opened her mouth at this point if someone had threatened her life. The middle of this dispute was no place she wanted to be.

Han was beginning to lose that frightening, artificial calm. He swore under his breath, shaking his head. "I ought to leave you here, you big, dumb, fluff-headed-"

Stung and too confident of forgiveness, Chewbacca rallied, growling back at Han, "Just because you didn't get anywhere...."

Leia managed to mentally translate what the Wookiee had said and winced. *Oh, poor Chewie. You shouldn't have played that card.*

Chewbacca realized that a second too late. His voice trailed off, and he stood there uncertainly. Han's expression had gone calm again. Ominously, dangerously calm. Then he smiled, and Chewbacca whimpered. The Corellian said, "You shouldn't have said that, 'cause now I really have to kill you."

Chewie didn't hesitate; he bolted for the hold. Han ducked into the companionway to cut him off.

Leia supported her throbbing head on her hand. Now she knew what to say to the people who couldn't tell when Han and Chewie were fighting. When Han was chasing Chewbacca, then they were fighting. She decided to leave them to settle it, and went to find her way to some flat surface to collapse on.

I can't let it happen, she thought, lying on the spare bunk. In the background, she could hear Han yelling at Chewbacca in some guttural Corellian dialect and Chewie roaring back at him. She ignored the voice in her head that told her to take all she could, while she could, before the Empire killed her again. Han wasn't in love with her, that was obvious, and if she gave in to her desire and feelings once it would just be that much more painful when he left. Or when he.... *No. No more hostages to fate*, she thought. Never mind that it was a little late for that already. She had Luke, Rieekan, Madine, the command staff, everyone else on the *Tantavie*, a whole Alliance full of hostages to fate to worry about. *Yes, but I haven't slept with any of them*, she reminded herself grimly. And she wasn't sleeping with Han, no matter how much she wanted to. It was time to start cutting her losses.

* * *

The *Falcon* throbbed quietly with the familiar rumble of engines in hyperspace. The door slid open at her touch, revealing the small, untidy cabin. Han was lying on the bunk, propped up on one elbow, reading from a datapad. He was dressed in pants and a rumpled, untucked shirt, barefoot and with his hair a little mussed. He looked up at her, surprised.

She took a deep breath and said, "Don't say anything."

He frowned, puzzled. "About what?"

She glanced upwards briefly in annoyance. *You could have predicted that one*, she thought. Stepping into the cabin and letting the hatch slide closed behind her, she said, "I meant, don't say anything now."

"What?" Now he looked like he thought she was crazy.

Swearing under her breath, she sat down on the bunk, moved the datapad to the floor, grabbed the back of his head and kissed him.

She had half a second to wonder how foolish she would feel if he didn't kiss her back, then he was kissing her back and pulling her into the bunk.

It was awkward; they kept encountering each other's bruises, and Han's current collection was extensive. The bunk wasn't wide and Leia immediately managed to ram her sore shoulder into the bulkhead, but none of it mattered. They were still kissing and he pulled her against him, burying his hand in her loosened braids. She ran a hand up the outside of his thigh, just the way she had always wanted to, and he made a pleased noise against her mouth and rolled on top of her. She pushed her hands up under his shirt, feeling hot skin over hard muscle. All her doubts had vanished under the overwhelming sense of rightness, as if a missing piece of the universe had suddenly clicked into place with all the finality of a natural force.

Han was saying her name....

Leia sat bolt upright with a yelp. She was sitting on the spare bunk, alone and cold, in the cubby next to the cockpit. *It was a dream*. She rubbed her face. *That was some dream*.

Han was standing in the open hatchway. "You know," he was saying conversationally, apparently addressing the secondary controls for the life

support system. "A couple of days ago, if she had screamed like a gundark when I tried to wake her up, I would've thought it was odd, but now it seems almost understated."

Leia buried her face in her hands. "I was having a dream."

"Yeah?" Han sounded more sympathetic. He probably thought she had been having a nightmare about Alderaan. Well, she had had plenty of nightmares, and would doubtless continue to have them, but this hadn't been one. It had been so real. *I can remember how his skin tasted.* She shivered. If he ever guessed.... "Did I say anything?" she asked, suspiciously.

"About what?"

That did it. Leia choked and started to laugh. By the time she fell over on the bunk, gasping for air, Han had left.

She found him in the cockpit, after she had splashed some water on her face and regained as much of her equilibrium as was possible. The canopy was dimmed against the strange light of hyperspace and she took a seat in Chewbacca's oversized co-pilot's chair. Han eyed her warily. She said, "Is Chewie still locked in the hold?"

"No, I let him out an hour ago." Han relaxed a little, apparently reassured that her behavior was at least going to approach rationality.

"That's good." They sat there in silence for some moments, until Leia remembered something she had meant to ask him. "How did you know she was onboard?"

"Something about his expression."

Leia regarded him, one brow lifted.

"And when I went down the companionway I saw he'd cleaned the galley," Han admitted. "He never does that unless he's trying to impress a woman."

"Ah."

Han eyed her speculatively, then became terribly interested in a worn spot on the readout of one of the comps. Leia braced herself, recognizing this as the beginning of a conversational gambit. "So," he said finally, "What are you going to tell people about all this?"

"About all what?" she said, honestly not sure what he was talking about.

Han gave up fiddling with the comp and leaned back in the acceleration chair, giving her an ironic look. "I mean, do we have to get a divorce or do you think an annulment will be enough?"

"Oh, that." She had forgotten about that. The High Council...didn't really need to know any of that. She looked at Han. "I wouldn't like to make an incomplete report," she said slowly. "But of course, it wasn't really important to the overall situation." They eyed each other cautiously. "But if we're going to start leaving things out...."

"Yeah..."

She pretended to mull it over. "The subject of attempted midnight swims might be avoided, when you're debriefed." She added, "Or when you're telling Luke or anyone else about this."

Han looked thoughtful. "That could be arranged."

* * *

Some hours later the *Falcon* settled on the blast-scarred floor of the *Tantavie's* bay with that light touch Leia was beginning to be accustomed to, and not long after that she was standing under the starship's bow mandibles, being greeted by General Rieekan and Colonel Degoran. Leia had sent a coded message ahead, giving them the bare facts that the Alliance had lost a trusted agent and almost lost one of their major supply lines due to what was essentially a trade dispute.

As soon as Rieekan finished speaking, Degoran, unable to wait to get his jibe in, said, "Well, Princess, I'm sorry to hear you accomplished so little. I suppose this can serve as proof that sometimes the Organa touch can't work wonders."

Leia gazed at Deogoran thoughtfully, and said, "I wouldn't say that, Colonel." She paused for a suggestive smile and a significant glance at Han, who was crouching next to one of the landing gear, peering suspiciously up into the housing. "I think I got one or two things done."

Degoran stared at her while Rieekan covered a grin with a cough. Leia shouldered her bag and strode off across the hangar.

end

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