

[Back To Index](#)

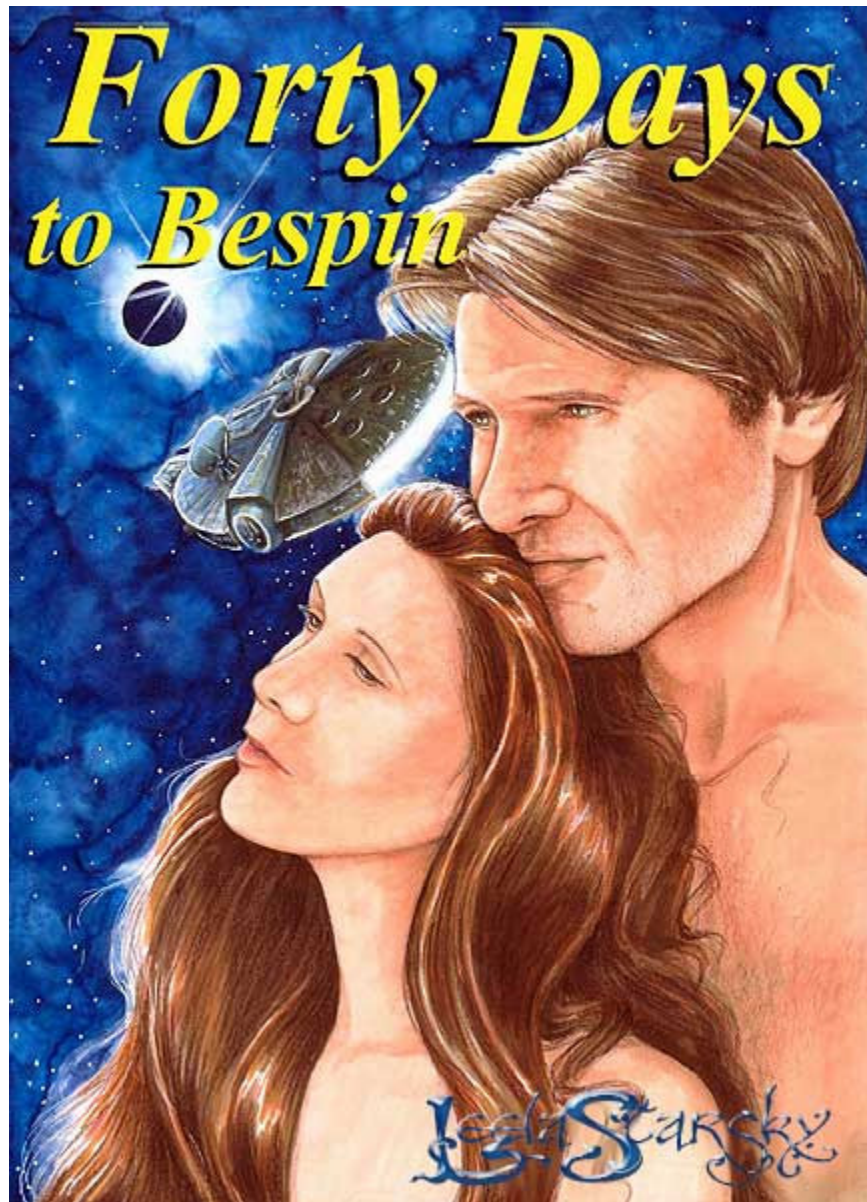
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Forty Days to Bospin Part 1

by [Leela Starsky](#)

NOTE: In my version of this galaxy far, far away, the Galactic Standard Year consists of 10 calendar months, each containing 40 days, or four 10-day weeks. A Galactic Standard Day consists of 20 fifty-minute hours. But this is usually deferred in preference to local time.

Inspirational music: "The Empire Strikes Back" soundtrack by John Williams, "The Mummy" soundtrack by Jerry Goldsmith, "Dinosaur" soundtrack by James Newton Howard, "Book of Secrets" by Loreena McKennitt, and "Touch" by Sarah McLachlan.



The Imperial fleet vanished into hyperspace, away from the Hoth system and its accursed asteroids, taking the stowaway *Millennium Falcon* and her crew with it. A short hop back into normal space to dump their garbage, and then they were away in earnest – leaving the *Falcon* and her crew to float away with the rest of the garbage.

Leia Organa was impressed in spite of herself. "Not bad, Hotshot," she admitted reluctantly. "Not bad. Now what?"

Han Solo moved his hands across the control panel, restoring power to the ship's systems. "Now we find out where we are and hope we can find somewhere safe to land."

The monitor in front of him came to life, throwing a blue glow over his face, and he watched it, waiting for the navicomputer to figure out where they were. They both glanced up as a piece of Imperial garbage floated past outside, then the navicomputer *blipped* and they focused on the small screen once more.

"Where are we?" Leia asked, leaning over his shoulder to get a better look at the screen.

"Here," Solo said, pointing. "Near the Anoat system."

Leia frowned vaguely. "The Anoat system.... There's not much there."

"I have a feeling – " Solo began, then punched in a code. "Let me check my logs."

"You keep logs?" Leia was more impressed by the minute. "My, how organised," she teased.

Solo started to scowl at her but the information he was looking for came up on the screen and his entire expression changed to one of reluctant anticipation. "Lando." He eyed the screen thoughtfully. "Now, this could be interesting."

"Lando system?" Leia asked, trying to place it.

Solo chuckled. "Lando's not a system; he's a man. Lando Calrissian. Gambler, con-artist, scoundrel." He threw her a teasing glance. "You'd like him."

"Thanks," Leia muttered self-consciously.

"Bespin," Solo continued, reading from the screen. "It's pretty far, but I think we can make it."

Leia was reading the data herself. "A mining colony?"

"Tibanna gas mine," Solo clarified. "Lando won it in a sabaac match, or so he claims. Lando and I go *way* back."

She heard the uncertainty in his voice. Looking straight at him, she asked, "Can you trust him?"

"No," Solo admitted. "But he has no love for the Empire." Another piece of debris floated past, and Solo came to a decision. He leaned over the comm and told the Wookiee at the other end, "Starting the engines, Chewie."

A muffled growl came back in response, and the *Falcon* hummed back to life. Solo set the coordinates and the ion engines ignited, propelling the small freighter toward Bespin.

Safe at last, Solo thought. He leaned back in his seat and regarded the princess smugly, then gave her his most inviting smile.

Leia shook her head and smiled shyly. "You do have your moments," she admitted, touching his temple with her lips. "Not many, but you do have them."

She moved over to sit in the co-pilot's chair beside him and Solo smiled, heartened by the slow but steady thawing of his ice-princess. Then she asked quietly, "How long will it take to get there?"

Solo got an Estimated Time of Arrival from the computer and stared at it for a long moment. There was no easy way to tell her.

"Forty-one days," he said, expecting her to lash out, to vent her frustration on him and his ship. He did not expect silence, and looked at her. She was obviously upset, but it wasn't a simmering, anger-filled silence. There was resignation in the set of her jaw. Her silence, her acceptance, left him feeling far guiltier than any of her past tirades.

"We might do it in thirty if I push the engines," he said. "But – "

"I'd rather get there in four weeks than not at all," she said, not taking her eyes off the distant vista of stars. "What about our supplies? Will we have enough food?"

Solo smiled grimly to himself, remembering how furious he had been with Chewbacca for overstocking the galley while they were preparing to leave Hoth. He had felt guilty enough about leaving, but taking more than he and Chewie needed from the Rebels' already meagre food stores had seemed greedy despite Chewie's protests. Now, it seemed, Chewie's obsession with food would save their lives.

"Yeah," he muttered. "There's enough food."

"Good."

An awkward silence descended and it occurred to Solo that all of Leia's personal effects would have flown with her transport. He sighed regretfully.

"I'm sorry, Leia. I – "

"I know, Han." Her eyes slid toward him but did not rise above the level of the deck. She took a deep breath then climbed out of the co-pilot's seat, pausing briefly beside him, her hand on the back of his chair, and repeated, "I know." Then she left the cockpit.

Solo watched her go, and then took up where she'd left off, staring impotently at the stars and wondering what they were going to do for the next four weeks. Oh, he could fantasize plenty of scenarios, especially where Leia was concerned. He'd become a master of that over the past year. But reality was something else entirely.

Reality was Jabba the Hutt, and the bounty hunters tripping over each other for a piece of the price on his Corellian head. That bounty had almost cost Leia her life on Ord Mantell. Risking his own life was one thing; risking Leia's was out of the question.

Their kiss in the circuitry bay came back to haunt him, and he wiped a hand across his face. *Solo, your timing stinks*, he admonished himself.

See-Threepio and Chewbacca both looked up from their work when Leia stepped into the main hold. Embarrassed, she kept moving without having any idea where she was going. There weren't a lot of options on a freighter the size of the *Falcon*. Leia considered continuing on to the galley to get herself a drink, but stopped at the bunkroom.

Once inside, she shut the door, leaned against it, and allowed herself the luxury of a mental wail. *Four weeks!*

She sighed and surveyed the cabin. It hadn't changed since her last trip on the *Falcon* just over two weeks ago. The small medical bunk was still dusty in the same places, the spare bunk was still packed full of miscellaneous

equipment, and Solo's bunk was still wearing the same ghastly sheets. Leia had made the mistake of commenting on their bilious mixture of chartreuse and purple colouring during her first— no, her *second* mission with the Corellian and his first mate, and ever since Solo had made sure they were on his bunk whenever she travelled with them.

Leia tried to see the humour of Solo's dedication to the running gag, but this time the sheets infuriated her. *Four weeks.* And she had *nothing*. No clothes, no toiletries, no personal – an unpleasant thought struck her and she rolled her eyes. She had two, maybe three days before her cycle began. How the hell was she going to deal with *that* here?

Moving away from the door, she sat on the edge of Han's bunk and tried to get her thoughts into some sort of order. The fact of the matter was she would have to deal with it. All of it. Even Han.

Her fingers fluttered across her lips as the memory of their kiss in the circuitry bay flooded through her, and she closed her eyes to relish it for a moment. No one. No one had made her feel like that. *Ever.*

But this self-indulgent daydreaming wasn't getting her anywhere. Leia took a deep breath and opened her eyes. And found them immediately assaulted by Solo's sheets.

In a fit of perverse vengeance, she stripped them from the bunk and tore each of them in half, making sure they could never be used again. She was surprised by the deep sense of satisfaction she got from the action. Then a truly delightful thought occurred to her, and she smiled wickedly.

The airlock alarm brought Solo and the Wookiee running. They arrived just in time to see her reset the hatch.

"What the hell did you *do*?" Solo demanded hotly.

Leia drew herself up to her full one hundred and fifty-five centimetres and looked defiantly down her nose at him.

"What the hell did you *do*?" There was an hysterical edge to his voice as he checked vainly inside the now empty airlock.

"I spaced the sheets," Leia finally answered.

"*What?*"

"The sheets," she repeated. "They had to go."

A strange sort of squawk snuck out of Chewie's mouth as he realised what the princess had done.

Solo glared at him briefly, then turned back to the small woman in front of him. "Sheets?" he asked, and then understanding washed over him. "My sheets?"

Chewbacca gave up trying not to laugh, filling the small space with hacking, honking barks.

"*Those* sheets," Leia assured Solo, retreating towards the main hold for the sake of her ears.

Solo shared an amused glance with the Wookiee then hurried after her. "I *liked* those sheets!" he said hotly.

Leia turned and regarded him tolerantly. "No you didn't, Han. You just kept them because you knew I hated them." Solo was struggling to maintain his indignant outrage. "And for us to survive the next four weeks together, the sheets had to go."

Solo's scowl cracked along with his resolve, and he ducked his head as a smile spread across his face.

It was infectious. Leia fought a battle with her own face and lost, but insisted through her smile, "They were *evil* sheets!"

"Mm," Solo agreed, sarcastically. "Pure Sith. But," he added, putting an arm around her shoulders, "you *will* have to be punished." Leia pulled away from him a little and regarded him through narrowed eyes. "You're going to have to remake the bunk," Solo pronounced.

Leia smiled. "I did."

He was taken aback. "What?"

"I did."

Solo let her go, and she followed him to the bunkroom.

"You *cleaned*," he said, surveying the small cabin suspiciously.

"I did." She sounded apologetic.

He looked at her. "You never cleaned before."

"I'm sorry." She shrugged. "I had nothing to do. I was going to clear the other bunk, but I thought – "

Solo eyed her warily. "We'd better find you something to do before you clean the rest of the ship."

"Mm," she agreed. "Without the dirt holding it together, it might fall apart."

Solo started to scowl at her, and then he noticed something sticking out of a drawer under the medical bunk. Two strides took him to the drawer, and he opened it to remove a neatly folded piece of sickening yellow-green and purple sheeting roughly twenty centimetres square. There was a small pile of them in the drawer. Solo glared at her. It was one thing for her to have spaced the sheets, but to have cut them into little pieces – ?

He waved it at her. "What the hell is this?"

"I'm *female*," Leia said, matter-of-factly, her amused expression unable to belie her faint blush. "Four weeks. Think about it, Han."

It took him a heartbeat to catch her meaning, and then he said, "Oh." And put the piece of sheet back in the drawer. A moment later, a sudden thought occurred to him. "What *did* you space, anyway?"

"The fitted part of the sheets."

Solo regarded her with genuine affection, and then made a show of inspecting his bunk. "Not bad, not bad," he muttered, then flopped onto it.

"Do you have to mess it up straight away?" she grouched. "Or is this some male, territory-marking thing?"

"Territory?" He grinned and moved over, ostensibly making room for her. "Absolutely." He patted the bed space in front of him invitingly. "Works even better when there's a female involved."

"I'm sure," she agreed tolerantly, and for a moment, Solo had the feeling she might be considering taking him up on the offer. But she merely indicated the clutter on the opposite bunk and asked, "So, where do you want this stuff put?"

Sitting up, Solo scratched his head and contemplated the task of shifting and sorting a mess that hadn't been looked at in, well, a very long time.

"You can use this bunk," he said.

Leia shook her head. "That's your bunk."

Solo frowned at her. "You've always used this one before."

"That was only for two or three nights at a time. I'd never hear the end of it if I threw you out of your bunk for four *weeks*."

Solo sighed. There was no way out of it; he would have to move the stuff. So far Leia had taken their predicament surprisingly well; the least he could do was provide her with her own bunk.

"We could put it in with Chewie," he supposed.

"Chewie won't mind?" Leia asked, considering the size of the small starboard hold that served as the Wookiee's cabin.

"So long as we leave room for his hammock," Solo shrugged. No, Chewie wouldn't *mind*; he'd be totally pissed. He would have to sweeten the deal somehow. Solo got to his feet and was conscious of towering over her. "Don't worry about Chewie," he said. "I'll get him to help, then he can't complain that I've put it in the wrong place or boxed something in."

He glanced down and saw that she was staring up at him with an expression of apprehension on her face. For a moment, he fought an almost irresistible urge to kiss her. But she suddenly averted her gaze and took a step away from him.

"Thank you for the bunk," she said, folding her arms defensively across her chest. "So, are you going to give me something to do, or do I start cleaning the cockpit?"

He gave her a look of unadulterated, if overacted, horror before taking her arm.

"Aren't you Queen of the Microfuser?" he asked.

"According to the know-it-all scoundrel who taught me," she agreed.

Solo grinned and led her out of the bunkroom.

Three hours later he found her where he'd left her, still working in the aft hold. The brilliant flare from the microfuser threw everything into sharp blue-white and black contrasts. He had set her up with a rack of circuit boards to work through while he and the Wookiee cleared the spare bunk, but had not expected her to still be at it. Microfusing was painstaking, time-consuming work.

He watched her switch off the microfuser to study her handiwork through the special goggles. As his eyes adjusted to the new light level, Solo realised the upper half of her snowsuit was hanging around her waist, revealing the body-hugging garment she wore underneath, and he took the time to enjoy her figure.

Finishing her meticulous examination of the circuit board, Leia put down the microfuser and goggles and straightened her back, oblivious to him. Then she started rolling her shoulders and stretching out the stiffness in her spine. Solo found the tug and pull of the fabric against her body mesmerising. She was trying to ease the strained muscles in her neck with her hands but must have been hindered by the thick plaits wrapped around her head because, to Solo's surprise, she unpinned them, letting them fall like silk ropes down her back, then started massaging her neck in earnest.

Seeing the dark smudges of carbon she was leaving on her skin, he smiled and approached her. She sensed him and turned, her hand still on her neck.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she responded, then glanced at the entrance to the hold as a horrible caterwauling drifted in. "What *is* that?"

Solo rolled his eyes. "Chewie singing. He found a box of old music tapes while we were clearing the bunk, and this is my punishment for lumping it all in his cabin."

"His punishment for you is to let him sing?" Leia clarified.

"Can you *hear* the noise he's making? Why do you think I 'lost' the tapes in the first place?"

Leia smiled, then listened harder, intrigued. She couldn't hear any music at all, just the Wookiee. "Is it Wookiee music?" she asked.

"No." One side of Solo's face twitched into a smile. "It's the Mud Wallows."

Leia laughed then quickly checked her mirth. The Mud Wallows had been a galaxy-wide sensation for almost ten years before sliding into obscurity about five years ago. At fourteen, she had been quite a fan and, because of who she was, had actually met the band. And had been shocked to find them amazingly crude – the lead singer had actually propositioned her! For the blossoming young woman Leia Organa had been at the time, it was a rude awakening to the sexual fixation of Human behaviour. Despite still liking most of their songs, it amused her to think that the band's music was being so abused by a Wookiee.

She waved a hand at the circuit boards. "You're right. Microfusing is slow, tedious, *hard* work."

"Especially when you do it for three hours without a break! I'm surprised you can even stand up straight."

Leia eyed the small stack of circuit boards and absently started rubbing her neck again. "There was always just one more bit –"

Solo gave an exasperated sigh. "You know what your problem is?"

"Yes," she answered, looking him in the eye. "You."

He smiled, but said seriously, "You work too hard."

"Someone has to do it," she said, defensively.

"Yeah, but it doesn't always have to be *you*."

He reached out to massage her neck for her, but she flinched away from him.

"Don't."

"Why not? I'm not gonna hurt you."

She inhaled sharply and, for a brief second, met his eyes. The pain and fear in them was unmistakable and left him flummoxed. Why would she be afraid of him?

"These are the ones I finished," she said, turning to the smaller of the two piles of circuit boards. *And deliberately changing the subject*, Solo thought. "You'd better check them. I wouldn't want to be responsible for –"

Her words regressed to a small gasp and her whole body tensed as he put his hands on her shoulders and started manipulating the muscles in her neck with his thumbs.

"Han, stop."

He thought he discerned a quaver in her voice and smiled gently. "No."

"Please."

There was a slightly panicked edge to her voice and Solo noticed her hands were gripping the edge of the crate she'd been using as a workbench. He said, soothingly, "It's just a massage, Leia."

He wasn't sure if Leia's silence came from her enjoyment of his ministrations or because she couldn't think of anything to say. Her body was still tense, but her eyes were shut and her head slightly bowed, allowing him the full expanse of her neck. Her skin was warm and wonderfully soft, her breathing shallow. To distract himself from the overwhelming desire to hold her, Solo changed the direction of his thumbs and concentrated on moving down her spine. And got an immediate reaction from the princess.

She gasped and stood tall, stretching her back. Then she started to pull away, embarrassed, he suspected, by her unguarded physical response.

"Your hands'll get tired," she said, lamely.

"Ever tried massaging a Wookiee?" Solo asked, his hands still working on her back. "Builds up your muscles."

"You massage Chewie?" She sounded surprised.

"Sure. When he needs it."

He felt her relax a little and smiled. The inclusion of Chewie had switched the massage from the sensual category to the therapeutic one, making it safe for her to enjoy what he was doing.

"You're very good at it," she murmured.

I know, he thought, but kept his mouth tightly shut, not wanting to foil his own progress. Nevertheless, his ego crowed, *Wait 'til you see what else I'm good at, Princess*. He took his hands back to her neck. *And then what'll you do, Solo?* he asked himself, unaware that his fingers were now caressing her neck instead of massaging it. *Show her what you're good at and leave? You really think that's an option?* He tried to focus on something other than his desire for her, but his body seemed to be working independently of him, moving closer to her.

"You know you have carbon smudges all over your neck?" he said in a low voice.

Leia seemed to struggle with speechlessness for a moment and, in the stillness of the aft hold, and despite the distant caterwauling from the Wookiee, he heard her swallow before she finally croaked, "I need to wash."

Solo felt her hold her breath as he moved a braid to one side, bent and touched her neck ever so lightly with his lips. He smiled when her breath came out in a shuddering whisper. His name, exhaled in a sigh full of such longing, such uncertainty –

"Han...."

Did she have any idea how much it turned him on to hear her say his name? And when she *breathed* it like that....

He kissed her neck again and felt her press up against him, uncertain whether he had drawn her to him or if she had leaned into the embrace.

"Leia," he murmured, knowing how powerful his use of her name had become, caressing her arms and drawing her closer, revelling in the feel of her body through her skin-tight undershirt. He nibbled on her earlobe, and then traced his lips down her neck to the valley between her neck and collarbone, aware of her pulse throbbing beneath his lips. He felt her hand tentatively touch his head.



Abruptly she pulled away from him. "I can't do this," she said. "I'm sorry."

Solo regarded her for a moment, not wanting to push her too hard lest she take flight, but sensing she needed the push. "Because you don't want to? Or because you don't think you should?"

"Because you're leaving."

Solo studied his boots and Leia smiled tightly. "I better go clean up," she said.

"Oh," he said, suddenly remembering what he had originally come to tell her. "The bunk." She looked at him questioningly and he explained, "The heat-unit's blown. Probably why we stopped using it. So I'll take it and you can have mine." Leia started to shake her head and Solo smiled and insisted, "Come on, Leia, you know how cold it gets." He ran his hands down her upper arms. "There's nothing of you; you'd freeze." A lewd thought occurred to him and he grinned. "Unless you'd rather let *me* keep you warm?"

Leia smiled tolerantly and replied, "That's all right; your bunk'll be fine. I take it water showers are out?"

Solo nodded, smiling apologetically. " 'fraid so. Tank's full but it's still a limited supply." His mouth twisted, ruefully. "The last thing we need is for the water recycler to go out."

"Mm!" Leia agreed, heartily, and headed out.

Solo watched her leave before making a mighty effort to pay attention to checking the circuit boards she had just finished.

Leia made her way into the small refresher cubicle, her mind and emotions in turmoil, and caught sight of herself in the small mirror as the door hissed shut behind her. She sighed and wondered what the hell she thought she was doing. Wondered if she could think about anything other than kissing Han and whether he had any idea how tempted she was to take him up on the offer of keeping her warm.

Irritated with herself and with Han, Leia stripped out of her snowsuit and underwear, automatically feeding them into the autovalet beside the washbasin. Then she unplaited her hair, stepped into the shower stall and activated the cycle.

Almost immediately, the sonic waves started rippling over her, jangling her nerves. Leia loved real warm-water showers, would spend as much time as possible under one, and although sonics were just as effective at removing dirt and dead cells, they were nevertheless something she endured rather than enjoyed. She and every other human she knew. *Except Luke*, she thought.

Luke, the desert-dweller, who had grown up with only sonics and regarded washing in water as a sinful waste.

For a moment Leia felt a whisper of concern for the young man. She hoped he had made it to the rendezvous with the fleet, and realised that she didn't even know if he'd survived the battle on Hoth. If he had, he would probably be worried sick about her. They would all assume the *Falcon* had been captured.

She raised her arms as the sonic unit moved into the last part of its cycle, lifting and separating her hair, allowing the waves to penetrate.

No one had any idea where they were. Sub-space communication was out of the question for the Rebellion's safety as well as theirs, and it was going to take the *Falcon* four weeks to reach something resembling civilisation. Four weeks for Han to...what? Pursue her? Torment her? Make love to her?

Leia groaned and leaned her head against the shower door. Was that what she wanted? Really? *I want him to kiss me*, she thought. *I want him to touch me, hold me, love me.*

*Everything I touch, everything I love **dies**.*

I know this...and still I want him.

Leia collected herself as the shower finished and stepped out, shivering from cold despite the warm, tingly residue of the sonics.

She opened the autovalet expecting to find her clothes laundered and dry, but instead found them dripping wet. Confused, she wondered for a moment if she hadn't misjudged the time, but checking the chrono she'd left beside the basin forced the horrible truth to sink in.

The autovalet seemed to have broken down. It was as unreliable as everything else on the stupid ship! Probably gone out in sympathy for the hyperdrive! Leia looked hopelessly at the small room she was in. Now what? She had no clothes! None at all! Her rage suggested it was probably another one of Solo's practical jokes and for a moment she pictured him waiting gleefully on the other side of the door. Whether for her shriek of outrage or naked dash to the bunkroom Leia couldn't decide, but she was determined to give him no such satisfaction.

Slamming the lid down on the autovalet, Leia grabbed the only towel in the room and wrapped it around herself. Then she opened the door and stormed out, daring the Corellian to be anywhere nearby.

The fact that he wasn't turned her theory to dust. And besides, she rationalised, there'd been no 'gloat' circuit in the autovalet.

She made it to the bunkroom unnoticed, shut the door and proceeded to look through Solo's clothes. Underpants were out of the question; there was nothing here that would even come close to fitting her. She pulled out a pair of pants with the ubiquitous bloodstripe down the seam. Fine, somehow they would have to do. And if Han had a fit about it, all the better!

Standing beside Threepio at the technical station, listening intently to Threepio's translation from the *Falcon's* erratic intelligence, Chewbacca was distinctly aware that his partner's mind had wandered despite his outward appearance of concentration. Chewbacca could understand his friend's loss of interest in the more mundane business of repairing what they could of their flying short-circuit, but the Corellian's distraction was irritating nonetheless. He had watched his friend kiss the princess in the circuitry bay and wanted to throttle him on the spot. In the middle of an unstable asteroid, an Imperial blockade waiting for them, their situation nothing if not desperate and Solo had been busy thinking with his gonads! And the fact that they were leaving the Rebellion to finally pay Jabba seemed to have slipped his mind entirely!

His human friend reeked of suppressed sexual desire. But then so did the princess. Chewbacca sighed, unable to fathom the ludicrousness of the human mating dance. They both wanted it, so why did they fight it?

Chewbacca was about to snap a reprimand at him when they both heard the booted footfalls and turned to look at the princess as she entered the hold. Chewbacca's eyes widened and he had to suppress a snigger as he took in what she was wearing, and looked to his partner to see his reaction.

Solo, it seemed, had been rendered speechless.

"You can add the autovalet to your list," Leia snapped defensively. "It seems to have cut out halfway through the cycle; all my clothes are wet." She indicated what she was wearing and added sarcastically, "I hope you don't mind, but the only other option was for me to walk around naked."

Chewie could hear the amusement starting to creep into his partner's voice as he stammered, "No, that's fine." After all, there wasn't much else he could

have said. "Although the image of you wandering 'round the ship naked does have a certain appeal," Solo added.

Quick as a flash Leia responded, "I will if you will."

Solo laughed and Chewie barked at his partner, [I dare you!]

Leia didn't miss the awkward glance the Corellian threw at him before covering it with a laugh, and Chewie could see she knew Solo had no intention of translating for her. He was about to engage Threepio when Solo asked her, "Is *everything* mine?"

"Except the boots," she admitted.

[She looks like a mini version of you,] Chewie rumbled and Solo's face broke into a wide grin.

"He says you look like a mini me," Solo explained delightedly and Leia rolled her eyes.

"Wonderful!" she muttered. She looked pointedly at the technical station and asked, "Anything I can do?" Solo and Chewbacca traded looks and the princess sighed and rolled her eyes again. "Let me guess?" she said. "Food?"

Chewie rumbled happily and Solo merely grinned, then called after her as she headed for the galley, "Unless you know anything about hyperdrive mechanics?"

The conversation was subdued as they ate the meal Leia had prepared. Solo and Chewie both managed the obligatory compliments for her preparation of the food, but Leia suspected their hearts weren't in it. She knew hers wasn't.

The meal didn't taste *bad* exactly, but it wasn't good, either. A mixture of rehydrated noodles, vegetables and sauce which she was sure she had eaten somewhere before and felt certain would taste nice, but...

"Typical princess," Leia muttered into her plate, feeling more useless than ever. "I can't even cook!"

Solo and Chewie both started to disagree, but Leia's glare told them they would only aggravate things by trying to perpetuate the myth.

"Well..." Solo was obviously fishing for something good to say and having trouble. "Princesses aren't *supposed* to cook," he said.

Leia wondered exactly what he thought a princess *was* supposed to do. She asked him and enjoyed his discomfiture. His larynx bobbed as he swallowed nervously. Finally he answered, "Well, I always thought princesses were just supposed to look beautiful."

Eye candy! Arm furniture! Leia thought bitterly as she pushed the noodles around her plate aimlessly. *Typical Imperial attitude!* She forced herself to smile as she said quietly, "Oh, I failed that one *years* ago."

"I don't think so."

Leia smiled at his compliment. "Thanks, but I grew up being mistaken for one of the servants."

Solo leaned back in the couch and turned slightly to face her, his elbow on the table. "Maybe because you spent a lot of your time with the servants?"

"Well...yes," Leia admitted. "I felt comfortable with them. *Real*. There was none of the... I don't know... Politics? *Airs*?"

"You could relax with them."

"They were *honest*."

"That's why you were elected into the Senate." Leia frowned at him and Solo explained, "You knew your people, the *real* people. And they voted for you because of it."

And then I betrayed and murdered every last one of them! Leia stared at her meal, willing the tears not to come and afraid to move lest her inner trembling become apparent. She felt Solo touch her face and held her breath, unable to look at him. The hand retreated and she closed her eyes in relief.

"Anyway," he continued, "I've seen you *looking* like a princess, Princess, and you *more* than meet the beauty qualifications. Besides," she heard his grin, "you're in at least half the pilot lockers and they're *never* wrong!"

Leia smiled despite herself. Solo had told her about the pilots hanging pictures of 'porn queens' with her face superimposed onto them in their lockers a year or two ago. It had peeved her then, but it amused her now. In a warped sort

of way. Unable to think of anything to say, and unwilling to waste the food, she forced herself to eat.

Han and Chewie seemed to respect her withdrawal from the conversation and chatted amiably beside her. Irrked that she was feeling so emotional, and irritated by the fact that she could only understand half the conversation, Leia quickly finished her meal and excused herself. She needed to be alone.

Solo seemed surprised at her departure, but accepted her excuse without question and bid her good night from the table. For that alone, Leia was unconscionably grateful. She'd been terrified he would expect her to kiss him good night, and the frightening part was that she *wanted* to. But Leia knew that if she started kissing Han, she wouldn't be able to stop.

She carried her dinnerware to the galley and decided to clean up the minor mess she had made while preparing their meal. All the while stewing over the excess of *feeling* Solo seemed to inspire in her.

She was almost finished her clean-up when Solo stepped into the small room carrying his and Chewie's dinnerware. Leia tried to conceal her unrest by quizzing him about the operating rules of the small sonic dishwasher.

He showed her the correct codes to enter; seemingly impressed that she had loaded the machine so well. But the minute they had finished the task, he moved closer and took her hand in his.

Here it comes, Leia thought frantically. He's going to kiss me. And I won't be able to stop...

"We need to lay out some ground rules here," Leia said hastily. Solo frowned at her and she plunged ahead, determined to say what she had decided she would tell him. "I don't want to get involved with you, Han."

Solo paused for a moment to regard her carefully, then looked at her hand as he let it go and asked, "Can I ask why the change of heart?"

"There is no change of heart," she replied stiffly.

"I see," he said, studying her for a moment. Then he added, "That wasn't the feeling I got in the circuitry bay."

He can't stop thinking about it either, she thought, but forced herself to plunge ahead. "I didn't say I'm not attracted to you, Han; I said I didn't want to get involved with you." She regarded him earnestly and reasoned, "If you hadn't dragged me from the Command Centre, I wouldn't even *be* here."

"No," he agreed, moving towards the hatch. "You'd be dead under the ice or Vader's prisoner."

Leia, struck by the bitterness in his voice and the truth in his words, hurriedly tried to sound conciliatory, "Han, I didn't mean – "

Solo paused at the hatch and looked back at her. "Leia, I didn't pull you out of there to annoy you, or to seduce you! I did it to save your *life*. I thought we were friends?"

Leia nodded. "We are."

Solo put his hand on the hatchway and considered briefly, then shook his head. "No, we're not." Leia swallowed nervously and Solo sighed. "I don't know what we are. Me and Chewie are friends; me and Luke are friends. Me and you?" His mouth quirked up on one side. "We have forty days and nights of close proximity, Princess; I'll try hard to be on my best behaviour. But if I end up annoying you or seducing you along the way, I apologise in advance."

Leia watched him go and wondered how she was going to survive the next four weeks.

Before she went to bed, Leia checked the clothes she had hung up to dry in the 'fresher. They were still quite wet, the snowsuit particularly so, and it occurred to the princess as she walked to the bunkroom and shut the door that she had nothing to wear to bed. Not that sleeping naked was a problem – in fact she preferred it – but it was not something she was about to consider while sharing the room with Han.

Not yet anyway.

Leia paused and wondered where the hell *that* thought had come from. No, she would wear the shirt she had on, she decided, trying to ignore the part of her brain that seemed to want to run rampant with her fantasies. It covered her bottom, so long as she didn't lift her arms, and would certainly do if she had to rush to the 'fresher. It would do to sleep in.

She switched the room lighting to the dim, 'night' setting, and sat on the edge of the freshly made bunk. *Han's* bunk.

Looking at the recently cleared bunk opposite, Leia found herself imagining him in it. So close that if she reached out she could almost touch him. Long, lean, almost too big for the bunk. Naked? Yes, naked; Han would be the sort to sleep naked. And looking at her with...

Leia frowned and moved across to examine the bunk Solo had cleared for himself. No, it wasn't a trick of the dim lighting; this bunk was narrower than the one he usually occupied. Standard width. Looking back at the bunk she was about to sleep in, it was suddenly obvious where he had widened it. And 'why' took no leap of imagination.

Embarrassed, Leia couldn't believe she'd never noticed before, but then the surrounding clutter had helped to hide it. It wasn't a true two-person bunk, but it was certainly more than a single. *No wonder it's so comfortable*, she thought, cynically. And couldn't help wondering how many women he had brought to it.

For a moment she considered taking the narrow bunk, but Solo's admonitions about the cold were correct. Space was cold. Starship bunks were so cold that no ship's bunk was manufactured without a heating element.

Resigned, Leia sat on Han's bunk and removed her boots, then untied the cord she had used to hold up her pants. *Solo's pants. Mini me!* Leia repressed a smirk and wondered if she should add a vest to her ensemble. Ah, if only Alliance command could see her! The talk... Leia considered her thoughts. There would be *talk*. Lots of it. Especially once she was safely back with the fleet. The princess and the smuggler *alone* together? Either they would kill each other or... Leia licked her lips pensively. She knew the sort of talk that had been going around the base before the attack – the sort of talk she had always met with disdain and Han had sometimes encouraged just to infuriate her.

Sighing, Leia stood, dropped the pants, and stepped out of them. She put them on the end of her bunk and climbed in. *Han's* bunk.

The clean sheets felt soft and cool against her skin despite the subtle warmth emanating from the thin mattress and she smiled, pleased to be able to enjoy the sensation. The cold had been such an overwhelming consideration on Hoth.

Settling onto her side after getting the pillow into a shape that resembled comfortable, Leia looked out at the darkened cabin and listened to the sounds of the *Millennium Falcon*, the wonderfully familiar hum of the engines, and snuggled deeper into the bunk. The smells and sounds combined to create an environment in which she felt wonderfully safe. It always had. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that the ship had been the instrument of rescue in her Death Star liberation, but Leia slept better on the ship than anywhere and had never had a nightmare on the *Falcon*.

Despite the freshly laundered linen, Leia could smell Han's distinctive scent in the pillow; the aftershave he used and maybe his shampoo, but under it all a subtle scent that was just his, and this too was comforting.

A princess and a smuggler... Leia could feel Dodonna's disapproval already, and Mon Mothma's. Rieekan...actually, she suspected Rieekan would be happy about it; he'd thrown them together on missions often enough. Maybe Rieekan had prompted Solo's return to the Command Centre for her? And maybe it had simply been Solo's concern...

Was he concerned for her? Leia rolled onto her back and stared at the overhead bulkhead, irritated with herself. Of course he was concerned; how many times had he saved her life? But did he *care*? Sure he'd kissed her, but Leia was far from knowledgeable in the area of relationships that were anything other than professional. Perhaps he simply wanted to 'bed' her? Maybe she was just another conquest or part of a bet with some of the Rogues?

Leia chewed her lip. That was the thing with relationships, wasn't it? Nobody knew what the other one was thinking. Someone had to take the risk – the risk of being laughed at, of being vulnerable. And starting something with Han... It dawned on Leia that the Corellian had been fighting their attraction just as much and as hard as she was. She sighed and settled onto her side again. So, did his kissing her mean that he'd changed his mind? And she had kissed him back...

Leia closed her eyes and wallowed in the memory of that kiss. The responses from her body were like nothing she had ever experienced.

Rieekan and the others would have them paired off by now, and Leia wondered if that was what *she* wanted? Was that what Han wanted? Leia wished she knew the answer.

"Because you don't want to, or because you don't think you should?" he had wanted to know. Leia burrowed her face into the pillow and answered honestly to herself, *Because I'm afraid...*

Solo took himself to the 'fresher on his way to the bunkroom several hours later, and was shocked to find Leia's snowsuit and underwear draped over the shower stall. Snowsuit, thermal leggings and top, socks, underpants and the corset-like undershirt that seemed so popular among women in the Alliance.

Solo had seen far more attractive forms of breast restraint, but these were obviously comfortable and practical. He smiled, lingering over his inspection of the bra. The form-fitting garment was designed to conform to the shape of the wearer, and he could clearly see the imprint of Leia's breasts in it. He ran his fingers lightly over the soft material; imagined it cupping her breasts. Imagined himself removing it and his hands cupping her breasts... and felt his nether regions respond. Sighing, he hung the garment back where she had left it, and moved to brush his teeth.

His toothbrush was wet and he frowned, thinking for a moment that he must have already brushed but forgotten. Then he realised - Leia must have used it. And found the idea ludicrously erotic. To have something so personal of his used so personally by her...

Solo closed his eyes, acutely aware of the erection straining against his pants. How many times had he watched her brush her teeth? So many times that he knew her routine. Front to left to front to right, then open to do the biting surfaces.... Solo opened his eyes and looked at his reflection in the small mirror, and wondered if Luke knew Leia's tooth brushing routine.

He applied paste to the brush and started brushing, trying to ignore the throb in his groin and the images his brain was throwing at him, fantasies of exploring her mouth with his tongue, and her exploring his. Fantasies of exploring not just her mouth but her body, between her legs, and bringing her to climax again and again. Just the thought of being inside her....

Solo spat and rinsed, and wondered how the hell he was going to survive the next forty days. And nights...

He looked at his bunk as he entered the softly lit bunkroom. The princess appeared to be asleep and, as his eyes adjusted to the low light, he could just make out her face, white against the dark shadow of her hair.

He started undressing, removing his shirt and blaster belt, then sat on the spare bunk to remove his boots. His bunk for the duration of their subspace journey to Bespin.

He stood briefly to undo his belt and trousers, sliding them past his hips, then sat again as he pulled them off, taking his socks off at the same time. Stripped to his underpants, Solo paused to wonder what he should wear to bed, and looked at the sleeping form of the princess, wondering what she was wearing.

He fossicked quietly in a drawer, found some comfortable shorts and donned them, leaving his underpants on the floor beside his socks. Then made a mental note to do something about the autovalet tomorrow.

About to get into his bunk, Solo paused and looked at the princess again.

Her face looked peaceful in sleep. Younger. The strict control she kept on her emotions and expressions relaxed. Solo crossed the small space between the bunks, the deck plates cold against his bare feet, and squatted beside her, mesmerised. She had loosely plaited her hair after her shower but it had obviously come undone, because now it flared around her head like a wild thing.

*Gods, he thought, she's **so** beautiful.*

The erection that had subsided as he undressed now returned in full measure. And, no longer hampered by his tight trousers, pointed eagerly at the girl asleep in front of it. As if its owner had any doubts about where he wanted it to go.

Solo breathed deeply through his nostrils and was echoed by the princess, who chose that moment to shift onto her back. That was when he realised she was still wearing his shirt. Just like she had in Farrouq's mansion on Coruscant. When he had pretended to be her husband just to keep her safe and Inconterza had almost raped her anyway.

"Leia," he sighed, then leaned carefully over her face to brush her forehead with a whisper-soft kiss. He then stood and went to his own bunk, settling the covers around himself as he lay down.

Leia woke with a start and lay still, orienting herself. She was on the *Falcon*, in Han's bed, limping towards a destination that depended entirely on the cooperation of Han's *friend*. The lack of control over her immediate destiny terrified her.

She looked across at the spare bunk, listening to Han's breathing, and felt vaguely disturbed that she hadn't heard him come in. It was unlike her, and suggested she felt safe around the Corellian, despite her belief to the contrary.

A wave of irritation swept through her and, glancing at the chrono over the bunk, she wondered what time Solo planned to get up. Deciding she still had an hour or so to sleep, Leia settled onto her side and let the comforting hum of the *Falcon's* drive lull her back to sleep.

Day3

Leia was awake, but the thought of getting up filled her with dread. The first day of their long trek had not gone well; she had begun it with a long-winded harangue about the fact that her clothes were still wet, which had put Han on an annoyed defensive. After that, Chewie had yelled at Han for not paying attention and causing a time-consuming blow-out in the communications array. The problem, which then somehow bled across to the sensor suite rendering them blind to anything that might approach the ship, had taken the Wookiee and the Corellian five hours to correct.

Leia had busied herself with the microfuser and the unfinished stack of circuit boards to keep out of their way and was painfully stiff and sore as a result. She'd contemplated asking Solo for a massage, but his mood was not good and the prospect of being beholden somehow did not sit well with her. She owed him too much already. And the thought of what a massage might lead to had kept her silent. Better to suffer.

But the pain had made her irritable as well as intolerant and she had lashed out at Solo at the first opportunity. His response had been equally heated and they had avoided one another for the rest of the day, even eating at separate times. But when she had overheard him describing her to Chewie as pre-menstrual, Leia had gone ballistic. The fact that it was true only made her angrier and Leia had taken herself to bed that evening without wishing any of them goodnight.

Listening as Solo rose the next morning, Leia wondered if he was still angry and, unwilling to face him, had rolled to face the blind side of the bunk and pretended to be asleep. And when he started arguing with the Wookiee, Leia had pulled her covers tighter and contemplated not getting out of bed at all.

Waking an hour later, surprised to find she had fallen asleep again, Leia rolled onto her back and pondered getting up. Apart from a need to use the 'fresher the incentive just wasn't there. She had nothing to do; she would have to go to Solo to find out what task he considered her capable of, and doubtless he would have a go at her for sleeping so late.

Sighing, Leia was shocked to be able see her breath vapour and, testing the air temperature with her arm, decided it was as cold as Hoth in the cabin! *Great!* Somehow those idiots had blown the environment control! She snuggled deeper into the warmth of her bed, wishing it were possible to hibernate until they got to Bespin and avoid the situation entirely.

A muffled, distant clanging penetrated her thoughts and she wondered what the hell they were doing now. Fixing environment control she hoped. Then it dawned on her that the sounds seemed to be coming from the floor.

Frowning, Leia sat up, heard a definite clang and felt terror grip her as she identified it as coming from the outer hull. There were several more thumps and clangs and Leia's initial vision of a couple of mynockes somehow surviving on the hull swiftly transformed into a boarding party.

"*Han?*" she shrieked, launching herself at the closet and flinging aside Solo's clothes as she hunted for the spare blaster she knew Solo kept there. "*Chewie?*"

The bunkroom was beside the portside docking arm and Leia could hear the top hatch opening as she searched, shivering from cold despite the rush of adrenaline. Somehow, they'd been boarded, she decided. Captured. And Solo and Chewie were prisoners...And they'd left her asleep in the hope that she wouldn't be discovered! Leia finally unearthed the blaster, automatically checking the charge, and raced for the airlock.

A large spacesuited figure was stepping out of it as she approached and she fired twice in rapid succession. As the blaster fired, the suited figure turned to look at her before he was thrown against a bulkhead as the first blaster bolt clipped his shoulder and then fell backwards as the second bolt hit his armoured helmet. The charge bounced off the helmet and impacted against the opposite bulkhead, starting a small fire.

For what seemed an interminable moment, Leia stared at the fallen, unmoving figure. Then the full horror of what she'd just done sank in and she dropped the blaster and ran to him. She had recognised him as she'd fired.

"Chewie!" she cried, crouching beside him as she checked the wound and looked at his face. "Chewie!" He seemed to be unconscious and she could faintly hear Han yelling through the helmet comlink.

As she hurriedly started unsealing the Wookiee's helmet, Leia could hear the airlock cycling behind her. *Han is going to kill me.* She lifted the heavy helmet off as the inner hatch opened and Solo exploded out of it, his helmet already off.

"What the hell did you *do?*" he yelled, then noticed the burning bulkhead and lurched back into the airlock for the anti-incendiary foam.

"I thought we were being boarded – " Leia started to explain as he returned and sprayed enough foam to extinguish the fire.

"You *shot* him?" Solo hollered. "You *shot* Chewie?" He returned the canister to the airlock and Chewie moaned as Leia tried to investigate his wound.

"I didn't *know* it was Chewie! There were these noises on the hull and I thought you'd been killed or something!"

"*What?*" Solo paused to give her a look of scornful disbelief then started undoing the Wookiee's spacesuit. "Help me get him out of this!"

Leia helped Solo roll the Wookiee onto his side and snapped defensively, "What the hell were you doing out there anyway?"

Solo grunted as he levered Chewbacca's injured arm out of his suit and the Wookiee whimpered. "What do you *think* we were doing, Sweetheart? Fucking around?"

"Yes, actually! And maybe if you'd spent more time actually *fixing* the ship instead of *fucking* with it, we wouldn't be here!"

Solo glared at her then said tightly, "Lift his head and shoulders so I can peel the suit down."

Leia complied, straining just about every muscle in her upper body to do so, and the Wookiee moaned again.

"We've gotta get him to the medbunk before he comes round," Solo said, and had almost succeeded in pulling the suit off when the Wookiee roared and lashed out, kicking Solo into the bulkhead and flinging Leia against the open hatch to the airlock. Her head hit the doorframe with an audible *crack*.

"*Chewie!*" Solo yelled as the irrational, howling and very conscious Wookiee staggered to his feet. "*Chewie!*" The Wookiee roared at him and Solo grabbed him by the fur on his neck. "It's *me*, you furry oaf!" Chewbacca bared his teeth, then *whuffed* apologetically and staggered, his feet still trapped in his EV suit. "Leia shot you," Solo explained darkly after helping his friend step out of the suit, and Leia was aware of them both looking at her as she struggled to sit up.

"I'm sorry – " she started and stifled a groan as her head started throbbing. She looked up at Solo as he approached, expecting him to help her to her feet, but instead he pointedly tugged the shirt she was wearing down over her naked buttocks then turned back to the Wookiee and helped him stagger to the bunkroom.

Mortified, Leia stayed where she was for a moment, trying to come to grips with the fact that, not only had she shot Chewie, she'd been running around half-naked. She clambered to her feet and waited a moment for everything to stop spinning. Then, pulling self-consciously at the hem of her shirt, she headed for the 'fresher.

She was shivering uncontrollably by the time she made her way to the bunkroom to dress and, aware of a background nausea, suspected she was mildly concussed.

She had to step over Solo's EV suit which he'd discarded in the doorway and Leia noticed the snowsuit and underwear, which she'd moved from the 'fresher to hang over the medbunk, had been thrown to the floor. She picked them up without a word, noticing that Solo did not look up from the Wookiee, and sat on her own bunk to contemplate dressing. Taking a deep breath to keep the nausea at bay, Leia pulled on her underpants and asked quietly, "How's Chewie?"

"He'll live," was the terse response, and Leia wondered why she was bothering to dress when all she wanted to do was fall back into bed and sleep.

"Do you need my help?" she asked, then winced and answered herself, "As if I haven't 'helped' enough already..."

Solo looked at her then and frowned. "Are you all right?"

Chewbacca rumbled softly and Leia wiped a hand across her eyes. The nausea was getting worse.

"I'm...fine," she muttered then added, "I have a headache." She came to a decision and swung her feet up onto the bunk. "I'm just going to lie down for a little while..."

Chewbacca growled at Solo and the Corellian frowned at him, nodded and moved over to the princess. "No, wait," he said, stopping her from lying down. "Let me look at you."

"I think you've seen more than enough of me today," Leia muttered, not looking at him.

Solo smiled despite his anger and replied quietly, "Hardly." He took her face in one hand, forcing her to look at him while he checked her eyes. "Nowhere near enough in fact."

Leia felt her insides flip at his words and held her breath. His scrutiny lasted longer than necessary, she was certain, and she forced herself to breathe, trying not to look into his eyes and wondering what he was thinking.

"Feeling nauseous?" Solo asked suddenly.

Leia nodded and he let her face go.

"Better not sleep – you could have a mild concussion."

Leia just wanted to curl up and lose herself in unconsciousness so she wouldn't have to deal with any of it.

"I'll risk it," she said, lying down.

"But I won't, not until I've scanned you." Solo said seriously. "And I can't do that 'till I've finished with Chewie. Sit up."

"No."

"Leia," Solo threatened, "if you don't get up now, I'm gonna get in there with you and make sure I keep you awake."

Leia looked at him, but she didn't get up. "Fine," she said, calling his bluff. "But hadn't you better see to Chewie first?"

Solo scowled at her then turned back to Chewie. When the Wookiee asked after the princess, Solo held his fist up, threatening to wallop him and said, "You *concussed* her you great clump of a lump!"

Chewbacca wailed mournfully and Solo pointed out, "Yeah, but she shot *you*." He inspected his friend's shoulder, poked the edge of the wound carefully with his finger. "Numb yet?" Chewbacca *wuffed* an affirmative and Solo set about cutting the Wookiee's fur away from the wound.

Leia watched the Corellian work over the Wookiee, listening to him alternately soothing and abusing his friend, and Chewbacca obviously gave as good as he got. They were such good friends... Leia had never had a friendship like the one Han and Chewie shared, and had always felt vaguely envious of them. Even Luke and Han had a friendship she could never share. Leia sighed, feeling very alone, and found herself wishing she could understand the Wookiee.

That thought gave her a moment's pause. Why shouldn't she learn it? The fact was she was in the best position ever to learn the language; she had Chewie, she had Threepio, and she had four weeks to fill.

Solo tried not to think about Leia as he shaved the edge of the burn site on Chewbacca's shoulder. Or the view he'd just seen of her naked rear. For the injury Chewie had caused her, Solo was tempted to shave his friend bald. But Chewbacca was already mortified.

[Is the princess – ?]

"She's lying down."

[But is she – ?]

"She'll be fine," Solo insisted. "Stop worrying. I'll scan her as soon as I've finished with you, and if you don't stop moving I'm gonna sedate you!"

[I didn't mean to hurt her.]

"And she didn't mean to shoot you," Solo assured him, and put the shaving equipment aside. "She thought we were being boarded." He put a towel under the Wookiee's shoulder and flushed the entire burn site with water. "When you're both on your feet again, you can wallow in guilt together."

He concentrated on applying the small swab of bacta and watched with satisfaction as it adhered to the wound.

"It's taking beautifully," he told the Wookiee. "An hour or two and we'll be able to wrap it."

[What about the ESA-unit? It's freezing in here, you know.]

Solo grimaced, "I know, I know! I'll get to it. Threepio's still out there. Who knows? Maybe he'll have fixed it by the time I get back?"

[He's probably fallen off by now!]

Solo grinned, "I don't think we're *that* lucky."

[And we'll blow the sublight systems trying to get him back on board.]

Solo looked horrified. "Are you trying to jinx us?"

The princess moaned and they both looked at her.

[Is she asleep?] Chewie asked.

"I think so." Solo picked up the diagnostic scanner and recalibrated it to human standards. "Rest up," he told his friend. "I'll check her over then get you something to drink."

[Check her over or do her over?] Chewbacca growled suggestively, and Solo regarded him with affront.

"What sort of animal do you think I am?"

[A human animal,] the Wookiee barked. [Worst kind.]

Solo scowled at him and shook his head. *Like you'd know* had been his instinctive come back, but the problem was, Chewie *did* know. Chewie had suffered some of the worst humiliations possible at human hands. And his life debt to Han had won him very few friends among his own kind.

Solo let his irritation slide and moved over to the princess. Despite being asleep, she was looking anything but comfortable; in fact she looked distressed. Her face was contorted with what Solo suspected was pain and her body was writhing slowly.

Concerned, he sat on the bunk beside her and ran the scanner over her head, watching the small screen as it relayed the pertinent information. Her brain was a little bruised on one side, but there were no clots or signs of haemorrhaging. But she was obviously suffering one hell of a headache.

Leia whimpered and pulled away from him and he followed her, running the scan a second time just to be sure. The diagnosis was the same, and Solo was about to get up to get her a painkiller, something intravenous so he wouldn't have to wake her, when she started gasping for air. His automatic reaction was to sit her up, to clear her airways, but when he gripped her upper arms to do so, she wailed and tried to throw herself from his grasp.

That was when he realised she was dreaming.

The throbbing ache in her head eventually penetrated Leia's pain-free oblivion, forcing her back to consciousness. And with consciousness came nausea. Leia moaned and shifted her head, hoping the change in position would ease the ache but, if anything, it seemed to intensify. She was breathing heavily, struggling to deal with the pain when a low hum seemed to hover over her. It confused her momentarily, but then abruptly she was back in her cell on the Death Star, the interrogation droid hovering over her.

Leia moaned and tried to back away. Then she felt the clamps wrap around her upper arms, the clamps that had held her in place while her veins were filled with poison...

No, please...

"Leia?"

"Where are the Death Star plans?" She was surrounded by menace. *Goddess, no...*

"Leia?"

The clamps were tightening; she could feel herself shaking. Next would come the burning...

"Where is the rebel base?"

*Where is Alderaan, you **bastards**?*

"Leia!"

Why were they calling her by her name? No one ever called her by her name. Sometimes Leia wondered why she even bothered keeping her name. As far as the rest of the galaxy was concerned, Leia did not exist. It was always 'Princess' or 'Your Highness' or 'Your Worshipfulness'...

"Leia, wake up; you're dreaming."

I am? But, the pain feels so...real.

A hand touched her face and she flinched away, whimpering. The pain in her head was becoming unbearable. But the hand was back, gentle, tender, forgiving. *I must be dreaming. Who could forgive me for Alderaan?*

Leia forced her eyes open and the light cut into her brain like a hot blade. She wailed and covered her eyes and found herself being held against a strong masculine chest, comforted, caressed. And a familiar, deep voice kept repeating over and over, "It's all right, Leia, you're safe. You hit your head. You're safe."

Safe...

Safe in an asteroid field? In the middle of an asteroid? In Han's arms?

Nausea...The Death Star dream always makes me vomit.

Leia tried to push Han away but he held her tighter, not realising she was no longer in the grip of the nightmare.

"Han," she stammered, letting him know she was aware. "I'm going to throw up."

He let her go and she fled to the 'fresher and vomited her heart out. Every purge was a new experience in agony; her head felt like it was going to explode and the pain behind her eyes made her want to claw them out.

Finally finished, Leia dragged herself to her feet and leaned over the basin, rinsing her mouth and washing her face with the cool water.

"Do you want a painkiller?"

The sound of his voice made her jump and she turned to see him standing in the doorway and felt a wave of irritation wash over her. Had he watched her entire performance? He looked concerned.

Leia nodded her response to his question, unable to trust her voice, and he moved away from the door. Heading back to the bunkroom, she supposed.

[How is she?] Chewie asked as Solo entered the bunkroom.

"I'm getting her a painkiller," Solo explained as he rifled through the medical kit.

[This is more than concussion,] Chewie pointed out.

"I know," Solo agreed, snapping a cylinder into the infuser.

Leia stepped into the room and Solo was struck by how small and fragile she looked. Although she now wore underwear, she pulled on the bottom of her shirt. Afraid of repeating her earlier performance, he supposed, and had to stifle a smile at the memory of the distracting sight of her creamy-white bottom appearing beneath her shirt, *his* shirt, as she had struggled to lift Chewie's helmet off.

Her hair was dishevelled and loose, hanging about her shoulders and down her back like a dark shawl. Solo was suddenly reminded of how she had looked in Farrouq's mansion almost three years ago on the mission to Galadan that had taken them to Coruscant and almost got them all killed. He was surprised to realise he had been as besotted by her then as he was now. The realisation was

something of a shock, because he'd been convinced at the time that she and Luke were destined to be a couple. It was certainly what Luke seemed to have in mind.

But not what the princess had in mind obviously. She had successfully kept the young man at a safe distance as far as romance was concerned, and Luke's interest for her in that regard had definitely waned. And, although the kiss she had given Luke in the sick bay on Hoth had been rather passionate, it seemed certain that she had kissed Luke simply to annoy Han. Luke had said as much that afternoon before everything had gone to hell. And then, of course, there was the kiss in the circuitry bay...

He approached her, indicating her neck with the infuser, and was amused to see her react exactly as he would have done – by covering her neck with her hand.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Millerangin," he assured her.

Leia lowered her hand and leaned her head slightly, pushing her hair out of the way and exposing her neck to him. It looked wonderfully smooth and soft, and Solo wanted to kiss it, but he pressed the hypodermic infuser against it, touched the trigger and heard it hiss faintly as the contents were forced through the princess' skin. He had given her a strong dose and, because it was being introduced intravenously, knew the effect would be pretty instant, but was nevertheless surprised when she slumped against him suddenly and sighed with relief.

He rested his hand tentatively against her back, enjoying the silken feel of her hair but uncertain how she would react if he hugged her. "Leia?"

The princess took a deep breath and stepped away from him, then looked up at him and said seriously, "Words cannot express my gratitude, Han. You are a god."

Solo chuckled and moved away to replace the infuser in the medkit. "*Finally* she sees the true me!"

Leia approached the Wookiee. "I'm so sorry, Chewie," she said contritely. "How are you feeling?"

[I'll be fine, little princess,] the Wookiee responded. [I, too, am deeply sorry for causing you pain.]

Leia turned her head slightly towards Solo as he translated, not taking her eyes off the Wookiee, then nodded. "Chewie, I'd like to learn your language; would you teach me? Threepio can help, and it's not as if we don't have time."

The Wookiee barked an eager affirmative and Leia smiled.

"Thank you," she said, squeezing his hand, then moved over to her bunk and started dressing. "What were you doing on the hull?" she asked Solo.

"ESA blew."

"I never would have guessed," she sniped sarcastically. "I assume you have another EV suit?"

Solo chuckled. "Why, Princess? Planning on coming out?"

"You needed Chewie," she said pointedly.

"Logged a lot of EV hours, have you, Princess?"

"No," she admitted, "but it still has to be done."

Solo regarded her carefully. The extra hands would be useful, without a doubt, but dealing with someone having an EV freakout...though admittedly, "freaking out" was not something he could imagine Leia doing.

He nodded reservedly. "I could use the help. " Then wagged his finger at her and warned, "You throw up in the suit, you clean it!"

Leia rolled her eyes. "Fine." She waved him towards the door. "Lead the way, Captain."

An hour later found them on the bottom hull, almost finished repairs on the Environment System Assembly. Threepio had been deeply traumatised by what he considered his 'deep space abandonment' and Solo had escorted him back to the top hatch. By the time he'd got back to where he'd left Leia, she was lying back, seemingly enjoying the view.

"Anyone would think you were enjoying yourself," he quipped, stepping up beside her.

Leia sat up. "I am," she said, and let him help her to her feet, being careful not to tangle herself in the safety-line dangling from her waist. "Once I get past the change to zero-g, the nausea and stuff, I actually like it."

Solo regarded her affectionately. "Like I've said before, Sweetheart, the Academy would have loved you."

"If the Academy had allowed females to be admitted," Leia responded pointedly, following him across the hull to where the Environment System Assembly was housed.

"Their loss," Solo agreed. "And I seem to remember pointing that out to them several times."

Leia grinned. "Think they could have coped with Luke *and* me?"

Solo laughed then sobered as he seriously considered the proposition. "I think they would have had trouble keeping you apart."

Leia laughed and said, "You think?"

"You would have been the sweethearts of the Academy," Solo teased. "Its star pilots-turned-lovers."

"*Lovers?* I don't think so."

Solo thought he detected discomfort in her voice and turned to look at her, but her face was hidden by the reflection of their helmet lights on her visor.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I just don't feel that way about Luke," she snapped, obviously irritated.

"No need to bite my head off," Solo responded defensively, walking towards the ESA again.

"Well, everyone is always pairing us off! It's annoying."

Solo checked the replacement ESA he had abandoned with Threepio and was pleased to see the droid had had the sense to magnetically secure it to the hull. He put his tool kit down beside the assembly, securing it the same way, and made a mental note to thank him.

"Maybe they pair you off because they all know how Luke feels about you?" He proposed.

"And how *I* feel about him doesn't count?" She knelt opposite the assembly from him and added sarcastically, "Oh, I forgot-I'm the 'ice princess' – fair game for any man with the balls to thaw me, right?"

Solo winced. He had said something to that effect in the south passage on Hoth. Said it to hurt her because she was being deliberately obtuse about his leaving the Alliance. Obviously he'd succeeded. He opened his mouth with the intention of apologising, but she muttered, "Besides, everyone knows I don't *have* feelings."

Not since Alderaan, Solo thought. *Only 'safe' ones like anger or hate*. But that was another issue, and not one he wanted to start here. He removed the relevant tools from the toolbox and passed them to her, then went back to the safety of their original topic. "You and Luke spend a lot of time together; people assume – "

"You and I spend time together; do they say that about us?" Leia frowned and answered her own question, "Actually they do, don't they?"

Solo grinned at her, pleased to find her face visible from this angle. "Especially after we've had a fight."

Leia's sigh was loud through the speakers beside his ears.

"Don't get me wrong," she said, sounding resigned. "It's not that I don't like Luke, I do. I just don't...I'm not in love with him."

A stab of what Solo could only describe as pure joy spiked through him, and he had to force himself to concentrate on the job at hand. *So what?* He told himself irritably. *Just because she's not in love with Luke doesn't mean she's –* . He stopped himself, refusing to think it. *Doesn't mean she feels anything for me*, his mind murmured quietly, rewording the thought to sneak it past.

She said she didn't want to get involved! Solo told himself crossly, then held out his hand and asked for the hydrospanner without looking at her. *Hell, I don't want to get involved! Of course you don't*, the other half of his brain told him sarcastically. *That's why you kissed her*.

"Which size?" she asked, and Solo wondered if anyone had ever told her what a sexy voice she had.

"Four," he said, and felt the appropriate shape fill his gloved hand.

He disconnected the relevant attachments on the ESA, handed the hydrospanner back to her, then, with Leia's help, lifted the unit out of its housing. While the unit itself was not large, it would normally have required Chewie's

strength to lift it, but in zero-g it was more than manageable. He ran a strap around it and hooked the strap to his belt to stop the unit from floating away.

"I hope he made it back to the fleet," he heard her say quietly inside his helmet, and wondered if she ever felt as concerned about him as she always seemed to be about Luke.

Solo concentrated on settling the new ESA into position before pausing to look at her. "A pilot like Luke? I'm sure he's fine," he assured her, not wanting to consider the alternative himself. Then, in an attempt to make light of their situation, he smiled and quipped, "Probably wondering what *we're* doing right now."

Leia's eyes met his for a moment, and then looked back at the ESA, obviously uncomfortable with that train of thought. "They'll all think we were caught," she murmured.

Solo couldn't disagree with her and thought sourly, *Yeah, it's gonna do wonders for my reputation among the bigwigs*. He made some adjustments to the new ESA unit then set about reattaching the necessary links, Leia passing him the requisite tools as needed. Connections complete, he held his breath and turned it on, and was pleasantly surprised to see it spring to life exactly the way it was supposed to. The way his luck had been running, Solo had fully expected it to fizzle and die. Happily, he made the final adjustments and set the temperature a fraction higher than usual, taking Leia into account and hoping it would make her time aboard his ship a little more comfortable.

He closed the panel, task completed, and looked at her.

"Finished?" Leia asked.

"Finished," he replied.

Leia clambered to her feet, awkward in the large magnetic boots, and walked around to him. She helped him secure the tools she had been holding back into the box, then walked beside him as he carried the faulty ESA back to the airlock. Solo opened the hatch, wincing at the blare of light from the airlock below, and positioned the unit on the small platform.

"You go down with it," he said, aware of Leia retracting her safety line. "Get Chewie to come and move it, then I'll come down."

When she didn't answer he turned to look at her. Leia was staring past the *Falcon's* mandibles at the Anoat system's Primary in the far distance, Beshpin, their destination, a point of light in between.

"Leia?"

She turned sharply towards him. "I'm sorry? What did you say?"

Solo stepped up beside her and regarded the distant sun as she had been doing. "You were a million light years away."

"I'm sorry, I was – "

"I know," he assured her. "It's like that. When there's nothing between you and the stars. You feel like you could fly without a ship."

"Yes," she admitted quietly.

He looked at her, bending to be able to see her face and forcing her to look at him. "You *should* have been a pilot; it's in your blood."

Leia looked back at the distant sun for a moment and Solo saw deep longing on her face, then she looked back at him and smiled. "The Organas never flew a day in their lives. They probably couldn't even drive a landspeeder. Too *privileged*."

"Then they must have felt way out of their depth with you!" Solo assured her and directed her towards the hatch. "Maybe you got it from your mother?"

Leia forced a smile and stepped onto the small platform. "Maybe." The platform descended, taking Leia and the faulty unit to the airlock below, and the hatch irised shut.

Left alone on the top of his ship, Solo considered her smile, aware of the deep sadness behind it, and was cross with himself for bringing up the family she had lost. He turned from the hatch to look back at the point of light that was Bespin and it occurred to him that almost everything would remind her of Alderaan. And that nothing he could say or do, or *not* do, would change that. He wished things were different, wished Alderaan was still there. And wondered where she would be if it was.

After the Death Star, she would have been a known Rebel sympathiser and activist. She wouldn't have been able to go home anyway. But at least it would have been there.

For a moment he wove a little fantasy in which the Empire didn't exist, and wondered where they would be. She would still be a princess of course, but without the cares she had now. Solo guessed she would seem younger, and probably more aloof. And he? Perhaps he would still be with the Navy, a captain.

Respectable. Respectable enough for a princess? Or, more importantly, her father?

Would she have gone to the Academy? Defied her father and followed her heart? Solo smiled at the images *that* fantasy conjured; she'd have turned the place on its ear! She and Luke. His smile melted away at the thought of Skywalker until he remembered that she'd said she wasn't *in love* with Luke. Solo smiled as he imagined Leia's reaction to the person *he* had been at the Academy – loud, obnoxious, cocky. She would have hated him! And he her. Solo grinned to himself. Both of them feeling equally passionate about the other...what an affair they could have had! Or would she have been like all the other spoiled rich brats that went through the place – seeking out every form of excitement to make up for the lack of it in their own lives. Blowing exorbitant allowances on drugs and alcohol, and sleeping with anyone and everyone just to get back at Daddy. Solo suspected Leia had too much self-esteem to take the full self-destructive path, but wondered if she would have experimented with it a little.

He tried to imagine her as a carefree teenager and realised he couldn't. Leia was naturally politically minded; she'd have been organising rallies and student demonstrations. And, as far as her military training was concerned, Solo was sure she'd have done *everything* by the book. She and Luke.

They were so alike in so many ways. They really were perfect for each other. Maybe that was the problem? Luke was not a challenge. *So what does that say about me?* Solo thought wryly. Leia was certainly a challenge as far as he was concerned – and one he took to with relish. But why? What was it about her and why did he *care* so damn much? Sure he wanted to sleep with her, but if that was all it was he'd have had her and been gone years ago. No, there was something else at work here, something far more dangerous and sinister. Something a mere "bonk" wouldn't satisfy. Nearly losing her on Ord Mantell had brought his feelings for her into sharp focus, and yet the reality of it was still too terrifying to contemplate.

Solo looked back at the hatch and wondered what he was waiting for. Leia was attracted to him, he knew that; he could read her body language easily. She wanted him. And he wanted her. But she was still in that state of virginal denial, trying to remain sane and logical against a tide of hormones. Refusing to believe that her body could be possessed of such instincts, or that her body's desires could rule her head. Maybe he needed to show her that logic had no part in this? Maybe he needed to go down there now, take her to the bunkroom and show her just what it was her body was craving? Get it out of both their systems.

But would it? Or would it just make things worse? Make leaving her unbearable. Solo looked up at the star-sprinkled blackness all around him. They could be dead tomorrow.

The hatched irised open in front of him, as if inviting him to carry out his plan, and Solo sighed. Leia was also terrified, had locked her feelings away so tightly that even she had forgotten the access codes. If he charged down there now, she would never let him near her again.

That was when he realised – he was waiting for *her*. Had been waiting for three years. Waiting for Leia to come to him.

Solo stepped onto the small platform, so engrossed in his thoughts he was only dimly aware of it carrying him into the ship, didn't even notice himself sag as the ship's artificial gravity made itself felt. Yes, he would wait for her, but he would also try to help her remember those codes. In fact, he suspected he had already broken one – when he kissed her in the circuitry bay. He smiled. So maybe he wouldn't rush her into the bunkroom; he'd just *kiss* her occasionally....

The airlock cycled and the hatch to the ring corridor opened to reveal Chewie waiting for him on the other side, the old ESA in the middle of the floor. The Wookiee stepped in and helped Solo remove his helmet.

"Where's Leia?" Solo asked peeling himself out of the thick EV suit.

[She rushed to the head,] Chewie answered.

Solo looked at him, concerned. "Is she all right?"

Chewie nodded. [I think so. She muttered something about gravity.]

Solo frowned. "Oh." He leaned forward to inspect the bald patch on the Wookiee's shoulder. "How's the shoulder?"

[I can feel it,] was the terse response.

Chewie had recovered enough to feel pissed about the blaster burn on his shoulder, but didn't feel comfortable enough with the princess to have a go at her. Solo smiled. The Wookiee and the princess had never come to blows. But then they had never been trapped in such close proximity for 40 days before. They were both hot-tempered, and it was inevitable there would be a battle of wills eventually... And, with the morbid fascination and safety of a spectator, and having been on the receiving end from both of them, Solo couldn't wait to see what happened when the war broke out.

"Let me check on Her Worship, then we'll see if there's anything salvageable on that old ESA."

Chewie picked up the heavy unit and headed towards the aft hold. Solo hung his EV suit in the recess beside the airlock, then followed the corridor past the

bunkroom to the 'fresher. The door was shut and he could hear the sonic shower in operation. It was unusual, but then maybe Leia had a thing about showering after space walks. A lot of people felt 'irradiated' after being EV.

Solo knocked on the door. "Leia?"

He could hear the panic in her voice as she responded, "*Han?*"

Solo grinned. She thought he was going to walk in on her. "No," he replied to her ludicrous question, "it's Luke." He didn't hear a response, but felt certain she'd be glowering. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine," was the response, but there was a reservation or terseness in her voice that made him hesitate before leaving.

"Are you gonna be long?" he asked. "I gotta go." He didn't need to use the 'fresher, but he was feeling vaguely concerned about her, and it was as good an excuse as any to get her to open the door.

The sonic shower stopped and he heard the shower door open. A moment later the 'fresher door opened and she was standing before him wearing nothing but a towel, a guarded expression on her face.

Solo was riveted by the sight of her naked shoulders, and by the knowledge that under the towel —

"I need you to fix the autovalet," she said.

Solo nodded. "I know. We'll get to it."

"No," Leia said evenly. "I need it fixed *now*."

Solo couldn't disguise his chagrin. It wasn't that he didn't want to fix the autovalet; it was just a much lower priority than systems like the ESA.

"Look," he said tersely, "I'm sorry you don't have any of your clothes but — "

"The change in gravity brought on my menses," she said stiffly, meeting his gaze despite the telltale reddening in her cheeks. "The pants I was wearing — "

"I'll fix it," Solo said hastily, cutting her off. "Soon as you're out of there."

"Thank you," Leia said, moving past him to the bunkroom and closing the door.

Solo ran a hand through his hair and caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of his eye. He looked back toward the aft hold, but the corridor was empty. *Chewie*, he thought. *Listening in. Probably laughing his fool head off back there.*

He moved into the 'fresher and started pulling the autovalet apart.

Two hours later he was abusing the autovalet with every swear word he knew. He had fixed it twice, but still it would not work and Solo, hot, irritated and sweating, for the life of him, couldn't understand why. He was lying awkwardly on the floor with his arm twisted into the machine, when the princess stepped into the small room – he assumed to check on his progress. He snapped without looking at her, "*What?*"

"I thought you might like a drink," she said quietly.

Solo pulled his arm out of the recalcitrant laundry unit's innards and looked up at her. She was wearing another pair of his pants and one of his...*undershirts?* Solo sat up, wiping his hands on his pants, then took the glass she was holding out to him. It was simply water, but it was cold and wet and barely touched the sides as it went down his throat.

"Thanks," he said, trying not to notice the subtle shape of her nipples through the sleeveless undershirt fabric as he handed the glass back to her. Nevertheless, his manhood noticed, and responded accordingly. Solo shifted uncomfortably. "Is it hot in here or is it just me?"

"It's hot," she assured him, and then added tactfully, "I think the temperature on the new ESA may have been set a little high."

"What are we running?" he asked.

"Thirty-nine," she said, and Solo rolled his eyes irritably.

"I set it on twenty-five!" he growled. "I'll have to go back out and reset it."

"I'll go," Leia offered.

"No, it's all right," he muttered. *One more fucking thing! I knew that fucking unit went in too easy!*

"Would you like another drink?"

Solo nodded. "Thanks."

She stepped out of the 'fresher and he turned back to the autovalet. How the hell was he supposed to concentrate on the autovalet when she was walking around his ship looking like that? Solo stuck his arm back inside the autovalet and felt around again but, as far as he could tell, all the connections were there. The stupid piece of junk *should* have been working! He sighed and beat his head half-heartedly against the seemingly unfixable machine and wondered how upset Leia would be if he put it out the airlock.

"Does that help?" Leia asked, and Solo looked up, surprised to find her back so soon. The amused affection in her deliciously sexy, alto voice reduced his response to a primitive grunt.

She stepped into the 'fresher and Solo pulled his arm out of the autovalet a little too quickly, wincing as he caught the back of his hand on something sharp, tearing the skin. Ignoring it, he again wiped his hands on his pants and took the offered glass. But this time he drank a little slower.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Leia asked.

A good bonk would take my mind off it, Solo thought facetiously, but shook his head. "I don't know what's wrong with it," he said. "It *should* be working."

"Do you want me to get Chewie?"

"Nah, the area's too small; he wouldn't get his hand in."

She noticed the blood on the back of his hand and frowned. "You've cut yourself," she said.

"It's nothing," Solo said and finished his drink.

Leia matter-of-factly rinsed the cloth that was on the edge of the small washbasin and handed it to him, trading it for the glass, and Solo resigned himself to at least making an attempt to clean it. He dabbed half-heartedly at the blood.

"Oh, do it properly," Leia growled, bending to his level and taking the cloth from him.

She started cleaning his hand and Solo, affronted, looked up at her and started to protest, "I can do it." But his view down the front of her undershirt silenced him. He glanced at her face, totally focused on his hand, and let his

eyes slide back to the soft visible curve of her breasts. All too soon her ministrations were finished and he looked at her face a fraction of a second before she looked up at him.

Solo swallowed and said softly, "Are you going to kiss it better, too?"

Leia smiled indulgently, lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it softly. It would have taken no effort at all to turn his hand to cup her face, to draw her to him. But he knew she would balk, so Solo forced himself to fight his instincts and simply smiled at her. *Give her space*, he told himself. *Wait. She has to want it as much as you do.*

"Better?" she asked. Solo nodded and she stood up straight. "I'll leave you to it then." She picked up the glass and left.

Solo sighed and looked balefully at the autovalet. He was about to put his arm inside again but reconsidered and gave it a hefty thump instead. The recalcitrant machine whirred into life.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered and hit it again. The autovalet hummed contentedly.

There was an air of irritability around the small holotable that evening, despite the fact that Solo had prepared what they all agreed was a very enjoyable meal. Solo's attempts to correct the ESA's setting had proved fruitless; the temperature inside the ship continued to be oppressive, and Solo was like a caged predator. Chewie had pointed out that the System they'd put in was actually designed for a ship twice the size of the *Falcon*, and that the ESA would regulate itself eventually, but that didn't make the current temperature any easier to bear. The temperature *was* coming down – it had dropped almost two degrees since Solo's last adjustment, but it was a slow process and conducive to ill tempers.

Solo and Leia had stripped to the bare minimum in an attempt to ease their discomfort. Solo was wearing an old pair of cut-off trousers, and Leia, one of his undershirts and a pair of lightweight shorts, identical to the ones Solo had taken to wearing to bed. The shorts had a drawstring waist, enabling her to cinch them to fit her. Her own snow-clothes were now dry because of the heat, but impossible to wear for the same reason.

Seeing Leia in what was essentially his underwear fuelled Solo's fantasies and frustration to a degree he had not thought possible. There was only one other woman who'd worn his clothes like this, and that was *after* he'd slept with her. A fond memory, and one that only exacerbated his desire to sleep with Leia. Simply sitting next to her was almost unbearable; the heat from her body and the sheen of perspiration on her skin... Han Solo was from a temperate climate and, despite his extensive travels, a hot, sweaty woman usually meant one he was 'playing' with.

But Leia had been getting less tolerant as the ship's day wore on, and Solo suspected it was not just due to the heat. He could tell by the way she was limiting the movement of her head and shoulders that she was in pain; she had obviously strained her muscles while trying to get Chewie out of his EV suit. But she was too stubborn to ask for any sort of pain-relief and, chances were, she would barely be able to move by ship's morning.

Chewbacca's shoulder had been wrapped to protect the bacta working there and the accompanying arm was immobilised to help speed the bacta's progress. As a result, he was getting progressively more frustrated by the limiting nature of being one handed. He was also unhappy about the heat, his thick pelt making him doubly uncomfortable, and, Solo noted, he was starting to *smell*.

Leia stopped eating and, with her elbows on the table, leaned her head forward between her hands so she could massage her neck and shoulders. *It must really be hurting*, Solo thought. She had loosely plaited her hair and it fell over one shoulder, tangling in her fingers as she tried to ease the tension in her muscles. Solo wanted to do it for her, to massage her neck and shoulders, to take the pain away. But he knew she wouldn't let him. Just the thought of touching her... caressing her... He stabbed his fork into the spicy salad he had created and tried not to think about her.

Chewbacca must have noticed her discomfort, because he paused his eating to question the princess' well being.

Leia waved his concerns aside. "I've just strained something," she said, and self-consciously sat up straight. "Couple of days and I'll be fine." She glanced at Solo, and then looked away.

Watching her, Solo suspected her train of thought had something to do with how unaffected he seemed to be from lifting Chewbacca and explained, "I've been dragging his hide around for years." Nevertheless, he was concerned for her. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine."

Chewbacca almost choked on his food. [This is because of me?] He sounded mortified.

"She was helping me get you out of your suit – " Solo started to explain.

[You had her try to *lift* me?]

"She *shot* you. We had to get the suit off and you weren't exactly helping-"

"I'm fine, Chewie," Leia tried to reassure him. "Really."

Chewbacca glared at his partner and barked matter-of-factly, [She'll need therapy on the affected muscles.]

Solo just looked at him.

"What?" Leia asked, looking for Threepio.

[Otherwise she'll be suffering for days,] the Wookiee insisted. [You'll have to do it; I've only got one hand.] Solo's expression turned uncomfortable, and Chewbacca added, [Besides which, I'd probably hurt her.] Solo started to shake his head but, seeing this, the Wookiee growled sharply. [You'd rather see her suffer than help her?]

Solo scowled at him. "You don't understand – "

"What?" Leia asked, understandably irritated at the lack of translation.

[Oh, I understand,] Chewie growled. [Better than you think. But you need to think beyond your desire to mate with her.] Solo's eyes met his like a thunderclap, full of affront and denial. [And don't give me that look. I know how deep your feelings for her run. But she is suffering, and *you* can help.]

Solo was struggling to work up a response when the princess sighed and asked to be let out from her position between them.

"Leia – " Solo started, but Leia held up her hand to stop him.

"I'm sorry, Han, I just can't do the one-sided conversation today."

[Tell her,] Chewie snapped as she squeezed past Solo.

"No," he muttered tightly under his breath.

[Tell her, or I will!] He watched the princess leave the hold, then glared at his partner and hollered, [Threepio!]

"Chewie..." Solo growled.

[*Threepio!*] The Wookiee looked back at his friend. [I'll tell her you're afraid to ease her suffering –]

Solo glared at him, hotly affronted. "She won't let me!" he snapped.

[I'll act as chaperone,] Chewie offered snidely. [That way she'll feel safe.] He looked irritably for the protocol droid and bellowed, [*Talk droid!!*]

"*Safe?*" Solo hissed.

Threepio hurried towards them from the direction of the cockpit. "Yes, Chewbacca?"

[Come with me,] Chewie barked succinctly and got to his feet to follow the princess.

"Chewie, will you just let it go?" Solo begged. "Please?"

[No,] the Wookiee snapped and walked out of the hold.

Solo hung his head in his hands and wondered what the hell he was going to do now. There was always the chance she would refuse – but Chewie was in a mood to be persistent, he could tell.

Leia was lying on her bunk when Chewie stepped into the open hatchway. She started to sit up, but winced and changed her mind as the pain in her neck and across her left shoulder intensified. The muscles had been steadily tightening all day, and now they felt like one huge knot. She didn't know what Chewbacca thought he could do, but she wished he would just go away. But when Threepio followed him into the room she knew she was in trouble.

Chewbacca moved across to the medbunk and pulled out the medkit. He foraged for a moment, found what he wanted, and put the medkit back. He then left the cabin, reappearing a moment later with a cup of water in his hand. He squatted beside the princess' bunk, rumbled and, holding the cup in the hand bound to his chest, offered her a small pill with the other.

"Princess Leia," Threepio translated. "Chewbacca says that he would like you to take this medication."

"I'm fine – " Leia started to say, but Chewie cut her off and Threepio hurriedly repeated, "Chewbacca says this is not a matter of choice – " The golden droid turned to the tall Wookiee and demanded, "What do you mean 'not a matter of choice'? Just who do you think you are to threaten Her Highness – "

Chewbacca roared fiercely at the droid, who took a step back then hurriedly told the princess, "It's a muscle relaxant."

Leia looked at the Wookiee kneeling beside her bunk. His clear, blue eyes held nothing but concern and a longing for her to trust him. She sighed softly and sat up, took the proffered pill and downed it with the cup of water he had brought. The worst it could do was put her to sleep, she decided, and there was a good chance it would quell the menstrual cramping only just beginning to make itself felt. Chewbacca rumbled happily and produced a heat-pack, which he must have warmed while getting the water. He rested it against her shoulder and Leia closed her eyes at the flood of relief it provided.

"That feels good," she admitted. Chewbacca rumbled gently and she opened her eyes to look at him.

"Chewbacca suggests you lie down, Your Highness," Threepio translated.

Leia nodded and turned onto her stomach, smiling softly as Chewbacca arranged the heat-pack across her shoulders. Despite the heat in the room, the focused warmth from the heat-pack was bliss. Leia closed her eyes and tried to help her muscles relax.

Chewbacca was aware of his friend standing silently in the doorway, watching the proceedings, unable to stay away despite his protestations and undoubtedly envious of his Wookiee partner's freedom to *touch* the object of his desires. Chewbacca sighed, and in a rumble barely audible to human ears, dismissed the droid.

With squeaking joints that sounded appallingly loud in the quiet cabin, Threepio departed. Chewbacca was afraid he would say something to Solo as he passed him, thereby giving away the Corellian's presence to the recumbent

princess, but, although the droid paused to look at the Corellian, he said nothing and kept heading for the cockpit as he had been directed.

As he looked at Solo, Chewbacca could feel the man's yearning for the young woman like a palpable force. He glanced pointedly at her then met his friend's gaze, telling him without words what he thought Solo should do.

Solo stepped reluctantly into the cabin, soundless on his bare feet, and moved to stand beside his friend. He looked down at the princess, chewing his bottom lip in a way he only ever did when he was very nervous, and Chewbacca got to his feet. He watched as Solo gathered himself, forced himself to sit beside her, and removed the heat-pack resting across her shoulders.

The princess turned her head sharply to look at him, and for the moment that he held her gaze Chewbacca could tell she was seriously considering fleeing. That it was only the Wookiee's presence in the room that kept her there. She winced as Solo's hands started kneading her abused muscles, then buried her face in her arm.

"Tell me if I hurt you," Solo said quietly, his attention focused on the feel of the muscles under his fingers. He felt her tense and assured her, "Relax, Leia, it's just a massage."

[I gave her a muscle relaxant,] the Wookiee rumbled softly and Solo nodded, his hands working continuously. He moved one hand down her back, feeling that muscle relax while his other hand tried to encourage a similar response from the tightly bound cords in her neck.

It felt like a long time to Solo, but in reality it was probably only ten minutes before her muscles finally relaxed under his fingers. Leia remained silent the whole time. Solo looked at her face – her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly ajar – and decided she had fallen asleep.

For a moment he indulged himself and simply studied her; brushed a strand of hair from her face and tenderly ran the back of his fingers over the soft curve of her cheek.

[You should tell her how you feel.]

It broke the mood. Solo bridled and his posture stiffened, but he did not look away from the sleeping princess. "And what would that achieve?"

[You would perhaps learn that she feels the same way about you.]

"And what good would that do either of us?" Solo muttered irritably. "If I made love to her, I couldn't leave." He got to his feet. "And I *can't* stay."

[Who says you can't come back?]

"From Jabba?" Solo looked at his friend and suspected Chewbacca was finally comprehending his fear and regret for the first time. "I'll be lucky if all he does is kill me." He turned and left the cabin, unable to bear the look of pity from his friend, and Chewbacca followed close behind.

On the bunk, Leia was unable to quell the tears that slipped from beneath her eyelids. Since Solo had informed her of his need to pay off the Hutt, and particularly since the bounty hunters had started to appear, Leia had always assumed it was Solo's innate irresponsibility that had kept him from paying the crime lord. But, as he had hinted on Hoth and now admitted to Chewbacca, he truly didn't expect to walk away from the Hutt with his life.

Leia felt certain that if it had just been himself and the Wookiee, Solo would have been happy to dodge the Hutt and his bounty hunters for the rest of his life. But, since Ord Mantell, since Fett had made her part of the equation, Solo had been adamant in his determination to pay his debts.

Even if it cost his life.

Struggling to stop herself from sobbing, Leia shifted onto her side and curled into a foetal position.

Everything I touch, everything I love dies.

Day4

He's watching me. I can feel it.

The Wookiee's morning ablutions in the 'fresher next door had awakened her, and probably Han as well. Or perhaps he had been watching her for a while.

Leia could feel his eyes on her back almost like a physical touch, and struggled to maintain the illusion that she was still asleep.

What's he thinking? Is he just going to stare at my back until I wake up?

Unless you'd rather give him your front to stare at? the sarcastic part of her suggested. *I'm sure he'd be agreeable.*

Leia rolled irritably onto her back, favouring her stiff neck and shoulders, and Solo said softly, "Morning, Leia."

Leia took a deep breath and expelled it through her nose, trying to calm the way her heart fluttered every time he said her name. She turned her head and looked at him. "Morning, Han."

Solo sat up, swinging his legs off his bunk, and rubbed his hands vigorously through his hair. This resulted in its sticking up at all angles and Leia couldn't help smiling.

"What?" he asked as he saw the expression on her face.

"Just enjoying your morning look," she said smugly.

Solo smiled, running a hand through his hair once more, then rasped his fingers on the stubble on his chin. "Think it'll catch on?" he asked.

"A Coruscant favourite," she assured him. "Actually, I think it already is," she added conspiratorially.

Solo grinned appreciatively and got to his feet, stretching expansively. Leia followed the play of muscles under his skin, mesmerised, until she noticed a bulge in the loose shorts he was wearing. She switched her eyes hastily back to his face and flushed a delicate pink as she realised he was quite aware of where her gaze had been focussed, however briefly.

He smiled and stepped over to her bunk, then leaned in and kissed her. The caress was soft and chaste yet suitably lingering.

"What was that for?" Leia asked, regarding him with wary surprise and he halted his retreat.

"You looked like you could use a good kiss," he said, then smiled and sat on her bed. "How're the muscles this morning?"

"A lot better than they would have been, I imagine," she admitted.

"Roll over," he said. "I'll warm them up."

Leia considered his invitation for a moment, then rolled onto her stomach and pulled her hair out of the way. She felt Solo shift closer and all but moaned as his hands made contact with the muscles across her shoulders. His hands were so wonderfully *warm*. She closed her eyes and let herself drift on the sensations his hands evoked.

"You're very good at this," she mumbled, her torso shifting with his manipulations. "Where did you learn?"

She could sense the smug smile on his face as he replied, "Just natural talent, Sweetheart."

"We had a masseuse on staff at home," Leia explained. "You're better than him."

"What are you suggesting?" he asked, and she could hear the laughter in his voice. "That I should sell my services?"

Leia smiled. "Maybe. Supplement the pitiful amount you get from us for freighting." As an afterthought she added, "And taxiing snooty princesses around."

Solo chuckled. "Dodonna'd think I was prostituting myself!"

"Who says he doesn't think that now?" she teased.

"You been spreading rumours about me, Sweetheart?"

"Every chance I get..." she murmured, struggling not to moan at the responses his hands were eliciting from her body. He slid the undershirt she was wearing off one shoulder to give himself greater access to the afflicted area and intensifying the tactile sensations on her skin.

"Oh," she breathed into her pillow, "You're in all the right places...and your hands are so *warm*..."

The undershirt was still restricting his movements and Leia lowered her arms, allowing him to slide it off her other shoulder. This, in effect, trapped her arms and, unable to hold her hair out of the way, Leia lifted her body and pulled her arms out of the undershirt all together. She settled again, pulling her hair away from her shoulders and felt him help. Felt his hand run across and through her hair in a way that could only be described as a caress. Leia shivered, then almost moaned with pleasure as he ran his fingers into her scalp.

She felt her eyes roll back into her head and closed them tightly, glad that Solo couldn't see her face, and wondered distantly, *What am I doing?*

His hands slid back to her shoulders, massaging once more, ranging deliciously across her bare skin. But even when she felt him push the undershirt down to her waist she did not protest. How could she when the feel of his hands was so irresistible?

He concentrated for a time over her kidney area, then moved slowly back up to her shoulders and down her arms. Leia moaned silently into the back of the hand her head was resting on. *What am I doing?* Then felt herself melt as his hands caressed the length of her arms before moving back to her shoulders. She could feel him leaning over her, smell his distinctive scent, and thought, *He could ask anything of me right now and I would do it.*

Solo trailed his fingers up her back and across her scalp and her skin broke out in gooseflesh. He did it again and she shivered.

"The palace masseuse never did anything like this," she stammered, attempting to maintain conversation so she wouldn't forget herself and moan.

"The palace masseuse never made love to you," Han murmured softly beside her ear, and still his hands travelled sensuously across her back.

With a shock Leia realised that was exactly what was happening. He had managed to divest her of her top, with *her* help, and soon her pants would follow. *But I can't!* she thought frantically. *I'm bleeding!*

"Han, stop," she said and rolled to face him, holding the sheet against her breasts to cover them.

They regarded each other for what seemed an eternity, and Leia longed to lose herself in his eyes. They were brown this morning – a soft, light brown. She wanted to remind him that he had promised not to seduce her, to tell him she had heard his vow to Chewie last evening, but his hovering *maleness* had thrown her completely.

She sensed his lips descending towards hers, knew she should protest, but was rendered speechless by the anticipation, and this time there was no denying the sensual nature of his kiss.

Leia all but physically jumped as electricity seemed to arc through her body. She reacted naturally, kissing him back, and when he paused to look at her, she halted his retreat by gripping his arm. Han needed little encouragement, and his lips found hers again. Leia tightened her grip on his arm, her other hand clutching the sheet to her breast as her body rewarded her participation with a delicious

ebb and flow. The sense of him hovering just above her was extraordinarily erotic and it shocked her to realise how intensely she *wanted* to feel him lying on top of her.

Her hand was working its way up his arm, and Leia knew that if it reached his neck she would pull him down to her. *I have to stop*, her conscience wailed. *I told him I didn't want this! I **can't** do this!* Yet her lips and body continued to ignore her. *Stop, stop, stop, stop!*

Then she felt his tongue cross her upper lip and was shocked out of her sudden passion. Sliding her hand to the centre of his chest, she put a physical barrier between them, and he stopped to look at her.

"I'm sorry," she stammered thickly. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"That's your problem," he said, pulling away from her. "You think too much."

Leia was insulted. She watched him pick up his clothes, automatically holding them in front of himself to hide the evidence of his arousal, and then he walked out without looking at her.

Leia exhaled a shuddering breath and rolled onto her side, covering her face with her hands. Her body still ached and her lips still tingled.

She spent the morning with Chewbacca and Threepio, and then, to keep herself out of Han's way and so she wouldn't have to ask him for something to do, Leia decided to tackle the circuit boards she hadn't finished microfusing. She was cross with him for kissing her and even crosser with herself for encouraging him. However, it was his remark about her thinking too much that rankled most. Leia couldn't help questioning Solo's taste in women if he had to stick to ones who didn't think. It didn't shed any brilliant lights on his character, either.

She had been working with the microfuser for an hour when the gravity went. Suddenly down was no longer down and a wave of dizziness went through her as the blood in her body seemed to rush to her head. Leia shrieked at the sudden change in perspective and hurriedly turned off the microfuser while struggling to stop herself from bouncing into the walls. And watched with impotent fury as the circuits she'd finished and the ones she had yet to do became hopelessly intermingled in mid-air. It would take her *hours* to sort them again!

"*Han!*" she shrieked.

A minute later Solo 'swam' into the aft hold, looked for her and grinned when he found her on the ceiling

"What're you doing up there, Sweetheart?" he quipped, and dodged a circuit board as it drifted past his head.

His grin infuriated her. "Does anything on this fucking ship work?" she demanded.

Solo's grin soured and he responded, "Your mouth?"

Leia would have hit him if she could have been certain of reaching him. "Why you—"

"What?" he demanded, capturing circuits as they passed him. "Nerfherder? *Scoundrel?*"

Leia steamed and decided she could probably reach him with a well-aimed kick.

"I came to warn you that we were disengaging the gravity for a couple of minutes, but Chewie obviously decided the surprise would be more fun."

"*Fun?*" Leia tried to throw a circuit board at him, but it tumbled lazily towards him instead. "Well, Chewie can —"

Her words degraded to an outraged shriek as the gravity came back on line and they plummeted to the floor amid a rain of flotsam and circuits.

Solo grabbed her and twisted as they fell, hitting the deck with his back and breaking the princess' fall. She crashed against his chest and the combination of impacts left him completely winded.

Leia threw herself off him. "Damn it, Han!" She looked at the mess of circuits and repeated, "Damn it!"

Solo lay, struggling to get breath back, and was aware of her getting to her feet.

Leia kicked at a small tumble of circuits. "I'm not sorting this, Han! You tell Chewie *he* can sort it!"

"You tell him," Solo croaked.

Challenged, Leia nodded and stormed down the ring corridor.

Unable to miss what promised to be a scene to remember, Solo struggled to his feet and hurried after her.

"Chewie?" she yelled and they both entered the main hold in time to see the Wookiee's feet disappearing into the overhead crawlspace. "*Chewie!*"

[What?] Solo heard his partner bark.

"I am not sorting the mess you've made in the aft hold!" she yelled.

[I wasn't anywhere near the aft hold,] was the response and Leia looked to Solo for a translation.

Solo shrugged. "Says he wasn't anywhere near the aft hold."

Leia stood under the hatch to the crawlspace and glared up at the Wookiee, hands on her hips. "You know what I mean," she told the Wookiee dangerously. "Fifteen boards, Chewie! *Fifteen!* *You* thought it'd be funny to turn the gravity off – *you* can sort the boards! I'd finished five and was almost finished with the sixth!"

[Then why hadn't you secured the ones you'd finished?] the Wookiee snapped. [If you hadn't secured them they were probably useless anyway!]

Leia frowned, struggling to translate. "Why did...why did...." She gave up and looked at Solo. "Why did I what?"

"Why hadn't you secured the ones you'd finished," he translated, then called up to the Wookiee himself, sounding resigned, "Because *I* didn't tell her to."

Leia rolled her eyes dramatically. "The lack of communication on this bucket of bolts is mind blowing! I have *no* idea how you two idiots make it fly!"

She stalked away and Solo watched her go, then looked up at Chewbacca and shrugged. Chewie grimaced at him and retreated into the crawlspace.

Solo went looking for her an hour later and, after a surprisingly extensive search, found her in the gun turret.

"What are you doing up there?" he asked, climbing up the ladder towards her.

The gaze she turned on him was vaguely hostile. "Target practice," she answered. "I just haven't figured out how to get the pictures of you out there."

Solo frowned at her. "What did I do?"

Leia glared at him then turned her seat to face away from him. "Leave me alone, Han."

"This is about this morning, isn't it?" he said, moving into the cramped space with her and sitting on the ladder. As the gravity in the turret was different from the rest of the ship, the sensation of sitting half in, half out confused his senses, making him feeling vaguely nauseous.

"I came here to be *alone*," she said, still not looking at him. "I need to think," she added a little less virulently.

"About this morning?"

"Among other things."

"Look, I'm sorry if I frightened you – "

"You didn't frighten me as much as I frightened myself, Han."

That flummoxed him. He had no response for that, and so he kept his mouth shut in the hope that she'd elaborate. Solo hadn't meant for it to happen either, but didn't know how to tell her that without insulting her. He had honestly meant to simply massage her shoulders, but had found himself caressing her as if it were the most natural thing in the galaxy, and it had felt so *right*...

Leia turned and looked at Han finally, wondering if she could admit to him that it wasn't her conscience that had stopped her this morning, but the fact that she was menstruating. No, she decided, it was still too personal.

"I'm sorry," she said, knowing how ineffectual it sounded.

Solo regarded her for a moment, and then asked, "About what happened? Or about what didn't?"

"About... all of it." She looked at her hands and sighed. "I just wish things could be different."

She dared to look at him and sensed he knew exactly what she meant.

Day7

Evenings were the hardest, Leia decided. That was really the only part of the 'day' when they all sat down together and had to make 'small talk'. She had started her lessons with Chewie two days ago and it was already making life interesting. Not that she could understand what he was saying yet, but there was the odd word she would catch, and Leia found herself listening to the Wookiee constantly, anxious to learn the flow of his language.

The temperature was coming down slowly; today it had hit thirty degrees and Solo had cheered. Danced around the hold like the lunatic he was. But while thirty degrees in the main hold was tolerable, in the bunkroom it was claustrophobic.

So Leia found herself lying on her bunk, on *top* of her covers *again*, *trying* to sleep. The heat had made her blood flow heavier, which was inconvenient, and Leia couldn't imagine what she would have done had the autovalet not been fixed. She had been living in some of Solo's clothes, and they were comfortable, certainly, but twenty hours a day? Leia wiped an irritating trickle of sweat from her throat and then roughly twisted her hair into one thick strand and lifted it away from her neck. *I should plait it*, she thought, but night was the only relief her scalp had from tight braids and she didn't want to spend the night more uncomfortable than she already was.

Another bead of sweat tickled her throat and she wondered if she could somehow make the floor in the main hold comfortable enough to sleep on. It was ludicrous that they could be suffering such heat in deep space. Ludicrous but typical. Especially considering the frozen hell they'd just left.

Solo had spent last night in the cockpit and Leia suspected he would do the same again tonight. He'd warned her he would be naked so, unless she wanted 'an education' as he had glibly put it, she would be wise to stay away. Leia couldn't help wondering what sort of 'education' he would give her. The thought of being naked was a seductive one. The thought of seeing *him* naked even more so. And the thought of being naked *with* him...

Leia rolled onto her stomach, irritated with herself. *Why* was she thinking these thoughts? She didn't want to get involved with him! Well, that wasn't exactly true, she admitted reluctantly; she knew she *shouldn't* get involved with him. That getting involved with him would inevitably lead to heartache. And Leia Organa had become extremely proficient at protecting her heart. Had locked it tightly away after Alderaan...

She had laid out the ground rules for Solo and, apart from the massage that had gone a little *awry*, his behaviour had been exemplary. The last two nights he had kissed her good night – light, non-threatening kisses. Tonight she had successfully avoided the nighttime ritual, but conversely found she missed it. And now her mind kept conjuring *images*... Han had spent the last three days in an old pair of cut-off pants, shirtless. Although she had seen him that way before and always found him attractive, the longing she suddenly had to *touch* him was almost maddening.

Leia felt reasonably certain that, despite his declaration to Chewbacca, Solo would need very little encouragement to leap into bed with her, and, on a physical level, Leia was finding the idea very tempting. To have it over with, that great unknown, and get on with her life. But that approach seemed so careless, selfish. Could she *use* Han like that? Or let herself go enough to participate? And on an emotional level? Leia suspected there was more between them than just lust, and that was the truly scary part, and probably why they had been dancing around each other for three years. If they did sleep together, what then? He would still leave and, Leia could admit to herself, she was having a hard enough time dealing with that prospect without the complication of sex.

All her life Leia had been taught to regard sex as something sacred -- a gift from the goddess, to be entered into only with love, and usually only in the confines of marriage. And although she had seen enough of other cultures, human and otherwise, to see her religious faith for the mere colloquialism it was, she still found it hard to dismiss. Even masturbation was a guilty pleasure, usually haunted by the spectre of her father, foster mother or aunts, and Leia wondered why she felt so honour-bound to keep up the dead ideals of a non-existent planet?

She sometimes envied Solo his Corellian heritage. *Sometimes*. Most of the time she regarded Corellian attitudes to sex as borderline depravity. But even Luke had had several encounters over the last couple of years, while 'The

Princess' continued to cling to her virginity as if it were some sort of talisman. Leia sighed and wondered for whom she was saving herself? The Alliance hierarchy? So that they could continue parading her about as some angelic martyr? It horrified her to think she had accepted the role. Willingly. Sacrificed her youth, her planet and now her humanity...for the Rebellion.

Leia rested her mouth against the back of her hand, realising that *all* of her life had been lived for someone else. Everything she had done, even her Senate tenure. She had *wanted* to be there, but it was for the betterment of others. The only thing she could ever remember doing purely for her own enjoyment was flying, a barely tolerated aberration as far as the rest of the Organas were concerned, and the first thing she had given up when she entered politics. But Han was right; it was in her blood. There was nothing she could compare to the freedom of flight. The power, the control, the *speed*.

She sighed and rolled onto her back again, pushing damp strands of hair from her face and considered having a sonic shower. It would give her relief from the interminable sheen of perspiration. For a little while at least. But she didn't have the energy. She heard Solo bid Chewbacca goodnight and move into the 'fresher, and closed her eyes, waiting to see if he would come to the bunkroom or spend another night in the cockpit.

Naked.

The thought of nothing but a cool sheet against her skin was wonderfully seductive and, Leia decided if he didn't come in, she would strip off as well. To her underpants at least -- her menstrual cycle precluded removing those. Solo hadn't made any 'smart' remarks about her bleeding; not that she really thought he would. Menstruation was one of those mysterious, women-only things that seemed to inspire universal discomfort in men.

She heard him leave the 'fresher and head back towards the front of the ship, so slid her shorts past her hips then sat up to pull them off. She tossed them to the end of the bunk then set about pulling the undershirt off over her head.

She had it half off, her arms trapped over her head, when the door to the bunkroom opened to reveal Solo. They both froze, their eyes locked for an endless moment, before Han's gaze slid down. To her chest. A 'fate accompli' settled over the princess and she finished removing the undershirt, dropping it with her hands into her lap, then looked at him again. He took a step towards her, his eyes bouncing between her breasts and her face. She watched his larynx bob as he swallowed before abruptly turning and leaving the room.

Bastard, she thought. Leia threw the undershirt to the end of the bunk, covered herself with the sheet and lay down. *Bastard*.

Well, what did you expect him to do? She asked herself. Not look?

I expected him not to come in here.

*You get the room to yourself for **one night** and you think it's **yours**?*

Leia groaned and rolled onto her side.

A moment later the bunkroom door opened again and she froze. Without a word, Solo walked across to his bunk and got in, lay down, pulled the top sheet up to his waist and rolled to face the bulkhead.

Leia stared at the contours of his back in the dim light and thought, *He's going to pretend it didn't happen.*

"Han?" No answer, but she could tell by his breathing that he was still awake. Leia sighed and closed her eyes. *Go to sleep*, she told herself. *Go to sleep and pretend you're not attracted to him. Pretend that when you wake up your every thought won't revolve around him. Pretend you're in control...*

"night, Han," she said quietly.

There was no reply and, after a while, Leia closed her eyes.

He didn't kiss me tonight...

"night, Leia."

Leia's eyes flew open and for a moment she thought she had dreamed it, but her brain assured her she had actually *heard* the distinctive deep rumble of his voice. She snuggled her face deeper into her pillow and wondered what the next thirty-four days would bring.

Day10

It was Leia's turn to prepare dinner but Solo had insisted on cooking, and she and Chewie were deeply suspicious of his motives. Therefore, when he called them to dinner and they found the table largely covered in generic spacer flasks, Leia regarded it warily while Chewie gleefully rubbed his hands together.

"What's all that?" Leia asked, surprised to find, on closer inspection, that there *was* actually food in among the flasks.

"We're celebrating," Solo announced happily.

Leia looked at him and wondered what harebrained idiocy he had thought up this time. "What?"

"One week!" he said grabbing a flask and pouring three cups, two standard sizes and one extra large. He replaced the flask and handed them a cup each, then held his own up and said, "A whole week and we haven't killed each other."

Chewbacca chortled, saluted them with his larger cup, and downed the contents in one swallow. Solo followed his example and Leia examined the contents of her cup suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"Potent!" Solo said, coughing, and Chewbacca laughed.

Leia put her cup down and they both yelled at her. "I don't have to drink it!" she said defensively.

"Sweetheart, we're *celebrating*," Solo said, as though he was explaining a difficult concept to a five-year-old. "The aim of the game is to drink as much as we can, have as much fun as we can, and hopefully remember as little as possible in the morning!"

"Oh hoh hoh!" she said and backed away from the table as though it was contaminated. "I've heard about these little *celebrations* of yours!"

Solo gave her his innocent surprised look. "You have?"

But Leia wasn't buying. She wagged her finger at him. "I've seen *Luke* after some of your little *celebrations*. He still hasn't got over the one where you dressed him in drag!"

Solo and Chewbacca traded shocked looks of inspired mortification and looked back at her with total, if feigned, innocence engraved on their faces. Solo pointed speechlessly at himself as if to say '*Me?*' and Leia almost laughed.

"Yes, *you!*" she insisted. "I *will* eat the food," she conceded, "but I will *not* drink."

"Ah," Solo said and put his arm around her shoulders. "But there are rules, you see."

Leia eyed him warily. "Rules?"

"Mmm!" Solo nodded, guiding her towards the table. "Why don't we all sit down and I'll explain them to you?"

"I'm not drinking, Han," Leia said forcefully.

Solo looked from the princess to the cup he had filled for her, and then held up his finger as a delighted look of inspiration flashed across his face. "Back in a minute," he assured her. "Sit, sit, sit." And rushed in the direction of the galley.

Leia sighed and passed her cup to Chewie, who promptly swallowed the contents, and then they both sat at the table. Solo reappeared a moment later and triumphantly placed a small shot glass in front of her.

Chewbacca seemed to think it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen and laughed hugely. Leia looked askance at Solo as he slid in beside her and he struggled to keep a straight face as he explained, lining up the cups one by one. "One for Chewie," he said, then pushed his own up beside the Wookiee's bowl-sized cup. "One for me." Then said with a flourish as he settled Leia's little shot-glass beside his standard sized one, "And one for mini-me!" Even Leia chuckled.

Solo poured her half a glass from the first flask and pushed it towards her. Leia shook her head.

"I made a concession," he said. "Now, it's *your* turn."

Leia gave him a stony look, but this time he didn't budge. Finally, she sighed and picked up the small glass. One or two wouldn't hurt, she supposed. Girding herself, she downed the contents in one gulp... and thought her head would explode. Solo handed her a large cup of water and she couldn't drink it fast enough.

"All right!" he crowed happily. "Now that the preliminaries are out of the way –"

Leia couldn't even cough, let alone yell at him. "Are you trying to *kill* me?" she croaked.

Solo cupped her face with one hand and regarded her affectionately. "Now where would be the fun in that?" He turned back to the table, grabbed another flask and proceeded to fill each of the cups again, only half-filling Leia's and beaming at her to make sure she noticed the concession. Leia simply glared.

"Speed is the name of the game," he explained to her as he passed out the cups. "First one to answer doesn't have to drink. Unless they get it wrong of course. Then they have to drink."

"And if you don't answer?" Leia asked sullenly.

Solo grinned. "You have to drink."

"So the only way to not have to drink is to answer first and answer correctly, right?"

"Yup." Solo picked up his cup and looked at both of them. "Ready?"

"Who asks the questions?" Leia wanted to know.

Solo growled, "I *knew* I forgot something!" Then yelled, "Hey, Goldenrod!"

Threepio had been standing beside the technical station and turned to look at them. "Yes, Captain Solo?"

"Question time, Threepio. You know the drill."

Threepio studied the three of them and managed to look perturbed. "Now, sir?"

Solo rolled his eyes and snapped sarcastically, "No, tin-man, next *week*. Yes, *now!*"

The protocol droid thought for a moment, then asked, "Which Smashball team won the finals this year?"

"Corellian Supernovas!" Solo shouted exuberantly, then turned and grinned at the others.

Chewbacca downed his cup and held it out for refilling while Leia contemplated hers and the rocket fuel that had been in her last glass. Finally, she drank it in one swallow. Expecting the worst, she was pleasantly surprised to find it extremely palatable.

She leaned across to look at the flask. "That was rather nice," she admitted as Solo refilled her glass from a new flask. "What was it?"

"No idea," Solo confessed. "That's the fun of the game, not knowing. That's why they're all in unmarked flasks."

"And, let me guess – half of it's undrinkable?"

Solo grinned. "Wouldn't be fun otherwise." He looked at Threepio. "Next question."

"Which planet is infamous for its human inbreeding?"

"Dubrillion!" Leia shouted, and then looked smugly down her nose at the other two while Threepio pronounced her answer correct.

Chewbacca and Solo downed their drinks and refilled their cups.

"What is the correct biological name for the species commonly known as the Chandrilian?" Threepio asked.

There was silence. Solo looked askance at Chewie, who shrugged and downed the contents of his cup. Solo looked at Leia.

"Mon Mothma?" she suggested, then tried to feel ashamed of herself.

"That answer is incorrect," Threepio said, but none of them were paying attention.

Solo looked delighted with Leia's suggestion but wagged his finger at her nonetheless. "I'm gonna tell her you said that."

Leia gave him a look that said, *Sure you will, Han*, and swallowed the contents of her glass. Solo did likewise and then refilled their cups from a different flask.

"Name the actor who played the lead role in the holocine adaptation of *To Die A Hero*," said Threepio.

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" Leia said, waving her hand excitedly, then abruptly switched to a dramatically sexy persona and drawled, "Damoran Revver." Then, once again looked down her nose at Solo as Threepio pronounced her answer correct.

"*To Die A Hero*?" Solo sounded anything but impressed. "*Please* don't tell me you're a fan?"

"It's a classic!" Leia protested, leaning back out of his way as he reached across her to fill Chewie's cup.

"Classic drivel," Solo opined.

"You know, I met him once," Leia said.

"Reverr?" Leia nodded and Solo asked, "Why? Did he promise to vote for you or something?"

"No, it was when he was trying to get into politics. Got voted in as Councillor for some minor sector on his homeworld and suffered ignominy on Coruscant. He offered to relieve me of the terrible burden of my virginity." She smirked. "His exact words."

"And you were how old?"

"Sixteen."

"Sleaze," Solo growled, and Leia sensed a bit of jealousy.

She smiled and said, "But roguishly handsome in a way that had women falling at his feet."

Solo regarded her with smug pride. "But not you."

"Oh, no," Leia agreed, then teased, "I only like *nice* men."

Solo's exasperated look only lasted a moment before both of them broke into huge grins.

Chewie barked impatiently and Solo agreed. "All right," he said. "Time to eat." He reached past the sea of flasks to a small stack of bowls and placed one before each of them.

"What is this?" Leia wanted to know. It looked innocuous enough --some sort of dried fruit or vegetable. But with Solo one could never be sure.

Chewbacca answered and Solo laughed and translated, "He said if you knew, you wouldn't eat it."

"Okay..." Leia acquiesced, deciding she probably *didn't* want to know, and tentatively tried one. Whatever they were, they were heavily salted and entirely palatable.

Solo used the pause in proceedings to put some background music on. A mixture of low-key melodious songs, some of which Leia knew, but a lot she didn't, and she guessed those were the newer ones.

They did another round of questions, most of which Chewie answered, and, to her disgust, Leia only managed to answer one. As a result, she was feeling decidedly relaxed and light-headed.

When Solo brought out the main meal, Leia was surprised at her own voracious appetite and devoured the heavily spiced dish with gusto. And wondered what it was about Corellians and spicy food.

She had almost finished when Solo gasped and both she and Chewie looked at him. "What?" she asked, and then suddenly recognised a dreamy, far away look in his eyes. He was reacting to the song that had just started.

"I haven't heard this for years," he murmured.

Leia smiled indulgently, "How long did you say those tapes were missing?"

Solo smiled and admitted, "Years."

He gazed into the middle distance. *Into the past*, Leia thought. That was where songs always took her, and why she had stopped listening to them. They brought back too many memories.

Solo started singing along, his eyes half closed, as he wallowed in the pleasant familiarity and allowed the music to wash over him. He had a pleasant singing voice, she realised with some surprise, and watched entranced.

Aware of her scrutiny, Solo opened his eyes and smiled at her and, without missing a beat of his song, redirected the words to her. Leia smiled tolerantly, wishing he would have the grace to be a little embarrassed by the mushy lyrics, and feeling a little out of her depth. How the hell was one supposed to act in this sort of situation? They had never covered being *sung* to in her diplomatic training. Propositioned, courted, even proposals of marriage, but not being serenaded.

Solo got to his feet and held his hand out to her, and she looked from it to him at a total loss as to what he expected of her now.

"Dance with me," he prompted.

Leia shook her head but contrarily gave him her hand, feeling obliged and bewildered. "I don't know – " she started, and Solo smiled, pulling her to him.

"Sure you know," he assured her. "What about all those formal functions?"

He turned in time to the music and she followed his lead awkwardly. "That...wasn't this sort of dancing," she murmured self-consciously. "That was...formal." *Proper*.

"Stiff-backed and uncomfortable," was Solo's judgment, and Leia smiled.

"That too."

Solo was singing at her again and Leia didn't know where to look. Solo's grin widened and he swung her to arm's length and back again. She tensed as he pulled her closer and he murmured into her ear, "Relax. *Feel* the music."

Leia closed her eyes and tried to focus on the music. Not the deep crooning of his voice or the feel of his breath across her ear. Not the warmth of one hand clasping hers, twining their fingers, and the other against her back, warm through the shirt she was wearing. The temptation to simply lose herself in his embrace was so powerful sometimes. He was intoxicating.

The song ended, followed by one with a completely different tempo, and Han and Leia, with unspoken agreement, disengaged and returned to the table.

Two more rounds, and Leia was certain she had never laughed so much in her life. She knew she was drunk – very pleasantly so, but far from senseless. She suspected she was also a little 'stoned'. Solo had put something extra in the food no doubt: berrenigo if her appetite was anything to go by, and she wondered what an introspective Solo would be like.

He and Chewie had taught her every drinking game they could think of, and they had all swapped tall tales and true, but their last tale had left her laughing so hard she could hardly breathe, and had in fact reduced her to tears.

Leia wiped at her eyes as she struggled to stop, glanced at Solo and started laughing afresh through her sobs. But the sobbing wouldn't stop. A wave of grief flooded through her and she covered her face with her hands, seeking to quell it, to return to the laughter of a moment ago. Solo was still laughing and she tried to focus on the sound, desperate to rejoin the party, but felt as if she were suddenly sliding down a long black hole. *Goddess, no...*

Looking at the princess laughing beside him, Solo felt certain he had never seen her laugh or relax like she had tonight, and decided that if he achieved

nothing else on this erroneous journey, at least he had made her happy – if only for a little while.

She was laughing helplessly into her hands, laughing so hard she was actually *crying*, and Solo, himself still laughing, reached out to rub her back.

That was when he realised she had stopped laughing.

He frowned and leaned towards her, concerned. "Leia?" And watched in total amazement as she fled in the direction of the cockpit.

Chewbacca watched her go and barked angrily, [What did you do?]

Solo held up his hands in complete bewilderment. "Nothing!"

The Wookiee snarled his disbelief and followed her, calling Threepio to follow him as an afterthought.

She was sitting in his chair, sobbing. Chewbacca had never seen the Princess of Alderaan cry. Never. He suspected no one had. And now she was sitting in his chair, weeping as though her heart were breaking, and he couldn't fathom what Han could have said to her to upset her so deeply. Especially when she had seemed so happy only moments ago.

She looked up as he stepped into the cockpit, fearful, Chewbacca suspected, of finding Han in the hatchway, and seemed to relax a little when she realised it was him.

She sniffed and asked, "What do you want?"

[My seat,] Chewbacca responded clearly, knowing she would understand that much of his language. He then waved his hand at the pilot's seat and said, [You can fit in his. I can't.]

The princess regarded Solo's seat as though she thought she might catch something from it, then got to her feet. "That's all right; I'll go."

Chewbacca pointed at Solo's seat and barked sharply, [Sit.]

Leia reluctantly moved across to sit in it and Chewbacca settled into his own, leaving Threepio standing between and just behind them.

[What happened?] he asked. [What did he do?]

"He didn't do *anything*," Leia sobbed. "I started crying from laughing and now I can't stop!"

Chewbacca thought about that for a while and decided it suggested unresolved issues. It occurred to him that there was a good chance she had never let herself grieve for the life and family she had lost on that galaxy-changing day three years ago. Never let herself grieve the death of her home world. It would have been too crippling at the time, and she had needed to function to survive. Plus there would have been the lingering pain from her Death Star ordeal, all of which had to be addressed before she could let herself think about Alderaan.

So, in the most efficient way possible, Leia Organa had buried it all to the most hidden corners of her mind. Buried it deep with her feelings. And now the alcohol was letting those feelings out; forcing her to address them.

[Perhaps because you have not let yourself cry,] Chewbacca suggested, irritated with the impersonal nature of having the droid translate.

Leia glared at him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

[You want everyone to believe your heart died with Alderaan,] the Wookiee said gently. [That you are nothing but pure efficiency. Have even convinced yourself.]

"Oh, and what *should* I have done?" she demanded, and Chewbacca sensed she was using her growing outrage to suppress her tears. "Sat blubbing in a corner while someone else figured out how to destroy the Death Star?"

[You need to let yourself *feel*,] he told her

"I *am* feeling," she responded weepily. "That's the problem! And I'm too drunk to be able to stop it!"

[Little princess,] Chewbacca rumbled and ran his hand down her arm. [There is no shame in grief.]

"*Shame?*" Leia looked completely traumatised and her tears sprouted afresh. "Goddess," she exclaimed, surging out of her seat, "you have no idea..."

Solo was slumped over the holotable and watched with impotent detachment as Leia fled past him towards the bunkroom and wondered what the hell his first mate could have said to her. He struggled to get to his feet, uncertain whether he should yell at Chewie first or follow the princess. What the hell was wrong with her anyway? How did someone go from laughing and enjoying herself so thoroughly to the depths of despair?

Chewbacca entered the hold and Solo turned to glare at him, noting that the Wookiee looked chagrined but unrepentant. Then suddenly the room seemed to be spinning all around him. Solo groaned. Of all the sithloving times to be drunk out of his mind...

[Continue To Part 2](#)

[Back To Index](#)