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Committed Part 2

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

Solo lowered himself into his pilot's seat, rested the hydrospanner on the control panel, and dropped his head into his hands. His jaw clenched against the shudder that tripped through his body. He had nearly opened fire on Lando, and he had no idea why.

The incident replayed in his mind, as vibrant as if it was happening in front of him again. Despite being absorbed in the speed draw drill, he remembered recognising Lando as soon as he had spun around, and yet he had still aimed the blaster at him. It was as if Calrissian had morphed into all the adversaries who had ever threatened or hurt the Corellian, but at the same time he had also known it was only Lando he was targeting.

He swallowed away the bile that surged up his throat. What the hell is wrong with me? He had come so close to pulling the trigger...

His fist smashed wildly against the bulkhead by his side, the anger overwhelming his self-disgust. Pain dragged him to his senses and back to what now passed as normality for him. Rubbing his aching hand, he winced and paused to look out at the busy hangar. The distance between himself and the organised teams of Rebels out there seemed overwhelmingly vast.

Maybe that was what he needed to do. He'd been seriously considering it as an option since he'd returned to the fleet. Taking that final step and actually enlisting had been enough to make him stop and wonder if he really wanted to do this, or if it was a reaction to having been rescued by friends who themselves were

Rebels. For a loner steeped in relying only upon himself and the loyalty of a Wookiee, that final step had seemed insurmountable.

The Rebels were a good bunch of people. Tenacious and resourceful, they stood for, and believed in, everything the Empire abhorred, defiled and destroyed. Why shouldn't he join them? Knowing that even Lando had joined the Rebellion only added to the equation. Besides, what difference would it make? He could enter this battle as a card-carrying Rebel and contribute to the result, or he could hide on board the cruiser in the same guise he had started his association with the Alliance - as a selfish, self-preserving mercenary. One way or the other, within a matter of days it could all be over for him anyway.

And then, most importantly, there was the princess. Leia. She had been trying to recruit him since Yavin. He had resisted the whole way, partly, he now admitted, because she was so passionate about his failure to commit. But that was before they had commenced an intimate relationship. Since his rescue however, she had been particularly silent on the issue. Apart from curtailing his plans to fly in the battle, she hadn't even asked him what his intentions were towards the Alliance.

He wasn't certain what this meant, if anything. Was she giving him time and space to decide what he wanted to do? Was she hesitant to ask him lest he tell her something she didn't want to hear? Or did she simply expect that he would follow her, wherever she went?

The strange thing was, he was prepared to follow her. To be there for her. To ignore the instincts that screamed for him to haul jets and get the hell out. If he joined the Rebellion, willingly and voluntarily, it would be a physical display of his commitment to her and all she believed in.

Commitment. There was a concept that used to scare the shit out of him. Now though, it was a different matter. Leia had revealed her devotion and loyalty by sacrificing her status within the Alliance in order to save him. And deep in his heart, he knew he was firmly committed to her. Why not take that final step and commit to all that she believed in?

Solo looked down and noticed that his hand had stopped shaking. He knew what he needed to do.

Rieekan indicated the chair in front of his desk, and Solo took a seat. The general hitched himself up on the corner of the desk and regarded the smuggler curiously. This was definitely unexpected. Solo had appeared in the Command Centre unannounced, had not stopped to talk to the princess, and had then

requested to speak with the Alderaani general. Noting the urgency and solemnity in Solo's eyes, Rieekan had conceded, despite his own pressing deadlines.

"What's on your mind, Solo?"

The smuggler spoke without a moment's hesitation. "That stuff you said before, about appreciating my capabilities and experience..." When Rieekan failed to comment, Solo seemed to lose momentum. "I was - uh - I was wondering if I might be able to give you a hand."

Rieekan's face was stoical. "We've always appreciated your services in the past. But I doubt we could afford to pay the type of fee you'd be after for this one."

The general's response was unexpected, and Solo found himself slipping into his old negotiating parlance. "Try me."

Rieekan sighed and nodded to himself. Now, this is what he had expected. He folded his arms across his chest. "There is no fee this time, Solo. In fact, we've asked all the independents to officially join the Alliance or leave."

"No one's asked me."

The general's head tilted quizzically. Was the Corellian smuggler actually offering to enlist? "Not even the princess?"

Solo returned the general's steady gaze. "Not even her."

"Perhaps she knew what your answer would be."

"And what if I said 'yes'?"

Rieekan uncrossed his arms but remained silent, compelling the smuggler to continue.

"I wanna join the Rebellion," Solo said. He swallowed and added, "In an official capacity." Rieekan's fingers tapped against the edge of the desk. "You don't have to do this, son. We all know what you've been through. No one will think less of you if you remain on board the Command-" "I'm not hiding on some cruiser," the Corellian insisted darkly. He tempered his tone when Rieekan raised an eyebrow. "I can contribute as much as anyone."

The general pressed his lips together. He'd been waiting to hear these sentiments from Solo for the last four years, and just when he'd heard them, he wasn't entirely convinced the Corellian was up to the task. He had no proof that Solo wasn't fit to serve; it was more a supposition based on what he imagined Solo had endured while imprisoned in carbonite.

"I appreciate your offer," Rieekan began, "but-

Solo sneered, "Thanks, but no thanks, right?"

"No, that's not right." Rieekan smiled at Solo's frown. "I won't patronise you. I won't even try to guess at what you've experienced or how you may have been affected." Solo averted his gaze. "But I do need to know that I can rely on you when things get tough."

The Corellian's eyes returned to the general. "You can."

"I want the okay from the med centre before taking you on," Rieekan explained. "I need that assurance, if only to appease Leia that I didn't talk you into this."

"She'll understand," Solo told him, adding to himself, I hope she understands.

"I hope she understands, too," Rieekan agreed.

Solo sat back in the chair, suddenly aware of what he had just committed himself to. It surprised him that the overwhelming emotion he now felt was fulfilment. Then he wondered if after volunteering to join, he might be able to request a position that would allow him to remain on the Home One, to be near Leia. After all, he had promised he would stay with her. The least he could do, in addition to proving his commitment, was to attempt to maintain his pledge. He was also fairly certain Rieekan wouldn't submit him to the discomfort of flying under Lando's command. That would certainly see him resign his commission before the rank clasps even hit his collar.

"Do you have any idea about where you might assign me?"

Rieekan's smile was wry. This might be the opportunity he was looking for. Crix Madine, one of Solo's compatriots, was slated to lead the commando operation against the shield generator located on the Endor moon. But the Rebellion also needed qualified flag officers with battle experience who were capable of commanding cruisers and frigates. If he could replace Madine with Solo, that would be one less ship's captain position he needed to worry about. And Solo had already proven himself capable of undertaking guerrilla operations in the past, albeit for a very hefty fee. Rieekan would also not be surprised if he ended up with additional operatives for this mission once the princess and the Wookiee found out that Solo was in command. Granted, he may have trouble convincing the High Command to allow Leia to go, but if that was what she wanted, he would certainly back her desire. Three for the 'price' of one!

"First you get the okay from the doc," Rieekan told him, "then we'll talk. But don't worry, I'll place you in a position that will fully utilise your particular talents and ensure you don't wreak too much havoc. At least not on the Alliance, anyway."

Rieekan slid from the desk as Solo rose to his feet, extended his arm and shook the smuggler's hand. "Welcome aboard, son." Solo's mouth twisted with slight embarrassment. "I'm looking forward to hearing some good news from the med centre, too."

"I'm on my way now."

As they moved towards the opening hatchway, Rieekan placed a friendly hand on Solo's shoulder. "Tell whoever's on duty, I'll take a verbal report over the line."

"Yes, sir."

Rieekan paused for a moment, then openly chuckled. "It means a lot hearing you call me that, Han." He clasped Solo's hand again and met the younger man's eyes. "It's good to have you on our side."

Feeling slightly light-headed, Solo strode down the corridor of the cruiser, trailing in the furious wake of General Madine. The taller Solo could easily have kept pace with the blond Corellian general, however for once he thought it wiser to give Madine some space rather than antagonise him. Especially as Solo knew he was the cause of Madine's foul mood.

The fair face was ruddy, flushed with self-righteous anger, and his fists were clenched at his sides. Crix Madine was livid, and he didn't care who knew it, especially the smuggler behind him. In his eyes, Rieekan had betrayed him, and Madine suspected it was because the Alderaani still had issues with his Imperial origins.

When planning had begun for the offensive against the Empire's second Death Star, it was Madine who had designed the operations to disable the generator that provided the battle station's protective energy shield. With an extensive background in the Empire's elite Special Forces, he was the most experienced covert operative in the Rebellion. There had been no question that he would command the task force that would strike against the shield generator.

It was Madine who had individually selected and trained the members of the task force. He had orchestrated the capture of the shuttle that would be used to infiltrate Imperial defences and land the team on Endor. The Supreme Commander of the Alliance, Mon Mothma, had personally congratulated him on his ingenuity and the comprehensive preparations. And then Rieekan - that puffed up, pompous Alderaani - had stripped him of the role and glory, and handed it to Solo. As if things weren't ludicrous enough, Rieekan had also commissioned Solo as a general!

It occurred to Madine that Rieekan had only given that rank to Solo to provide him with a level of sorely needed respectability. Madine was aware that Rieekan had a deep affection for Princess Leia. With the princess now 'consorting' with the smuggler, Rieekan obviously felt obliged to prop up Solo to a status that was more worthy of her.

Whatever the reason, Madine didn't have to like it or agree with it. He had never believed in field promotions; a smuggler now wearing general's pips only vindicated this conviction. And although Solo had once been an Imperial pilot, he had only risen to the lowly rank of lieutenant before receiving the inevitable dishonourable discharge.

Commissioning Solo into Alliance forces was a laugh; commissioning him as a general, was an absolute joke. But the joke had landed squarely on Madine when Rieekan had replaced one Corellian general with the other. Rieekan had done his homework, all right. There was the logical reasoning that Madine had previous experience commanding a frigate, and they were desperately short of battle-hardened ship's captains. Solo had previously proven he was capable of leading low-level, ground-based ops. Thanks to his criminal background, Madine surmised. It made sense. Yet Madine still didn't have to like it.

He had already broken the news to the members of his team, and although it wasn't the usual professional image he liked to project, he had let his displeasure be known. And then in a final act of spite, he had re-assigned the soldiers who formed the shuttle's command crew so that they would accompany him on his transfer to the frigate. That had been part of his agreement with Rieekan. He would abide by Rieekan's decision, providing he took the command crew with him. Rieekan had given in surprisingly easily. So easy, in fact, Madine suspected he already had a new command crew in mind. And still Madine didn't like it...

Madine glanced behind to see if Solo was following him. The smuggler was quiet, the ridiculous lopsided grin absent from his face. Madine wondered how much the carbonite experience had affected him. Solo's face revealed nothing. If anything, he looked casually relaxed, though his pupils did seem unusually dilated.

Well, things will hot up for you soon, Solo, Madine thought. He was about to introduce Solo to the members of the task force. Madine had no intentions of graciously handing over to Solo and providing him with a comprehensive briefing. The younger Corellian would have to try on the vacuum suit and see if it fit. Madine smiled to himself. It would be more accurate to describe what he was about to do Solo as opening the airlock and pushing him out, minus the suit.

Being swept along in Madine's wake, Solo switched into autopilot mode, and tried to detect the spice derivative coursing through his system. He had escaped from the med centre relatively unscathed, a packet of medication in his pocket and a

commission in his hand. He was fortunate that the doctor on duty had been Tuulavich, the same doctor who had physically examined him when he had returned to the fleet. At least it meant he didn't have to cover old ground with an unfamiliar medical practitioner.

Tuulavich had been genuinely flabbergasted when Solo had appeared at the med centre and explained that Rieekan wanted medical approval before commissioning him. And she had not been easy on the Corellian. From her prior experience with examining Solo, Tuulavich knew he could be a difficult patient who would not admit to any illness. She had also expected that he would have developed psychological problems as a result of his carbonite imprisonment, and she had frankly expressed this opinion to him.

In spite of his claims of perfect health, she had run a scanner over him to check his vitals, then advised that all seemed well from a physical perspective. He had agreed with her diagnosis, but still she had eyed him sceptically.

"So you've noticed no difference in the way you feel or behave? Or the way others act around you?" He shook his head, not wanting to mention the physical problems he was having in bed, or the depression and mood swings in case they jeopardised his commission. "No."

The doctor had seen through his claim, and had indicated his hand. "How long have you had the shakes for?"

Solo had defensively folded his arms across his chest. "It's nothing. Doesn't affect me."

Tuulavich had sighed. "Look, Solo. I won't stand in your way. You want a commission so you can fight against the Empire? I'll tell Rieekan anything you want me to. But if you're serious about getting some help, especially if you want to survive this fight, perhaps you should talk to me." He had not budged, yet something in her voice weakened his resolve. Tuulavich had then surprised him by calling up Rieekan and advising that Solo was physically and mentally fit.

When she had signed off, she had turned to Solo. "Okay, you've got your commission. Now. Tell me the truth."

He had relented as much as a man not comfortable being in med centres, or the centre of attention, could, yet still he had not told her much. He admitted to the tremble in his hand that occasionally got worse. The short-temper. The dark moods. The trouble he had sleeping. There was no mention of nightmares, the incredible self-loathing he occasionally experienced, feeling disconnected, screaming in the shower, his impotence, or the 'grey-out' that had seen him nearly kill Lando.

The doctor had listened without comment or judgement, then explained that she had limited psychological experience, however she could prescribe a medication that would relieve his anxiety and allow him to cope better under stressful situations.

"I don't do drugs," he had insisted, though not as emphatically as he had told Chewbacca.

Tuulavich had been prepared for his response. "I suspected as much. What about a spice derivative?"

Solo had swallowed and run a hand through his hair. "Not andris," he had told her. Andris may have been used in psychopharmacology, but it heavily dulled the senses and usually slipped the user into a stuporous haze. He could not afford to go into battle in a spaced out state.

Tuulavich had shaken her head. "I was thinking about a low dose of drofic."

A shiver had run up his spine and he had shifted in his seat. "And what'll that do to me?" "As I said, relieve the anxiety. Relax you, but still allow you to focus and concentrate. It should also ease that nervous twitch in your hand."

His instincts screamed at him to say no. To leave the med centre and continue to put up with whatever plagued him, knowing that spice could only cause him trouble. After all, Tuulavich had already assured him a commission; he didn't need any further help from her. But there was also a part of him that thought differently, knew better. A part that recognised that he needed help if he was going to survive. And he most definitely wanted to survive. Needed to survive. Needed to be there for Leia. To spend the rest of his life with her.

Solo had left the med centre with the spice capsules in his jacket pocket, and having already taken one under the watchful eye of the doctor. The medication worked fast. By the time he arrived back at Rieekan's office, the tension had left his skull and shoulders and he was starting to feel more like his old self.

Rieekan had welcomed him back by shaking his hand in congratulations. "Welcome back, General Solo."

"You're kidding," Solo had quipped. "Who died and made me general?"

Rieekan had appreciated his wit. "I need you to lead a special mission; command a strike force, in fact. And as the current commander you'll be replacing is a general, to show that I'm deadly serious about this mission and that I have confidence in your capabilities, I need to give you a commensurate rank."

Solo's eyebrows had raised in disbelief. "You sure you wanna make me a general, though? No-one's gonna wear that."

"You undersell, yourself, Han. There's many a soldier who would gladly follow you to war, and many that already have. In my opinion, that's the mark of a real leader, not how many years you've served or how many staff college courses you've attended. It's whether you have the skills to get the job done, and can inspire the troops to follow and emulate you."

Solo had almost cringed under the praise. "But a general? I'm too young to be a general."

"I made Calrissian a general."

That had changed everything. "You made Calrissian a general?"

Rieekan had smiled smugly. "I made Calrissian a general."

The crooked grin slipped up the smuggler's face. "Well, then. I'm sure I can stomach being a general, as well." At least for a short time. No doubt the commission would be rescinded if the Rebels won. And if they lost...it wouldn't make any difference anyway.

"Who will I be replacing?" Solo had asked.

The Alderaani had given him an enigmatic look. "A friend of yours. Compatriot."

"Madine."

Rieekan had nodded. "Is that going to be a problem?"

The two Corellians had never liked one another. Madine's disdain for Solo was founded in his belief that the younger man had thrown away a potentially successful career with the Imperial Navy, to then slip to the depths of smuggling. Solo didn't like the general, mainly because he knew that Madine didn't like him.

The roguish glint in Solo's eyes returned. "Not any more."

Before Rieekan had headed off to discuss the new arrangements with Madine, he had set the Corellian up at a vacant workstation that Solo recognised as being Leia's. Rieekan had explained that Mon Mothma's shuttle had recently docked and Leia had been required to attend to the Supreme Commander and other members of the Alliance High Command. A shame really, because there were so many things that had happened in to him the last hour that Solo really wanted to share with her. He had considered calling her, or leaving a voice message on her comlink, but preferred the idea of telling her in person. Instead he turned his

attention to the operational plans and orders and the intelligence estimates that Rieekan had provided to him, knowing that he had a lot of work to catch up on if he was going to be adequately prepared for the mission.

It had been nearly forty minutes before Rieekan returned with Madine, which made Solo suspect that Madine had not given in easily or graciously, and from the red tide that rose up around the blond man's collar, Solo's suspicions were confirmed. There had been no niceties between the two Corellian generals as Madine had sized up the younger man, but neither had there been any hostility or sarcasm from Solo. Han suspected the spice had mellowed out his attitude.

Now, as he followed Madine to the storage hold that the strike force had commandeered as their section HQ, Solo found himself studying Madine's uniform and wondering what he would look like in one. Solo was no fashion victim. He knew what he liked and what was comfortable, which was why his wardrobe did not extend much past military cut trousers, spacer vests and jackets, and an assortment of shirts. But he did know that the fawn and blue coloured uniforms these Rebels wore was truly hideous, and made them look like an ill-trained bunch of counter-revolutionaries from some backwater system. Right there, General Solo resolved that he would not wear a uniform until the Alliance adopted something along the lines of the dark blue uniforms of the former Corellian Defence Force.

Solo mentally shook his head. Already making plans for 'afterwards'? he chided himself. He knew he would be lucky if he only died a quick death. And that fashion critique he had just provided on the Alliance uniforms...? Had the drofic dredged that one up from his psyche?

Madine came to a hatchway, keyed it open and headed through without explanation. Solo was still a few meters behind, but he heard the bark that called Madine's team to attention. He entered through the hatch in time to see ten soldiers forming up smartly in the centre of the hold and snapping to attention. Madine eyes were cold and hard as he sauntered down the line of soldiers - male and female, humans, near-humans and a felinoid of some species. When he came to the end, he pivoted on his toe and returned back towards Solo. Madine stared at Han as he gestured at the soldiers.

"Here you go, Solo," Madine told him. "They're all yours."

Solo glanced at his troops, then back at the shorter general. "This is all of them?"

Madine's mouth twisted into a nasty smile. "The command crew have already been re-assigned. But don't worry." He looked at his chrono. "You've still got 46 hours to come up with replacements."

Solo unconsciously mimicked Madine's actions, and checked out his own chrono. The thought of having to find a new command team in less than two days did not overly concern him. He could always get Wedge or some of the other Rogue Squadron pilots. Or even Chewie, providing the Wookiee was still talking to him; Han hadn't spoken to his friend since the disagreement they'd had yesterday. With any luck, Luke would be back shortly and Solo would have the chance to ask the young Jedi to be part of the crew.

And then there was Leia. Since the time of her rescue from the first Death Star, the princess had proven that she was a capable of undertaking low-level ops. Solo had dodged significant blaster fire and shared many a combat ration with the diminutive princess throughout the operations they had been on over the ensuing four years. He knew that if he asked her, she would follow him willingly.

But as much as he wanted to go on this mission with Leia at his side, he knew it would be safer for her to remain on the Home One. It occurred to him that if he didn't want to argue with her over his resolve not to allow her in the command crew, it would be wiser not to tell her about either the mission or his commissioning until the last possible moment. He recognised this decision could cost him, not only because he had specifically sought out a commission to prove his commitment to the princess, but because it was possible she would love him less once she found out he had hidden it from her.

Without further word or instruction, Madine brushed past Solo and left him alone with his team. Solo stared at the hatchway as it closed behind Madine, momentarily lost in thought. He listened to the steady rhythm of his breathing, ensured his hand was not trembling, then turned back to the squad.

"Relax, guys," Solo suggested.

Ten pairs of eyes glanced curiously towards their new commander, yet they remained steadfastly at attention.

Solo tried again. "At ease."

With precision timing, their legs widened to the formal 'at ease' position, arms bent and tucked smartly behind their backs. I hope Madine taught them more than just great drill, Solo thought bleakly.

He moved to the centre of the line, quickly assimilating the different faces and body shapes into his mind. He didn't recognise any of them, but then he had mainly mixed with squadron pilots. Outfitted in camouflaged fatigues and field boots, they were a mixture of old and young, experienced and novice. They all appeared alert and fit, and Solo didn't doubt they were healthier than he currently was.

"Okay," General Solo began, "who's in charge here?"

A middle-aged lieutenant with white blond hair and beard spoke up. "You are, sir."

Solo grinned, suspecting the man was the second-in-command. "Good answer. And you are?"

"Perron, sir. Jax Perron."

"You the 2IC?"

"Yes, sir."

Solo felt the urge to cover his ears. Instead, he shook his head. "Listen up. I don't want to repeat this." He met the eyes of his soldiers. "My name is Solo. Han Solo. You can call me either. Or if you can't handle that, then 'General' will be fine. But not too many 'sirs', all right? They'll give me a rash."

His first directive to the squad only seemed to confuse them; frowns rippled across their foreheads and a few of them exchanged disconcerted glances.

General Solo continued. "You may be accustomed to the Madine School of Management and Discipline, but you'll have to get used to the way I operate real quick. I'm sure you can handle that. You're all flexible and adaptable, otherwise you wouldn't have been assigned to this strike force in the first place."

There were murmurs of assent.

"And you're probably wondering how we're getting where we're going now that our command crew has disappeared on us."

A corporal, perhaps around Luke's age, spoke up. "We have been wondering about that, sir... er, Han... er, General."

The young woman blushed at her error, and Han gave her a brilliant smile in return, increasing the flush across her cheeks.

"Pick one and stick with it," he kindly suggested.

This time, the corporal's response was not as bold. "Yes, General."

Solo raised an eyebrow and continued. "I don't want you worrying about where the command crew is coming from. That's my concern, and my job to solve. You guys have other things to contend with, all right?" He sighed at the chorus of 'Yes, sirs'. "I've got a lotta work to do if I want to catch up with the rest of you. So

I'd appreciate all the help you can give me." There was another round of 'Yes, sirs' and Solo rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You're doing it on purpose now, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir!" the soldiers yelled out in unison.

Solo shook his head in resignation and met the gaze of Lieutenant Perron. The elder man shrugged his shoulders and smiled unabashedly. Han nodded and matched the smile with his own lopsided version. So far, so good, he considered. This 'general stuff' might work out, after all.

"Okay, Perron," Solo conceded. "You wanna give me a briefing. Or are you gonna punish me some more?"

Han tilted his head back and enjoyed the sensation of warm water streaming down his body. Having a real water shower installed into the Falcon's refresher was one of the small luxuries he had allowed himself, and each time he used it, he congratulated himself on his acumen. Except, he was certain he hadn't been thinking about much of anything when Chewbacca had found him screaming in the shower yesterday. Even now, just recalling the incident caused him to cringe with embarrassment. He had no idea what had come over him.

Lathering the liquid cleanser across his chest and arms, he noticed the slight quiver had returned to his hand. So the doc was about right, he thought. The calming effects of the spice appeared to last 10 hours or so. Despite the dosage advice from the doctor, he wondered if he really needed to take another capsule. Apart from the tremble in his hand, he didn't feel as disjointed now as he had previously, nor as moody. Admittedly, he was tired, though he recognised that as a result of preparing for the mission, not the energy-sapping fatigue that had eaten at his bones for the last five days.

He still had no command crew. There hadn't been time to approach any likely contenders, and if he was truthful about it, he was partly hoping Chewie and Luke would sign on. He had also been unable to contact Leia. He'd left a few messages on her comlink, but as she hadn't returned them, he assumed that the Supreme Commander must have her hopping. As there were only two sleep cycles left before he was due to depart with the strike force, the last thing he wanted to do was spend a night on his own but there seemed no way around that. At the least he hoped he'd be able to catch up with Leia prior to the first briefing session tomorrow.

The hatch to the refresher suddenly opened and Chewbacca appeared at the threshold.

[Han?] The Wookiee's growl was inquiring, not threatening, and there was a hesitancy in his stance. [Are you all right?]

Solo wiped the beads of water from the transparent door so that he could better see his friend. He didn't blame Chewbacca for interrupting his shower; knowing the way the Corellian had been behaving lately, the Wookiee was within his rights to be concerned.

"I'm okay," Solo assured him, a self-consciousness turning the corner of his mouth. "Don't worry. I have no intentions of drowning myself."

Chewbacca chuckled weakly. For a moment, an uncomfortable silence descended over them, then Chewbacca turned to go, only stopping when Han called his name.

"Chewie." Solo didn't quite know what he wanted to say, only that he owed his friend an apology for the way he had spoken to him, and was grateful that the Wookiee cared about him. Words seemed totally inadequate, and besides which, Solo was never very good at choosing the right ones to use at the right moment. He accepted the only word that came to mind. "Thanks."

Chewbacca nodded briefly in acknowledgment, then the hatch cycled shut behind him.

Solo finished his shower, combed his hair, then shaved. Although he normally didn't shave before bed, he was intent on testing the extent of the trembling in his hand as he moved the shaver across his face. By the time he finished, a spark of anger had ignited in the back of his mind and the trembling has increased. Telling himself that he didn't need any more medication, he padded back to his cabin on bare feet and settled into his bunk. The muscles in his shoulders tightened as he rested his head on the pillow. Painfully aware of Leia's absence from his side, a dullness ached in his chest. His annoyance with his reaction escalated. Relax, he growled at himself, grinding his teeth together. You need all the sleep you can get. Lots of things to do tomorrow.

Ignoring the thumping pulse in his ears, Solo closed his eyes. An asphyxiating grip immediately clamped around his throat and chest. He struggled into an upright position and turned on the lights, unconsciously gasping with the effort. He swore at himself and smashed a fist against his forehead, then yelled at himself again for over reacting. Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! He pressed his hands against his face and tried hard to control his breathing. You're losing it again, Solo.

With one furious swipe of his hand, he pulled the covers off and rose to his feet. Okay, you win, he snarled internally, snatching up his jacket. He removed the pack of medication from a pocket, pushed a capsule from its protective seal and

swallowed it dry. When there was no immediate relief, he swallowed another one, then sat on the edge of his bunk and waited for the anger and anxiety to subside. The medication slowly seeped into his system, calming his racing heart and easing the tension in his muscles. Within ten minutes he was relaxed enough to wonder if perhaps he shouldn't have had two capsules. He was not sure how the extra dose would affect him. He supposed it was possible to be too relaxed and serene. Oh well, he thought mellowly. Too late. At worst, he suspected it would be a little like being drunk.

Solo closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose, relishing the feeling of relaxation and well being, and speculating why he hadn't used spice for such a long time. The uncharacteristic thought jolted him back on course. Careful, he told himself, that's the spice thinking. Accept it for what it is, but remember what it can turn you into. He realised he was probably being over cautious. Drofic was a very subtle spice that wasn't worth the effort for serious spice users, and as the medication he was on was only a derivative of drofic, he knew he didn't really have anything to worry about. The anti-spicer in him was wary nonetheless.

Looking down at the rumpled sheets and covers, Solo decided he had no desire to sleep in his bunk without Leia. She may still be working late, but he knew the code to her suite. There was no reason why he couldn't head back to her cabin and wait for her to return. Besides, just being in her bed may offer him enough comfort to get some sleep.

He dressed quickly, choosing something that would also do for the brief tomorrow, stuffed the medication in a vest pocket as an afterthought, and left his cabin. In his hurry to get to Leia's suite, he almost bumped into Chewbacca in the narrow corridor.

[Hey there,] Chewbacca steadied him with a gentle paw. [What's the rush?]

"Chewie!" Solo blurted out. "Ah, no rush. No rush at all. Just wanna get somewhere fast."

[Where are you going?]

Solo winked and smiled happily. "Leia's place. Gotta date with a princess." He blew the smile into a long sigh.

The Wookiee studied Solo carefully, noticed the brightness in his eyes and the redness in his cheeks. Chewbacca suspected it was more than the blood-rush of lust driving Solo on, but there was no smell of alcohol either on Solo's breath or emanating from his pores. He hadn't seen his friend this happy since the flight to Bespin, or more precisely, once Solo and the princess had started mating.

[Are you on something?] Chewbacca asked suspiciously.

Solo's smile became amusingly dreamy. "Only love, my friend. Only love."

Chewbacca's laughter echoed down the corridor and he fondly ruffled Solo's hair. The laughter ceased as Solo clasped a hand onto the Wookiee's arm and looked at him seriously.

Solo asked, "Are you coming to the briefings tomorrow?"

Chewbacca shrugged. [I had no intention. There is enough work to keep me busy without wasting my time on briefings and meetings.] He cocked his head at the Corellian. [Why? Do you still intend flying in the battle?]

Solo shook his head and explained, "I promised Leia I wouldn't. I bet you had something to do with that, right?" The hair on Chewbacca's forehead shifted in imitation of raising an eyebrow, but he said nothing. "Come to the briefings," Solo continued. "There's something I need to tell you and ask you, but I can't do it until then." Because if Chewbacca didn't believe that he was fit to lead the mission against the shield generator, he was afraid the Wookiee would ensure that the princess talked him out of it as well. And then how could he show his commitment to Leia?

Chewbacca nodded in agreement. "I'll be there."

Solo grinned his appreciation, then his face became solemn again. "What I said about your Life Debt-

[Already forgiven,] Chewbacca assured him. [And forgotten.]

Solo clasped the Wookiee's arm again and received another ruffling of his hair for his troubles. They parted without another word. Solo had only travelled a few steps before Chewbacca called out to him, [Give the princess a kiss from me!]

"In your dreams!" Solo replied flippantly.

The Han Solo who ambled up to Princess Leia's suite was perhaps the most relaxed member of the crew. He nodded agreeably at the people he passed, occasionally grinning at the responses he received. He wasn't worried by the knowledge that in one and a half Standard days he would lead a strike force upon which the survival of the Alliance depended. And it didn't concern him that he still hadn't found a command crew for the shuttle. When he reached Leia's cabin, he was even humming a jaunty tune to himself. Hiding a smug smile and trying to smooth out his Wookiee-ruffled hair, he keyed in the code and let himself in.

Leia was sitting cross-legged on her bunk, head tilted to one side, running a brush in long strokes through her hair. At his unexpected entrance, Leia sat upright and smiled brightly at him. "I was just thinking about you," she beamed.

Solo closed the hatch behind him, moved further into the room and towards her. "Good thoughts, I hope."

"Always good," she grinned. "Well, some are wicked, but then you have corrupted me." Solo leaned down and kissed her, his lips softly nibbling at hers. Their mouths parted but he rested his forehead against hers in an intimate gesture that was quickly becoming their way of showing affection.

With his head still pressed to hers, he sat down on the bed and whispered, "Hi."

"Hi yourself."

He pulled away from her slightly so he could better see her face. "Busy day?" She sighed and nodded. "Did you get my messages?"

Her expression was marred by guilt. "I'm sorry. I only just noticed them when I got in. I didn't call you because I didn't think you'd be awake."

His smile was self-deprecating. "I haven't slept for the last five nights. Why would I start now?"

Leia looked at him inquisitively. There had been no rage or self-loathing in his remark, only a simple honesty. His demeanour was almost jovial.

"Sorry." Leia pushed her hair back and off her shoulders. "It's just been a terrible day."

He leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "'S'okay."

Han stared at her intently. The white undershirt she wore was most definitely his; it hung loosely on her shoulders, revealing the smooth curve of breast when she moved her arms. Tucked up under the tail of the shirt, she wore a pair of his hip-and-thigh-hugging shorts, and on her feet, the thick white spacer socks also looked familiar. There was a fragrance to her skin, suggesting she had just had a 'fresher, and her hair shone in the cabin's bright, recessed lights. Damn, she is beautiful, he thought. What in the stars does she see in me?

There was a gentle stirring in his loins, but he quickly disregarded any idea of attempting to make love to this beautiful woman. Not after all his previous failures. He was in too good a mood to want to ruin it. Tonight it would be enough just to be with her, to touch her, to love her and know that she loved him.

"Start wearing my clothes, Princess, and people are gonna think there's something going on between us."

She shivered as his voice reverberated throughout her. "Something is going on between us."

"Oh. I thought it was just my vivid imagination." He winked at her and she blushed a very attractive shade of pink. When she met his eyes again, he indicated her attire with a tilt of his chin. "When did you do an alpha strike on my closet?"

Leia's head dipped forward and the brightness in her eyes dulled. "It was the only way I used to be able to get to sleep without you."

Her admission crashed inside his stomach, and he smiled at her sadly. If the last year had been a nightmare for him, it must have been a living hell for her. She deserved better than this, better than him, better than he could offer. And he didn't know where to start with giving her what she deserved. He had sought out a commission to demonstrate his commitment to her, and yet he couldn't tell her about it in case she tried to curtail his mission or insisted upon accompanying him. And how would she react once she did find out, especially as his commitment to her meant he had to leave her again?

"I'm here now," he promised, raising her hand to his lips and kissing it.

Leia noticeably brightened. "I know, I know." She cradled his cheek in her hand and he pressed a kiss into her palm. "And I know how lucky I am."

He reached towards her hair and trailed his fingers through it. "And I know how lucky I am," he agreed.

A smile lit her face as the adrenaline rushed through her body. Right now, Leia couldn't think of anything better than making love to this wonderful, sensual man. She ached to feel the warmth of his skin against her own, to lie beneath his strong body and join with him again, like they last had on Bespin. And maybe if she loved him enough, she could help cure what ailed him.

Solo seemed suddenly fascinated with her hair, opening his hand and running his fingers through it as if he was catching a stream of water in his palm. Tenderly watching him, she saw the innocence and vulnerability in his face and re-considered her ideas of seducing him. His failure last night - just one more in a line of them - had totally shattered him. She had witnessed the shadows that marred his mind, the depths that he had sunk to, and it had frightened her. Looking at him now, smiling and behaving more like his old self, it was difficult to believe this was the same man. She would wait for him, she decided. Wait until he was confident enough to try again. She wouldn't rush him into it.

Han unexpectedly rose from the bed, undid his holster's tie-down strap and released the gun-rig from his hips. Leia's mouth opened, but was silent as she watched him remove his boots and trousers, then his vest and shirt. He placed his clothes across the desk and chair, and met her curious gaze. Standing next to the bunk, hair ruffled, dressed only in his socks and shorts, he made an interesting sight. An interesting, arousing sight.

"Thought I'd join you," he explained, sitting on the bed behind her. "Sorry I don't have a shirt to match yours. Someone stole all of mine."

Giggling, Leia tried to turn to face him, but he gently pushed her shoulders so that her back remained towards him. He scooted forward on his rump, stretched his legs out on either side of her and adjusted her position so that she was sitting between his thighs. He took the brush from her lap, spread her hair across her shoulders and commenced brushing it in long strokes.

"I've always wanted to do this," he told her.

She smiled at his admission and rested her hands on his thighs. He started humming as he brushed her hair, singing the occasional word, and she marvelled at the wonderful change in his mood compared with last night. Unfortunately for her, as happy as he was, she knew he wasn't aroused; she hadn't seen any telltale sign through his shorts, nor could she feel any indication pushing into her lower back or hip.

The warmth radiating from him was invigorating, and the touch of his hands and body... Leia knew she needed something innocuous to talk about if she was going to tame the fantasies dancing through her mind.

Leia cleared her throat. "What did you see Rieekan about today?"

Han didn't miss a beat. "He wanted my opinion on a few aspects of the ops plans." Which wasn't that far from the truth. "And if he keeps this up, I may have to start charging him. Possibly by the word."

The playful swat she gave to his leg became a loving caress of his thigh. She couldn't touch him enough.

"And what else did you get up to while I was enjoying myself with the High Command?"

Han stopped brushing her hair. "I went to the med centre. To see Tuulavich."

Leia held her breath. He actually went to the med centre? Why would he have done that willingly? Unless... She wanted to turn around to face him, but something stopped her. Perhaps, she realised, because that something scared

her. She was almost afraid there would be a change in his hazel eyes. A sickness. Evidence that he had changed for the worse.

"Oh?" The quiver in her voice was obvious. "W-what did s-she say?"

"It's not that bad."

"I-I didn't-"

He chuckled. "You didn't have to."

Pulling the hair away from her ear, he gave it a quick nibble, but the gesture only disconcerted her more. She tensed and he noticed her reaction. "Leia-"

"What did the doctor say?" she insisted.

Solo grinned and prodded her shoulder in gentle rebuke. She really was worried about him.

"Relax, will ya?" He shook his head. "The doc didn't say I needed to be committed, all right?" He pursed his lips and returned to brushing her hair. "She just gave me something to get my head together."

The princess didn't appreciate his casualness and she still found it difficult to face him.

Although she had originally wanted him to get help, she didn't want to imagine how any type of heavy medication might affect him. Especially when she knew how much he loathed drugs. "What sort-"

"A derivative of drofic." He understood why she was asking this level of detail. "Mild spice. Low dose. Not overly addictive. Okay?"

Leia nodded, but she had one more question to ask. "And is it working?"

Han's laugh was incredulous. "You haven't noticed? I feel great!" He placed his arm around her body and held his hand up to her face. "Look."

His hand was rock steady, fingers still and relaxed. The princess twisted her shoulders around and met his wonderful, lopsided grin. His eyes were wide, the black of the pupils nearly subsuming the hazel. She smiled at him, delighted to see him so happy. Then he actually giggled and she couldn't help but laugh with him.

"You're high!" she accused, spinning around on her bottom to face him. His head shook in solemn denial and she pushed at his chest. "Yes you are!"

He covered his mouth with flat fingers and raised his eyebrows. "Maybe." His face cracked into a grin and he chuckled again. "Think I had too much."

As he normally didn't take spice or chemical stimulants, Leia had never seen him in this state before; a little drunk, maybe, but never high on drugs.

"Is that a concern?" she wondered.

"It's only drofic," he reassured her. "Should wear off in a few hours." He was still grinning like an idiot, delighting in her concern for him. "Thought I'd just enjoy it while it lasts." Unable to maintain her disquiet while he was laughing, she pushed at him again. "And at my expense, it seems."

His face dropped and he tried to be serious for a moment. "Naaaah." But at the sight of her bemused look, his laughter broke through again and he took her hand. "Come and join me. The water's fine."

The invitation was too tempting, especially considering the dark mood he'd been in lately. Leia's fingers darted towards his bare ribs, and she started tickling him. His chuckle gathered strength; he wasn't particularly ticklish, but her attempt was both amusing and endearing.

The princess knew he was more likely laughing at her than because of her. His laughter was contagious and she joined in as her hands moved up his chest and under his arm. She shrieked when he unexpectedly fell backwards and dragged her with him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, while she mercilessly attacked his ribs and armpits again. She was laughing so hard herself that it took her some time to realise he had stopped.

Wondering what was wrong, she pushed herself up on his chest to look at his face. His eyes were closed and a satisfied smile curved his lips. He tugged on her hair, encouraging her down until he pushed her head against his torso. Leia complied with his desire to simply hold her. She pressed her hips against his stomach, tucked her face between his shoulder and chest, and relaxed with him. He sighed contentedly, and she leaned forward to kiss his neck.

They quietened and held each other, their senses awash with the other's presence. Leia's eyes closed and she listened to his breathing settle into a steady rhythm, his heart beating beneath her hand that lay against his chest. Before long, she realised he was asleep. Soundly and blissfully. She held him for a while longer, waiting for the inevitable nightmares, and when they failed to eventuate, she carefully reached across him and pushed the remote switch for the lights. Leia snuggled back into her lover, to hold him and watch over him while he slept.

From a distance of ten light years, the Sullustan primary was a distant speck of light, a dust mote in a seething mass of starships. Alliance factions previously spread throughout the galaxy were now merging and multiplying, convening here on the outer edge of the system before launching one final attack against the Empire and its planet-crushing Death Star. Home One, an immense Mon Calamari cruiser and the Rebel command ship, dwarfed the frigates and escorts as it lumbered through the Rebel fleet. Smaller snub fighters soared over the hull of the cruiser, dogging the mechanical leviathan like a school of suckerfish.

The Home One's central briefing theatre hummed with noise and activity. The theatre's stepped, circular layout had not originally been designed to house a council of war, and so the Rebels who had gathered here had to weave and push their way past each other as they waited for the briefing session to commence.

Han Solo stood to one side of the entrance, leaning against the bulkhead as he tried not to get in the way, but at the same time keeping an eye out for his friend and his princess. Leia was obviously busy attending to the specific needs of the High Command, though Solo noticed that quite a few of the councillors were already here in attendance. And although Chewbacca had promised he would attend, Solo wondered if the Wookiee would be able to stomach a formal briefing session, especially with all these stiff-backed military types present. There were certainly a gaggle of high profile, high ranking senior officers here, and those who had chosen to remain on board their vessels would be tuning into the briefing as it was transmitted throughout the fleet.

A colonel brushed past him, and Solo muttered an apology for getting in the way, despite the other man's narrow-eyed glare. In order to maintain operational security about the mission against the shield generator, only a handful of Rebels knew the smuggler had been commissioned, and as Solo still chose to wear his spacer attire, he assumed he must have looked like an uninvited guest. He was grateful that the drofic had tamed his sarcastic attitude, otherwise he might have flattened a few of his new colleagues by now.

Despite the chaotic atmosphere, Solo felt amazingly calm and relaxed. He had slept a good seven hours straight before awakening when Leia had rolled from his arms. They had managed to share a quick breakfast, then he had headed off to check in with his troops while she hurried off to her own duties with the High Command. He smiled now as he recalled her astonishment when he had agreed to attend this briefing session with her. No doubt she had believed she would've had trouble convincing him to come.

Unfortunately, he still hadn't been able to scrounge up a new command crew, even if only as a backup in case Chewie refused and Luke hadn't returned in time. That was his first job once the briefing was over, he decided. Discuss with Rieekan likely contenders for the crew.

"Solo."

Han looked over his shoulder. Rieekan had unexpectedly appeared at the hatchway to a small alcove and was beckoning to him. Han glanced around, checking one more time for Chewie and Leia, then pushed himself upright and followed Rieekan into the alcove.

Solo immediately recognised the dark haired woman who stood next to Crix Madine. Mon Mothma - the Supreme Commander of the Alliance against the Empire. This stately Chandrilan woman, and former Imperial senator, was the political leader and symbol of the Rebellion. Without her direction and the guidance of the High Command, the Alliance would surely have lost its way long ago.

Rieekan ushered him towards the Supreme Commander. "Mon Mothma, may I introduce you to General Han Solo. Han is leading the strike force against the shield generator."

Solo instinctively clicked his heels together and bowed at the waist. "Ma'am." Then wondered what had caused him to react as though he was still a junior officer in the Imperial Navy.

"Solo?" Mon Mothma said his name as if recognising it from somewhere. "Ah, yes. I believe you and Commander Skywalker played a part in Princess Leia's rescue, as well as the destruction of the first Death Star." Her chin rose as she studied him for a moment, noting the lack of uniform and the slightly scruffy appearance of his hair. "A pleasure to met you, General. Yet another Corellian warrior out to fight the Empire. I wonder if it's in the blood, or in the water?"

Rieekan grinned, but Han missed the connection. He gathered that Madine appreciated the remark, for the blond general sniggered.

"Han's no Garm," Madine opined snidely.

Now he understood; the reference was to the former Corellian senator, Garm Bel Iblis, a one-time adversary of Mon Mothma and co-founder of the Alliance. Unfortunately, Solo knew, there had been some sort of disagreement or falling out between Bel Iblis and Mon Mothma, and the Corellian general had parted company with the Rebellion not long after the Battle of Yavin.

"What is your background, General?"

Madine chuckled and turned to hear what Han had to say. Solo cleared his throat, uncertain whether he should tell the truth or cover up his smuggling past. He was aware that when she was a senator, Mon Mothma had a well-known prejudice against pirates and smugglers. He seriously wondered if it would be

preferable to claim an Imperial background instead, even if that was more than 10 years ago and relatively short-lived.

He settled for the Corellian euphemism for smuggler. "I'm a free trader."

Madine guffawed loudly and Mon Mothma's eyes widened. "I see." She glanced at Rieekan, as if questioning the judgement of the Alderaani general, then looked earnestly back at Solo. "Allow me to wish you the best of luck, General."

Uncertain if he should feel offended, Han nodded once and replied, "Aah, thanks."

The Supreme Commander turned her head towards the other Command members who were conversing quietly in a corner. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I have some final matters to attend to." She took her leave from the three generals and moved across to her colleagues.

Rieekan glanced at his chrono. "We should be starting soon." The Alderaani glanced out the hatchway. "I wonder where..." He turned back to Solo. "You haven't seen Leia lately? She was supposed to sort something out for me."

Han shook his head. "Not since breakfast."

At first the response seemed not to register with Rieekan, then he straightened and met Solo's eyes. "When this is all over," Rieekan sternly suggested, "remind me that we need to sit down and chat about a few things."

Han had enough sense to keep his tongue in his head and a smile from his lips. He shrugged agreeably. "Okay."

Rieekan headed back into the theatre in search of Leia, and Solo was about to follow when Madine nudged him in the ribs. "Free trader. Smooth, Solo. Real smooth. Certainly impressed me."

Not even the drofic could contain Han's dislike for his compatriot. "Asshole," he muttered, trying to put some distance between himself and the blond general.

Madine stiffened, squared his shoulders and placed himself in the path of the taller Corellian. "Do you want to settle this here and now, smuggler?"

Solo's smile was patently forced. "Let's fight the Empire first, hey, Crix?"

The general's face lit up triumphantly. "As I thought. You need a Wookiee at your back to give you some balls?"

There was a dangerous glint in Solo's eye as his hand flexed above the butt of his blaster. His voice was void of all inflection. "Any time you can work yourself up for a little speed draw comp, give me a call."

Madine met the quiet threat with equal conviction. "Oh, I'll give you a 'call' all right, Solo. You don't have to worry about that."

Solo knew Madine was not responding literally to the offer of a duel; he was simply warning Han that he would be there at his back, constantly hounding him, until they finally did 'settle' the hatred between them. Solo pushed past Madine and headed out into the briefing theatre.

To his relief, Chewbacca had turned up. The Wookiee was standing at the top of the stadium seating, as far away from the front of the room as possible, and looking mildly uncomfortable in the crowd of smaller sentients. Chewbacca brightened when he saw Han and tromped down the steps towards him. "Glad you came," Han told him as the Wookiee fondly patted his shoulder.

[You know how much I hate these things,] Chewbacca grumbled. [I'm only here because of you. This had better be worth my while, or I'm going to be mighty pissed.]

Solo chuckled. "Gee, I'm glad I know that you like me. Otherwise, I might be offended."

Chewbacca folded his arms across his chest and looked at his friend. [You're certainly in another good mood.] His head tilted curiously. [That medication must be working.]

Solo was abashed for a moment, as if he had been caught out doing something wrong. He knew he couldn't hide much of anything from the Wookiee.

He met Chewbacca's gentle gaze. "Yeah."

[Took a little too much last night?] Chewbacca suggested, baring his teeth in a grin. Solo shrugged. "An interesting experience."

[It was certainly interesting to watch.]

"You should've seen it from my side."

Chewbacca sniggered. [I'll pass on that, thanks.] He glanced around at the milling Rebel officers. [This is a bit high level for us. Shall we sink to our rightful positions up the back?]

"Are you kidding?" Solo asked. "Leia's got a front row seat. I thought we'd join her."

Chewbacca started at Solo's uncharacteristic suggestion, his stare sliding from bewilderment to wonder.

As the Wookiee looked as though he was about to question him further, Solo added, "Wouldn't miss this for anything." Then he spied Lando across the other side of the room and tried to distract Chewbacca with Calrissian's appearance. "Would you get a load of that."

The hair prickled on the back of Solo's neck. He hadn't seen Lando - no, now it was General Calrissian - since yesterday's incident in the Falcon. It had been confirmed that Lando would be leading the fighter attack against the Death Star, something that still stuck in Solo's throat if he was honest with himself. Lando was chatting animatedly with a few pilots, Wedge, Janson, Maarker and an unfamiliar Sullustan native. And while the other pilots were attired in flying suits, Lando was dressed up in that ridiculous, antiquated Rebel uniform.

Chewbacca whuffed in amusement. [He's always been a show nerf. Now he's got the uniform to match.]

Solo's lips twisted awkwardly. "Yeah."

Calrissian became aware of their attention. He quickly excused himself from the others and headed towards the Solo and Chewbacca.

Solo couldn't keep the sarcasm from his tone. "Well. Look at you. A general."

Calrissian beamed proudly. "Someone must have told them about my little manoeuvre at the Battle of Taanab." Lando knew who that 'someone' was. Out of curiosity, he had asked Rieekan what had clinched the decision to commission him as a general and place him in command of the fighter attack. It had surprised him no end to learn that Rieekan had been swayed by Solo's opinion. Always the betting man, Calrissian would have given himself long odds of that ever happening.

"Don't look at me," Solo told him dismissively. "I just said you were a fair pilot. I didn't know they were looking for someone to lead this crazy attack."

Calrissian appraised him frankly, wanting to appear gracious in his finest hour. "I'm surprised they didn't ask you to do it."

The Corellian's smile suggested that Lando didn't know everything. "Who says they didn't, but I ain't crazy." Not any more, anyway, he added to himself. "You're the respectable one, remember."

The emphasis on the description was far from flattering, and Lando looked at Solo warily.

A chime sounded, signalling that the brief was about to commence. The Rebels hustled to their seats as Solo glanced around again, looking for Leia one more time. She still wasn't here. He shuffled the reluctant Wookiee onto a bench in the front row and took a seat next to him, noting with interest that Lando preferred to remain standing in the aisle next to Chewbacca, his arms folded across his chest.

A small form bumped against him, and he turned to find Leia sliding into the empty position next to him. She looked mildly flustered, her face coloured with exertion, but she smiled at him and squeezed his knee.

The clamour from the audience was rapidly quietening, so he spoke in hushed tones. "Hi. Thought you were gonna miss out on all the fun."

Leia's eyes glistened with gratitude. "Thanks for coming," she told him solemnly.

"The least I could do."

Her gaze moved past him towards Chewbacca. "How did you talk Chewie into it."

He gave her a lopsided grin. "With my renowned Solo charm."

"Gentles." General Rieekan commanded the attention of the audience. He took a step back. "The Supreme Commander of the Alliance against the Empire. Mon Mothma."

The Rebels rose to attention as Mon Mothma entered the theatre from the rear alcove. The other members of the High Command trailed behind her, followed by Madine and a few other military commanders. The Supreme Commander almost immediately indicated that the gathering should resume their seats, and they silently complied.

When the audience were re-seated, Mon Mothma took up a position at the centre of the briefing theatre, in front of the holographic display. Her eyes swept across the individuals in the audience, and she began her speech in that rich, refined voice she was famous for.

"The Emperor has made a critical error and the time for our attack has come."

A holographic display shimmered into life, producing a structural image of the Death Star currently under construction above the Endorian moon. For Han, at that instance it finally sunk in how momentous this gathering of Rebel factions was. This was it. This would be their last stand.

Han recalled a similar briefing that he had attended four years ago in the Massassi Temple on Yavin IV. Back then he had stood at the rear of the room, distancing himself from the Rebel pilots, and rolling his eyes at the simple tactics General Dodonna had explained. How things had changed. Here he was, in the front row of the briefing theatre, a princess by his side, his best friend on the other. And no longer a self-serving mercenary. Now he was a general, though most people here weren't aware of that, and he honestly didn't care one way or the other if they did know.

Leia unexpectedly clasped his hand, and he gave her a small half-grin. He wondered if she was thinking the same thing.

Although it was well known by everyone in the briefing theatre and those throughout the fleet watching this on broadcast, the Supreme Commander provided the background as to why the Rebel Alliance was here. Her tone was confident and inspiring, only wavering when she spoke of the losses that had occurred in order to obtain the plans to the Death Star. She handed over to Admiral Ackbar, the Calamari captain of the Home One and Commander-in-Chief of the Rebel fleet.

The admiral provided an overview of the Death Star's countermeasures. The holographic display changed to depict an energy shield being generated from Endor, enveloping the Death Star as it circled in geosynchronous orbit.

Ackbar drew a shuddering breath. "The shield must be deactivated if any attack is to be attempted." The holographic Death Star expanded on the display, dissipating the representational energy shield into a million virtual particles that fired across the theatre.

Ackbar gestured towards the image. "Once the shield is down, our cruisers will create a perimeter, while the fighters fly into the superstructure and attempt to knock out the main reactor." He nodded towards Calrissian. "General Calrissian has volunteered to lead the fighter attack Lando smiled smugly as he became the centre of attention, and his gaze moved sideways to catch Solo's reaction. Lando turned towards him when the Corellian wished him luck. His confident, almost haughty, smile quickly failed when Han snidely added, "You're gonna need it."

Solo flinched at Leia's sudden prod into his bruised hip, but he did not meet her eyes, aware that perhaps he had gone too far. Penitently, he caressed the fingers of her hand he held.

Ackbar handed over to General Rieekan. The Alderaani prefaced his presentation by indicating that Crix Madine was responsible for devising the operations he was about to discuss. Han repressed a sneer as Madine puffed up with his own self-importance.

Rieekan continued. "We have stolen a small Imperial shuttle. Disguised as a cargo ship, and using a highly encrypted Imperial code, a strike team will land on the moon and deactivate the shield generator."

I wonder who...? A sudden insight ignited inside Leia's mind, and she knew what Han had been up to with Rieekan. Her stomach dropped and she released his hand. Han was part of the strike team that would disable the shield generator. How in the stars had Rieekan managed to talk the smuggler into this? Had the spice made him susceptible to suggestions? Then she realised that Han had more likely sought out the medication after he had spoken with Rieekan. That was why he had seen the doctor; not because he wanted to please her, but because he wanted to please Rieekan.

Leia's heart thumped inside her chest and she stared ahead at the display. Solo's hand groped for the touch of hers. She swallowed the lump from her throat and allowed him to take it again. Why has he done this? her thoughts keened He doesn't have to prove anything. He promised he would stay with me. I don't want to lose him again.

Madine unexpectedly encroached into her thoughts and Rieekan's presentation. "General Solo. Is your strike team assembled?"

The words Madine emphasised suggested that he believed in neither the rank nor the fact that Solo commanded the team. But they pierced Leia's despair. General Solo? Han wasn't just part of the team, he was commanding it. And he was also part of the Alliance. An overwhelming sense of pride and elation blew away the anguish in her heart. Han wouldn't have joined up to satisfy Rieekan, and she knew there was definitely no predilection towards the military in his character. He would only have sought out a commission for her sake alone. He couldn't have shown his dedication and commitment to her any more deeply than if he had proposed marriage.

Leia's mind whirled with frantic possibilities. There had to be some way she could reciprocate. Some way to show Han that she was just as committed to him. And there was certainly no way she was letting him out of her sight again. All she had to do was figure out how to get assigned to the strike force. Having resolved this for herself, the princess turned towards Solo to reveal to all her support for, and love of, this man.

Solo's eyes had hardened and he was staring at Crix Madine. You bastard... Madine knew there was still no replacement flight crew. So this is the way it's gonna be. This was evidently the beginning of payback - the unspoken declaration of war.

Due to his preoccupation with Madine, Solo failed to notice that a majority of the assembly was gaping at him in open-mouthed disbelief.

"My team's ready," General Solo said coldly. "I'm still finalising the command crew for the shuttle."

Rieekan glared at Madine. "Thank you for your concern, General Madine." He had not wanted to distract the audience by indicating that the former smuggler was now the general in charge of the strike force. Madine was obviously trying to embarrass his compatriot. Rieekan resolved to discuss the interruption with Madine at the conclusion of the presentation. "Now, if I can draw your attention back to my brief, I would like to focus on arrangements for the hyperspace jump between Sullust and Endor."

Chewbacca pushed at Solo's shoulder. [You need a command crew? What about me? Or aren't I good enough for you now, General?]

Solo indicated to the Wookiee to keep his voice down so as not to interrupt Rieekan. "It's gonna be rough, pal," he whispered. "I didn't feel I had the right to speak for you." ...Not after that crap I said about your Life Debt. "But I was gonna ask you. That's why I wanted you to come today."

Chewbacca softly growled, [I'm with you.]

Well, that was one. Solo nodded at his friend, realising he should have had more faith that the Wookiee would follow him anywhere. Then Leia was holding onto his arm, smiling at him proudly, and Rieekan's voice faded into background noise. Han had an urge to take her face in his hands, right here in the front row of the briefing theatre, and kiss those sweet, moist lips.

She moved those same lips towards his ear. "General." Her voice was low but she said the title with more reverence than he knew he deserved. "I'm coming with you. You're not getting away from me again that easily." She allowed her lips to graze gently against his ear before adding, "And I'm sure Luke will join us when he returns."

If he hadn't known differently, Solo would have suspected he had over-dosed on spice again. The excited tingle of adrenaline rushed through his system. He took comfort in the simple knowledge that he was seated between the two people he cared most - a Wookiee and a princess - and that they would be there again, by his side, when he needed them.

"I've always loved a man in uniform," Leia whispered seductively into his ear.

Solo's gaze remained on Rieekan, to at least give the appearance that he was paying attention to the Alderaani general.

"I draw a line at the uniform," he muttered out the side of his mouth.

The princess leaned into him again and rephrased her admission. "I've always loved a man out of uniform."

"Now that," Solo told her, "I think I can accommodate."

Don't look at her and you'll do just fine.

General Solo kept his gaze focussed on the Imperial shuttle as he strode across the hangar, resolutely trying not to look at the Millennium Falcon as he passed by. As the two ships were facing each other, almost comparing each other like rival lovers, with every step he took it became increasingly difficult. He had hoped that wearing fatigues and boots like the rest of his strike force, as opposed to his normal spacer attire, would make things easier for him. But it didn't.

The fact was, he was heading off on the most significant event of his life, and he wasn't taking her with him. Having Calrissian trailing behind him, struggling to keep up, somehow only made matters worse.

Solo's voice was filled with exasperation as he again tried to convince both Calrissian and himself that he was serious. "Look. I want you to take her. I mean it. Take her. You need all the help you can get. She's the fastest ship in the fleet."

Calrissian slowed, then halted, causing Solo to stop in his tracks. Han's offer was exactly what Lando had wanted - the Falcon to be given to him freely and unconditionally. But now it had finally happened, Lando was reluctant to accept. Solo did appear to be earnest, though. Earnest and desperately trying to keep conflicting emotions in check. Calrissian decided it was perhaps best to put both of them out of their misery.

"All right," Calrissian conceded. "I understand what she means to you." He watched the Corellian's attention stray towards the freighter. "I'll take good care of her. See she won't get a scratch. All right?"

Solo's gaze returned to Lando as he realised the enormity of what he had just offered, and wondered if his sudden selflessness was a delusional side effect of the drugs. He nodded. "Right."

Now that his offer had been accepted, Solo seemed at a loss at what do to next. Unable to stand only meters from his ship and know that it may be for the last time, Solo turned and started up the shuttle's ramp. Halfway up, Han had sudden second thoughts. He stopped, spun on his heel, only to be faced by Lando waiting expectantly at the bottom of the ramp, as if anticipating that Solo would rescind the offer. The look on Calrissian's face only hardened his resolve.

"I got your promise now," Solo said lightly. "Not a scratch."

"Get going," Lando told him, then added, "Good luck."

Though he had wanted to get a written and signed guarantee from Calrissian that he would return the Falcon in the same condition that she was in now, the Corellian could only nod in reply. "You too." Refusing to look at his ship again, Solo headed back up the ramp and into the shuttle. The passenger compartment was a tight fit for 10 heavily armed soldiers. Solo bantered casually with the women and men of his task force as he brushed past them. In order to distance the team from its Rebel origins, standard procedures for Special Force operations had required all distinguishing rank and insignia to be removed from their camouflaged fatigues. Han decided he rather liked the idea of having no rank pips. It placed all members of this strike force on equal footing, and hopefully would ensure they acted more like a team than a bunch of individuals.

He entered the cockpit. "You got her warmed?"

Luke's familiar, boyish tones filled the cockpit. "Yeah, she's coming up."

It was comforting to have Luke back. He had returned not long after the initial briefing session had concluded, and had been an eager volunteer for Solo's command crew. Seeing him sitting there at the navigator's position, with Chewie in the co-pilot's chair and Leia at the comms station, it was just like old times.

No, he amended to himself. Not like old times. Everything looked right. But it didn't feel right. Luke had changed. There was an air about the young Jedi that Solo couldn't quite comprehend. Maybe it was the seriousness that now moulded his features. Or the prosthetic hand that Vader had forced upon him. Or perhaps even the black clothes he chose to wear. Whatever it was, Luke had aged far more than one Standard year in the time since he and Solo had parted company on Hoth.

Solo thought twice about ruffling Luke's hair, and instead moved past him and into the pilot's seat. Chewbacca bitched from the co-pilot's chair. [This seat is too fucking small for me!]

Solo glanced at his friend wryly. Chewbacca wasn't happy unless he had something to complain about. "Yeah, well, I don't think the Empire had Wookiees in mind when they designed her, Chewie."

[My ankles are up near my damn neck!]

"And I'm not interested in your sex life."

He ducked but failed to miss the friendly slap against the back of his head. Add one more to the count, he grinned to himself, rubbing at the spot the Wookiee had just hit.

Pilot and co-pilot commenced the final sequence of checks, instinctively dividing the tasks between themselves without having to discuss it. Han automatically rapped a knuckle against a read-out that normally played up on the Falcon, cursing his own sentimentality when the display did not change.

Then his gaze came up and caught on the distinctive profile of the Millennium Falcon. His ship.

His girl.

Leia's strong fingers slipped onto his shoulders. "Hey." His eyes met hers, but only for a moment before slipping back to his ship. "Are you awake?"

The smile he tried to manufacture failed to appear. "Yeah. I just got a funny feeling." No, it was a horrible feeling. A terrible feeling deep in his gut that threatened to overwhelm him. When he spoke again, his voice was lost in his throat. "Like...like I'm not gonna see her again."

Beside him, Chewbacca soothingly called his name. [Han.]

Leia's hand gently turned his chin so that their gaze met again. Her eyes held his, imbuing her strength to him. She knew this was difficult for him, but he had already come so far. She was certain he could take that final step. And she wanted him to know that she would be there for him. "Come on, General. Let's move." I love you, she silently added.

Han blinked. "Right." He turned back to the job at hand. "Chewie?"

Chewbacca chimed in, [Standing by.]

Han took one final look at the Falcon. I'll see you on the other side, baby.

"Let's see what this piece of junk can do. Ready everybody."

end

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