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Marriage of Convenience

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

“Dammit, we missed our connection.”

Han Solo had come to a halt dead in his tracks, dropped the kit bag he'd been carrying and placed his hands on his hips as he frowned up at the holoboards that listed departures and arrivals. An exhausted Leia Organa nearly ran into the back of him. Nearly but, much to her inexplicable regret, not quite. Despite concentrating on the throng of sentients and droids that filled the passenger terminal, Leia was aware of her companion and was able to sidestep him, only managing to brush against his side. An irrational thought occurred to her and she wished she hadn't reacted so quickly, wished she'd bumped into him, finally having found the excuse she needed to touch him.

Leia knew she was over-tired, and suspected fatigue had something to do with the way her mind had recently taken to obsessing about Han Solo. That, and the fact she'd been travelling closely with him for the last fifteen Standard days. He was obviously getting to her. Or perhaps he wasn't getting to her enough.

At first she'd resented that the Corellian had been selected to accompany her into the Corporate Sector, even if he was the only affiliate of their Rebel cell who'd had recent experience in that part of space. Her umbrage towards Solo had many origins. One of the things that angered her most was Solo's lack of commitment towards the Alliance. Solo had played a significant role in the Battle of Yavin and the destruction of the Death Star, but the smuggler had refused to become an official member of the Alliance. For the last year and a half he'd remained on the edge of the Rebel cell that she and Luke Skywalker belonged to, preferring to feed his greedy, mercenary tendencies rather than join in the fight against the Empire. So although he'd effectively 'volunteered' to partner her in a mission to the Sector, he'd also negotiated a substantial fee for his services.

Tainted by this disapproval of his morals, Leia was uncertain of her feelings towards the smuggler. His arrogance and cynicism grated on her nerves, but at the same time she deeply appreciated his piloting skills, his natural

leadership ability, and his loyalty to Chewbacca and Luke. She'd always considered him a friend of sorts, even if she didn't particularly like him from time-to-time.

Yet since they'd been on this mission together, something between them had subtly changed. Travelling under assumed names as a married couple, they'd spent twelve days using commercial passenger transport to surreptitiously enter the Corporate Sector, enroute to meeting their contacts. Sharing a two-berth cabin with Solo had not been the chore that she had imagined it would be, nor had she been required to use hand-to-hand combat to keep him at bay. Strangely enough, he had respected her privacy and had not pulled any number of stunts she had expected of him. Even more surprising, she had found him to be an insightful and amusing travelling companion. Away from the Rebellion's war-machinery and the testosterone-laden crew rooms, Solo revealed a personality she instantly grew to like, particularly as he made the long ship 'days' bearable. And most nights she'd spent doubled-up with laughter as she lay in the bunk beneath his, listening to his crude jokes and the wild stories he spun about his smuggling career.

Their mission had proceeded smoothly. They'd made contact with the businessmen who had offered to assist the Alliance by acting on their behalf as intermediaries between starship and weapons manufacturers. Leia knew that referring to these individuals as 'businessmen' was being overly generous. There was no doubt they were part of a wider criminal conglomerate, and their intentions were more nefarious than honourable. Leia had been grateful for Han's prior experience in dealing with these sorts of people. The physical presence of having him there by her side had bolstered her self-confidence, even if he'd been unarmed. The restrictive weapon regulations imposed by the Corporate Sector Authority meant that he'd had to leave his heavy blaster pistol behind, though he had been carrying an undetectable, single-shot palm-gun strapped to his lower leg.

Although the discussions had been amicable, they had not agreed on anything, nor had the princess promised anything apart from the assurance that she would present the offer to the Alliance High Command.

Solo had been relieved when they had resumed travelling again. He'd especially cut his hair short and grown a beard for this mission, and she suspected the change of appearance was to distance himself from the smuggler known as Solo, a name that would probably draw considerable attention if run against Security Police databases. The forged identity disk in his wallet described him as a starship technician from Corellia, and from the casual clothes he wore to the way he carried himself he appeared to be that person, though retinal scans and DNA analysis would soon pinpoint him for who he really was. It was obvious to Leia that he was eager to depart from the Corporate Sector as quickly as possible. The fact that he had accompanied her into the Sector when he plainly

did not want to be there only served to intrigue her more. And she wasn't entirely sure he had come along just for the money.

Since leaving their 'business' contacts, they'd been travelling solidly for more than forty hours, most of it sitting upright in a variety of intra-system shuttles as they headed towards a major interstellar transit station. Solo had chosen them a circuitous exit from the sector. He had assured her the route would prove difficult for even the nosiest of the brown-uniformed Security Police, the Espos, to keep track of. He had also convinced her that they should buy tickets for their transport immediately before departure as opposed to booking their names against flights in advance. The less time the names Carris and Jerin Forschler appeared on passenger manifests, the less chance a squad of Espos would be waiting at a departure gate for them.

It had sounded like a reasonable plan to Leia. That was until they arrived at a crowded space station terminal to find that the interstellar flight they'd been planning to take had already departed. She might have been annoyed with him if she hadn't readily agreed to the plan.

The touch of Leia as she brushed against him drew a glance from Solo. He steadied her with a hand to the elbow as she stopped the travel case trailing behind her from running into the back of her legs. He gave her the lopsided smile that now had a tendency to make her knees weak, and with the way she was feeling it was the last thing she needed.

"Easy there, Princess."

The grip of his hand on her arm caused a rush of adrenaline to surge through her system, and she looked up into his face as he turned back toward the holo-displays. Although the moniker he used wasn't in character with the identities they had assumed, Leia took no offence. If anything, she relished the title when he spoke it.

"Looks like we only missed our flight by ten minutes," Solo told her. He muttered a choice Corellian epithet under his breath. "May as well have been ten hours."

His gaze returned to hers and she spent the next few moments trying to work out what colour his eyes were under the harsh lighting. Milky green, she finally decided. When they had boarded the shuttle nearly fifteen hours ago, his eyes had been a dark hazel. She'd often wondered if his clothing or his mood caused his eyes to colour-shift. Deciding this phenomenon required more research, she resolved to keep track of the colour of his eyes in relation to the colour of his clothes. Now seemed like a good time to start. Blue collared shirt, pleated taupe trousers makes green eyes. Combined with the short hair and beard, he looked like a respectable citizen, not the smuggler and mercenary

he was. Like someone's husband, she thought. Some lucky woman's handsome husband...

Solo turned back toward the young woman by his side, mildly surprised that she was staring at him, and belatedly released her arm.

"You look a bit whacked," he observed.

His comment distracted her from her study and with the contact between them broken, Leia's senses came on-line again. She frowned at him. "Whacked?"

Solo grinned at her. "You know...tired."

She had to agree with him. Sitting upright in uncomfortable passenger seats for forty hours straight was not the best way to travel, nor was it conducive for sleep. Solo, on the other hand, had no trouble falling sleep anywhere they sat still for longer than five minutes; it appeared to be one of the enviable survival skills peculiar to soldiers and pilots.

Leia had been looking forward to the promise of the interstellar flight if only because it had meant a cabin with a bunk and ten hours sleep, and the chance to change out of her crumpled blouse and pants. Now all she had to look forward to was a hard chair in a waiting lounge surrounded by thousands of other grumpy sentients for an unknown length of time.

"I'm tired, Han," she agreed, hoping it didn't sound too much like she was whining. "Tired and hungry."

"Jerin," he corrected with a wink. "Your one true love."

Sighing melodramatically, Leia rolled her eyes. The fact of their 'marriage' had been the source of much humour and sarcasm. "I'm tired and hungry, Jerin, my one true love. And if you were a proper husband, you'd be looking after me better. Properly providing for me."

Solo chuckled fondly, enjoying the banter he and Leia had discovered on this journey together. "I always knew you'd be a nagging wife, Carris."

"And I've only just started."

His face became serious. "I know. And I'm scared."

She poked her tongue at him and pouted her lips petulantly. "I'm getting angry now."

"Tired, hungry and angry. Now I'm really scared."

Solo cast a quick glance around the passenger terminal. His mouth twitched in contemplation as his mind processed the information his eyes took in. Then suddenly he collected both their bags and lifted his chin towards a gap in the crowd. She followed him without question, too tired or too comfortable with his leadership to argue.

They came to a waiting lounge, an area that was not much more than a square of carpet set off from the main thoroughfare and lined with rows of seats. Solo led her to one of the least occupied rows and a series of empty seats. He swung her case up onto one of the chairs, dropped his softer bag on top of the case and flicked up the armrest so that two separate seats effectively became one. He patted the vacant seat invitingly.

"Have a rest," he suggested. He smoothed out the fabric of his bag as if it was pillow. "Put your head down if you want. I'll get you something to eat and see if I can work out which flight we should take."

She stared up at him in a vague sort of wonder, as if he had offered her peace throughout the galaxy. "You'd do that for me?"

A flash of discomfit came over him and he averted his eyes. To Leia's surprise, he took her hand, yet his words were lightly said.

"Sure. You're my wife."

She suppressed a shiver when he pressed his lips to the backs of her fingers. Her eyes met his and she searched for something more than the colour-shift. She caught a glimmer, a depth of emotion that had been slowly seeping through Solo's personal shields over the last week. But then he ruined the moment by turning the kiss into a lick, his tongue moving slickly over her fingers. Repulsed, Leia pulled her hand from his and wiped it on his shirt.

"You're revolting," she told him, folding her arms across her chest and sinking down onto the hard chair, hoping he wouldn't provide her more examples of his oral dexterity.

Solo reached for her hand again, plaintively asking, "Don't you love me any more, sweetheart?"

Trying her best not to smile, Leia shooed him away. "Just go and get me some food."

He grinned at her and bowed subserviently. "Your wish is my command."

"Go!" she ordered.

He winked and headed off into the crowd. Leia watched him leave, wondering what was the thing, or combination of things, about him that made him appealing. She felt certain that once they returned to the Rebel base, things between her and Han would revert to where they had left off; this impasse was just too good to last.

Settling herself against the luggage, Leia hoped their journey would soon be over. Especially as she didn't think she could resist the 'charms' of Han Solo for much longer.

Solo felt certain someone was following them. It was nothing he could put his finger on. He hadn't noticed anybody suspicious on the four shuttles they had taken, nor had any of the passengers transferred to the same flights that he and Leia took. It was, more than anything, a bad feeling.

There were many reasons why someone might want to track them. The contacts they had met with could be checking to see where they went to next, either to ensure they left the sector or confirm they were from the Alliance. The Espos could also be onto them, though this was less likely. The identities the Alliance had provided them with seemed to be vacuum-tight, and he doubted the Espos were aware who they really were. Besides, if the Espos were onto them, he suspected they would've been arrested by now.

It also didn't worry him that some bounty hunter was out to claim the credits on his head. The chance of the bounty being known this far out from Hutt Space was slim. But right now, not being certain if someone was following them concerned him more than whom.

Solo had hoped that separating from Leia would cause any would-be pursuer to slip up in deciding whether to remain with the princess or to follow him. He wasn't worried about leaving Leia on her own, even if she wasn't as alert as she normally was. There were so many life forms passing through the

terminal, and so many Espos on patrol, he doubted anyone would be bold or stupid enough to try anything.

Besides, there was no way he would put Leia in jeopardy, not the way things had developed between them. He suspected Leia would consider them to be just friends, yet things were different for him. Friendship was a large element of their relationship, but there was something else there that he wasn't sure about, wasn't clear about what he now felt for the young princess. He'd always thought she was beautiful. Lately his attraction towards her had taken on a decided sexual flavour. As desiring beautiful women was second nature to him, he could have coped with the licentious stirrings if they hadn't been complicated by a level of protectiveness and possessiveness towards her. Solo didn't have many friends or make them easily, so he had no benchmark to measure this relationship against. He was certain this was more than friendship he was experiencing. The idea of exactly what it was worried him more than the notion that someone was following them.

The Corellian returned his attention to the screen of the passenger administration system. He scanned through the different flight schedules he had been considering for the last twenty-five minutes. There weren't many options. The passenger terminal may have been busy, but it was mainly a transit point for flights within the Corporate Sector. Now that he suspected someone was trailing them, he just wanted to get the hell out of the sector. There was no point jumping around from system to system if their pursuer was a native of these parts. He doubted they would be able to shake a local so easily. Solo was prepared to take the risk and head straight out of the sector, back to the relative safety of the wider galaxy, where they could blend in without being cornered.

He had nailed it down to two options. One flight had two stops to make within the sector before heading to Bothawui. Apart from the fact the ship didn't leave for another twenty hours, Bothawui was a bit too close to Hutt Space for Solo's liking. It was highly likely the bounty hunters there would be aware of the reward on his head.

The other option was to leave on the out-going leg of a tour heading for Coruscant. Coruscant, the heart of Imperial government, was another planet that he had no particular desire to get within parsecs of, for his own sake and to protect the princess. At least this flight would be making stops at seventeen other destinations before it arrived at Coruscant, giving them plenty of opportunity to jump ship. But even this plan had its problems. The tour was fully booked, so he would have to place their names on a standby list and hope someone failed to board by the time pre-flight checks started. The flight's departure time was also not for another two and a half hours. That meant over two hours with their names on a passenger manifest. Over two hours open to the mercies of the CSA, the Espos and whoever was following them.

What he wouldn't give to be at the controls of the Falcon. To have the luxury of relying on himself, his ship and his Wookiee co-pilot, instead of the whims of the CSA transport system. And while he was yearning, he wished for the comfort and familiarity of his heavy blaster pistol sitting low on his thigh.

Solo sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He didn't like it, but he submitted the names Carris and Jerin Forschler to the standby list for the tour, accepting the chit the system spat out in exchange for the deposit of credits he inserted. Then he went in search of food for his 'wife', the princess.

Someone was talking to her, using a name she knew wasn't hers. The name was familiar to her and so was the voice. But she was tired, perched on the edge of consciousness and content to slip back into sleep.

The voice grew closer, softer, and she had the vague impression the voice was murmuring the name in her ear. A whisper of breath caressed the sensitive folds of her ear and she shivered. The gentle touch of lips and beard upon her cheek startled her, and her eyes flickered open.

Solo was pulling up and away from her, grinning crookedly. "Rise and shine, sweetheart."

Disoriented with sleep, Leia looked at him in confusion. She touched a hand to her face, uncertain if she had dreamed the kiss but convinced she could feel the memory of it.

"Did you...?" Solo was watching her curiously, head tilted, his eyes wide and innocent. She changed her mind and let the question go unasked. "I must've fallen asleep."

She realised Solo was holding a tray of food, and the aroma drifting from it reminded her how hungry she was. She struggled upright and swung her legs off the seat and onto the floor. He proffered the tray towards her.

"Your provider has returned with provisions," he told her smugly.

She took the tray from him and inhaled deeply, wondering what was in the wrapped rolls and what the fried wedges in the small bowl were. "Smells delicious. What is it?"

Solo moved the luggage from the seat to under the chairs and sat down next to her. He retrieved the tray from her and placed it on his lap, encouraging her to turn towards him. He handed her one of the stuffed flatbreads that was rolled up and held together with a flimsy-like covering. Leia prodded a finger through the salad vegetables, then licked the piquant sauce from a knuckle.

“I thought this looked fairly safe. Stayed away from the meat cos I couldn’t work out what any of it was.” He took a bite of the roll. “Hmmm, not bad,” he mumbled around the mouthful.

Leia had to agree with him and she nodded as she nibbled at the bread. The vegetables were fresh, and the sauce had a sweet and spicy flavour without being too hot. She was grateful Solo hadn’t chosen a fiery sauce, the type that she had learned was his favourite, and she wondered if he had done it for her benefit.

Solo handed her a clear tetra pack of what she assumed was water. “Here. Keep your fluids up.”

Leia sucked at the built-in straw and was pleased to find that it was water. She took another bite of the roll and settled back into her seat, enjoying the simple pleasure of eating.

“Mmm, try one of these.”

Solo dipped one of the fried wedges into a pool of sauce and held it toward her. She recognised it as some kind of tuber, but as she didn’t have a free hand she leaned forward and took it from his fingers directly into her mouth. The vegetable was crunchy on the outside, warm and soft on the inside. Combined with the sauce, which tasted like a variant of the sauce on her roll, it was a taste sensation. She tilted her head back and moaned appreciatively.

“You’ve made up for missing our flight, Jer,” she told him, placing her water back on the tray and popping another wedge into her mouth. “I knew there had to be a good reason why I married you. I just couldn’t think what it was until now.”

She realised he was staring at her, and she returned his open gaze. His eyes had shifted again, to a deep honey colour. He was also uncharacteristically quiet. She watched his larynx bob in his throat and tried to guess what was going on behind those incredible eyes of his. Had she caused this change in him?

Leia gave him a small smile. “Did you find us another flight?”

Solo blinked as if awaking from a daze. "Uh, yeah." He cleared his throat and took a sip of water. "It leaves in about two hours, but we won't know until just before departure if we're on it."

She frowned and munched on another sauce-covered vegetable wedge. "Why's that?"

"The flight is booked out so I put us on the standby list."

Leia's eyes widened and she grappled with her immediate reaction to yell at him for potentially endangering their lives. But if anything these two weeks had taught her, she knew him better than that. It had been his idea to keep a low profile. If he had now changed his mind, he would've had a good reason for it.

She cast an eye around to ensure no one was listening in. "You think we're being followed?" she asked him softly.

Solo's mouth became a hard line and he nodded.

"Any idea who?"

He pulled an indifferent face, shook his head curtly. "I'm not even sure if we're being followed."

Leia took another bite of her roll, chewing thoughtfully as she considered his speculation. Solo might not have the Jedi psychic ability that their friend, Luke Skywalker, frequently displayed, but she trusted his instincts. His street-wise intuition and gut feeling had saved them both many times.

"This flight's the best of a bad bunch," the Corellian added defensively. "We need to get out of this sector quickly. It was either a two hour wait on a standby list or being stuck here for at least another twenty hours."

Despite the solemnity of the situation, Leia curbed a grin, amused that he felt the need to justify his decision. He wouldn't have done that two weeks ago.

"It's all right, honey. I believe you." She smiled to herself, enjoying the link between the endearment she had chosen for him and the colour of his eyes. "So where is this flight headed?"

He smiled wickedly and waited until she had bitten into the roll again. "Coruscant."

His timing was impeccable. Leia coughed and spluttered mid-bite.
“Cor-cor—”

Solo thumped the flat of his hand between her shoulder blades.
“Easy there.”

She struggled with the mouthful for a while longer before she could swallow it. Her hunger gone, she sullenly returned her roll to the tray. Solo knew she would have problems with returning to Imperial City, the place she had called ‘home’ during her time as a senator. After the depth of friendship they seemed to have found, she couldn’t understand how he could be so insensitive to her feelings and choose this particular flight without considering her.

Her eyes hardened as she stared at him. “Tell me you’re joking.”

The lopsided grin widened. “I’m not joking. The flight is heading to Coruscant. Is that a problem?”

A sharp pain pierced her temple, threatening to develop into a headache. “Are you always this dense or do you do it just to annoy me?”

His easy laughter surprised her. “I do it to annoy you.”

He placed a tuber wedge in his mouth and smiled at her agreeably. Leia could only frown at him. The look on her face must have been pitiful enough that he had to put her out of her misery.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. It’s a tourist flight. Makes seventeen stops before it hits Coruscant.” He dipped another wedge in the sauce. “Somewhere along the line, Mr and Mrs Forschler will decide not to re-board and disappear into the populace. There’s no way I’d willingly go to Coruscant. You may think I’m slow, but I ain’t that stupid.”

Leia was too busy making sense of what he’d said that she didn’t appreciate he was holding the fried vegetable towards her, his eyes encouraging her to take it. When she understood what he meant, she accepted the wedge in the spirit it had been offered – as a peace token.

Trying her best to glower at him, she dourly said, “You’re not very funny.”

“I’m not,” he agreed.

Leia reached for her roll and they ate in silence for a while before Solo leaned towards her and hopefully asked, "Wasn't I a little bit funny?"

"No."

"Oh." He sat back and sighed to himself, the corners of his mouth turning down.

"And you're wrong about something else," she told him. "I don't think you're slow. Or dense. Or stupid."

His eyes brightened at her remark, but he said nothing.

Leia tempered the spite in her tone as she added, "I just think you're a typical male."

Solo chuckled and raised an eyebrow. "Typical?"

Her smile was rueful. "Maybe not that typical."

By the time they finished their meal, the comfortable familiarity between them had returned. Leia discovered that if she didn't set out to be angry with him, the bonds of friendship repaired sooner and easily.

With her stomach full and figuring they had some time to wait, Leia was thinking about another nap when Solo gently nudged her. He explained that they needed to find the departure gate of their flight and wait to see if they got called from the standby list. Before she could protest, he collected their luggage and headed towards the moving walkways, leaving her to tag along behind.

The transit terminal was massive and spread out over many levels and across different arms, so it took nearly half an hour to locate the gate. Although departure was at least eighty minutes away, boarding had already commenced. The lounge area was a sea of sentients from a variety of races, even some that Leia could only guess at. That was one of the things about the Corporate Sector that continued to surprised her; this remote enclave of the galaxy seemed to attract all matter of flotsam and jetsam intent on escaping from the Empire, but in reality, they had only swapped one miserable authority for another.

The boarding was not as disarrayed as it appeared at first glance, and Leia imagined the passengers would be eager to settle into their cabins and staterooms before heading to the ship's bars, restaurants and casinos. She caught a glimpse of the starship's hull through a viewport but as it was docked so close to the terminal, she had no idea what type or size it was. From the

passenger numbers, she guessed the ship was a cruise-liner catering for at least a thousand passengers, and perhaps with as many crew and droids. Solo may have been forced to pick 'the best of a bad bunch', but at least they'd be able to get lost in the crowd.

Leia sank gratefully onto a recently vacated lounge chair that Solo directed her to. These seats were cushioned and wider than the ones in the main area of the terminal. She rested her head on the back of the seat and watched the Corellian haul their luggage over to the registration counter. She heard him tell the counter droid their names, and that they were on the standby list and wanted to check in their bags in anticipation of being accepted on the flight.

She must have dozed off because the next thing she knew, Solo was sitting down next to her. As there were no armrests on these seats there were no barriers between them and she became aware of how close they were sitting. She suffered a moment of confusion, indiscretion and excitement. Hoping some distance between them would clear her mind, Leia pushed herself upright. The effort it took seemed overwhelming and she remembered just how exhausted she was.

"Take it easy, sweetheart," he soothed. "We've got ages to wait."

Leia tried to relax back into the chair, wiggling and fidgeting as she attempted to get comfortable again, and wondering what had caused her to over-react towards Han.

Solo placed his arm behind her along the back of the seat, and beckoned with his head. "C'mere."

The princess hesitated. She knew what he was suggesting, but was torn between the desire to touch him and the fear of touching him. And if she overcame the fear, gave in to her desires and did touch him, how would such a display look in public? Then she remembered they were supposed to be married; if it looked like they were a couple, all the better. Her logical reasoning helped to dampen the confusion, but it was fatigue that finally swung her decision.

It was difficult to tell who was the more surprised: the princess or the smuggler. Leia snuggled into the side of his body, resting her head against his shoulder. The natural place to lay her hand was against his chest next to her face. A profound sense of peace and comfort washed over her. She closed her eyes and drifted on the sensations, following her instincts. Though wonderfully relaxed, her senses seemed unusually attuned.

Han felt warm, soft and hard in all the right places, from the firm plane of chest to the strong arm that pulled her closer against his side. He may have been travelling in the same clothes for over forty hours, but there was no

offensive body odour, just a musky masculine scent that she had become accustomed to. A scent that she now equated with Han.

Leia shifted slightly and opened her eyes. At such close proximity, she was able to study his beard. For the first time she realised the beard was a mixture of blond and brown hair, some longer than others. As his beard was only two weeks old, it was also a bit irregular, being heaviest along his jaw and upper lip, with patches of skin visible below his mouth and at the bottom of his cheeks. The slash of scar across his chin was also untouched by stubble.

She was not surprised Solo's beard was as unruly as he was. She could never imagine her father having a beard like that. Bail Organa had always kept his jet-black beard neatly trimmed. She remembered that it had also been unexpectedly soft to the touch.

On impulse, Leia reached up and touched Solo's face. Their eyes met. Neither of them said a word as she traced a finger down his cheek and through his beard. It felt both rough and smooth, typically Han. But there was also an unexpected tingling in her finger; a mild buzz of energy she couldn't explain.

Her curiosity satisfied, she placed her hand back on his chest and gave him a small smile. The last thing she saw before she closed her eyes was Han smiling back.

He almost dared not breathe lest he woke her. She had fallen asleep nestled against him as if it was the natural place for her to be. Convinced that exhaustion had caused Leia to drop her shields and accept his shoulder as a pillow, Solo was nonetheless awed.

Sleep had given her a fragility that he rarely saw when she was awake. The side of her face he could see was like porcelain, smooth and white against the darkness of her hair. With her weight pressed against him, he realised just how light she was. His arm had dropped from the back of the seat to cradle her body, and he could feel the bones of her ribs through her thin blouse. There was almost nothing to this dynamic princess, this young woman. And yet right now to a jaded smuggler, she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Get a grip, Solo told himself. You're getting too close. Getting caught up in all this make believe shit. She's not your wife. If anything, she's your employer and you're the 'hired help'.

He watched her head move rhythmically with each breath he took, gently rising and falling with his chest. He could feel the solid beating of his heart, his pulse reverberating against the weight of her head. Yet his heart had surely stopped when she had touched his face. What had compelled her to make such a bold gesture still puzzled him.

She's not your wife. His inner voice was less strident, less haranguing. Not your anything. Not now, never will be.

It was tempting to kiss her. He was lucky to have gotten away with the kiss he had used to waken her earlier. But he couldn't risk stealing another one. Not only did she need the sleep, if he started kissing her he was uncertain he would be able to stop.

She's the princess. You're the smuggler, the dirt on the sidewalk. Do you really think she could ever love you?

Solo frowned at the unexpected vector his thoughts had taken. The absence of love from his life had never concerned him before. Love was one of those debilitating emotions he wanted no part of. Life with love clouded the mind. Life without it – once you'd had it – led to despair. He couldn't have cared less if the women he'd previously been involved with had loved him or not. If anything, he'd preferred that they'd kept whatever they felt to themselves. Back then, love had certainly been the farthest thing from his mind.

Realising he was tired, he convinced himself that sex was causing this obsession he had with the princess. Or the lack of sex, more precisely. That, and travelling alone with her for the past two weeks. Sharing a cabin with her, even if they'd had separate bunks. Knowing that they shared the same 'fresher, even if it was separately. Appreciating what she looked like in the undershirt she wore to bed. Eating every meal with her. Watching her and watching out for her, for hours on end...

She was a beautiful woman and he enjoyed being with her. It followed that he would want to sleep with her. Except right now, his mind refused to fantasise what it would be like to make love to the girl with her head on his shoulder.

Make love... Not sex, but love.

Solo closed his eyes, rested his cheek against the top of Leia's head, and wondered what it would feel like to wake with Leia in his arms, to feel her naked body spooned against his. He knew it was a dream that would never come true.

* * *

The lounge area had been empty of all other passengers for quite some time, and Solo was seriously considering alternate travel options when the counter droid paged Carris and Jerin Forschler. The relief was visible on his face as he gently shook Leia awake. She pushed herself off his shoulder, blinked blearily and brushed the hair from her eyes. A crease marred her cheek from where she had rested against his shirt, and Solo tenderly rubbed his thumb across it.

“Come on,” he told her. “We’re outta here.”

Taking her hand, he helped her to her feet and led her to the counter, releasing her hand while he dug into a pocket for his wallet. A sheath of Corporate Sector currency helped to exchange the reservation chit for boarding passes. Leia couldn’t help notice that the transaction nearly cleared out Solo’s wallet. The Alliance had provided them with a reasonable amount of money to finance this mission, but it looked like they were down to the last of it. At least the cost of this flight included all meals. They’d have to plan carefully if they were going to meet up with a Rebel cell before their funds ran out completely.

To her surprise, the Corellian took her hand again. All part of the act, she reasoned, trying to ignore how wonderful it was to feel the warmth of his palm against hers. Just make believe. Like the way she had dressed up when she was a child and pretended she was someone else. Just like she was doing now.

They walked to the boarding gate as a couple and presented their boarding passes to another droid, then continued down the empty passageway into the ship. The distance to the ship’s main hatch seemed infinitely long, and Leia stifled a yawn against the back of her free hand, wondering if it had been a good idea to take that nap.

“Hang in there, Princess,” Solo encouraged. “Almost there. You’ll soon be in your cabin, snuggled up in bed and fast asleep.”

Her smile was thin and ragged. “You may have to carry me.”

He shrugged amiably. “Whatever it takes, sweetheart.”

For a moment, Leia felt certain her heart had stopped and she averted her eyes, unsure if she had heard or imagined the suggestive tone in his voice.

They passed through the liner's hatchway and entered what looked like an elaborate hotel lobby. Luxurious carpeting stretched across the deck towards the long reception desks. Wood panelling lined the bulkheads. Lush potted plants and sofas were dotted around the floor, and Leia now understood why their tickets had cost so much. This cruise liner was extravagant, and she guessed the richer passengers would be upper echelon employees of the Corporate Sector Authority.

Although the scheduled departure was not far off, the passengers were still making last minute preparations, enquiries and complaints to the staff behind the desk. It looked like they had more waiting to do. Leia's weary sigh was audible, and Solo cast her a sidelong glance. He picked what appeared to be the shortest queue, and tugged her along behind him. She didn't quite resist but she wasn't exactly compliant either. When they came to a halt, Solo slipped a consoling arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer, allowing her to lean into him.

Fortunately they didn't have long to wait. Solo confirmed their passage with the attendant, and received the access card and directions to their cabin where, they were told, their luggage had already been deposited.

Solo turned from the receptionist and beamed at Leia. "Still want me to carry you?"

For the first time she could remember, Leia found his obvious leer endearing. The colour rose to her cheeks and she was lost for words. Solo quickly snagged up her hand again before she could protest, and they headed in search of the accommodation levels.

As she expected, the décor changed significantly the deeper they ventured into the ship. The carpet quickly disappeared to reveal hard decking, stark white bulkheads replaced the wood panels, and the quality of the fixtures became noticeably cheaper. The distance between cabin hatchways had narrowed, suggesting the cabins themselves had also reduced in size. But Leia was so looking forward to sleeping in a horizontal position, she wasn't about to let the low-standard accommodation distract her from this goal.

Solo finally found their room and slipped the access card into the key slot. Leia followed him through the hatchway, and ran into the back of him when he came to an abrupt halt. Bumping into Solo was becoming a habit, and a distracting one at that. She moved around him and was about to mention this maddening trait he had picked up when she realised what had caused him to stop. The cabin had only one bed. One bed that was barely big enough for two.

Before she could open her mouth, Solo looked down at her sternly. "I am not sleeping on the floor."

Leia stared at the bed and said nothing.

“There’s no way we’ll get another cabin,” the Corellian told her. “We were lucky to get this one.”

She moved further into the room towards the bed as Han closed the hatch behind them, sealing their conversation off from prying ears.

“And even if there is another free cabin, I doubt we can afford it.”

He was right, on both counts, but she didn’t tell him. Instead she remained silent and looked around the cabin. The room was not much wider than the bed and probably twice as long. The bulkheads were grey and scuffed. A waist-high cabinet ran the length of one wall, and her case and Solo’s bag rested on the top next to the drinks dispenser. Two stiff-backed chairs poked out from underneath the cabinet; she guessed these chairs also functioned as acceleration seats. A holoivid box hung from one corner, next to a closet, so it could be watched from the bed. Immediately inside the main hatch was another door that led to a cramped refresher unit. And that was it. Leia tried not to pull a disparaging face. At least their luggage had turned up safely.

“Look,” Solo appealed, “we’re gonna be on this crate for a few day days at least. You can’t expect me to sleep on the floor.”

She couldn’t, she agreed. That wouldn’t be fair. She may have had less sleep than he had, but she could tell he was tired. Despite his higher levels of energy, his eyelids were heavy with exhaustion and the whites of his eyes bloodshot. Besides, not only did the floor look hard and uncomfortable, a layer of grime dulled its surface.

Leia turned towards him, noticed the defensive gleam in his eyes and the clench of his jaw. “You can sleep in the bed.”

He must have been preparing for another response because he opened the grim line of his mouth and raised a forefinger in warning. “If you think...” The indignation leeches from his face and he dropped his hand when he realised what she had said. “What?”

“You can sleep in the bed.”

He frowned at her. “Where are you sleeping?”

“In the bed.”

“In the bed?” Solo glanced down at it. “With me?”

Leia swallowed before she admitted, “With you.”

His eyes widened with delight, and she watched as he tried to hide his smile by casually rubbing a hand across his beard. He suddenly found it difficult to meet her gaze and seriously studied the bed for the first time.

“It is a bit small,” he said.

“Yes. It is.”

“Hey, we can head and tail.” He saw her frown and explained, “I guess you never had another kid sleep overnight in the palace and had to share your bed with them.”

Leia smirked at him. “No.” The image of Solo as a child – who had friends ‘sleep over’ – was amusing and so distant from the mercenary he liked to pretend he was. It was tempting to ask him more about his childhood. She was also entranced that he’d originally thought she would know what he was talking about; he had such a strange ability to forget, or ignore, that she was a princess.

Solo clarified what he meant. “If we head and tail, there’ll be more room. You sleep at one end, and I’ll take the other.” When she didn’t respond, he added, “Okay?”

She nodded and looked down at the tiny bed she was about to share with Han Solo. The bed may have been designed for a couple but it was smaller than the one she had slept in back home on Alderaan. No matter how they positioned themselves, she knew there was the distinct chance they’d inadvertently touch each other. The thought was both thrilling and terrifying.

“Which side do you want?”

Startled, she looked up at him again. “Side?”

Solo grinned at her. “Which side do you wanna sleep on?”

Her gaze returned to the mattress. It had never occurred to her that sharing a bed meant choosing a side. She’d always slept in the middle of a bed, regardless of its size.

“Oh, um...” She bit her lip as she considered the problem, wondering if there was a right or a wrong answer.

She flinched when Solo slid his arm around her shoulders. If he noticed, he didn't say so. Instead he turned her from the bed and steered her back towards the refresher cubicle.

"Have a 'fresher," he told her. "I'll fix things up for us."

"Oh." Wide-eyed, Leia stared into the refresher. Us? Me and Han. "Fine."

Without further hesitation, she collected a toiletries bag and fresh clothes from her travel case and entered the cubicle.

While she was undressing, a voice came over the public address system advising passengers to secure their luggage and take a seat as the liner would depart from the terminal in fifteen minutes and make the jump to lightspeed approximately five minutes later. That would give her enough time to finish her ablutions and make it back to bed. Back to the bed she was sharing with Solo, she reminded herself. What in the stars had you gotten yourself into, Organa?

The refresher's sonic waves gently buffed and cleansed her skin as she stood in the stall, and although invigorating, her mind was pre-occupied. She was more concerned with convincing herself that she could trust Solo. They were friends. She could sleep in the same bed with him and nothing would happen. After all, she'd been travelling with him for fifteen days and he hadn't tried anything. Yet, her subconscious added snidely. Just give him a chance. Any chance. This chance.

She had to admit, it was tempting to see how far he would go. The thought that he might find her attractive was intoxicating. But the real question was: how far would she allow him to go? Of that, she had no idea. Then she couldn't believe she was even thinking about allowing him to try something.

Bearing in mind she didn't have much time before departure, Leia hurried through her 'fresher. She decided against unplaiting her hair as the sonics would still clean it while it was tied up. The cycle was soon finished, and she hurriedly slipped on fresh underwear and the men's white undershirt she had been wearing as nightwear on this trip. The shirt was several sizes too large for her; the short-sleeves fell down past her elbows and the hem reached to mid-thigh. Han had seen her wear this shirt to bed over the last week and a half, but they hadn't been sharing the same bunk then. For some reason she now felt naked in it, and she tried to stretch the material down over her knees. The movement only served to draw her attention to the wobbling mounds of her breasts; she hoped they hadn't moved that obviously when she'd previously worn this shirt around Han.

Using the flat of her hand, Leia smoothed the peaks of her nipples that were visible through the shirt and looked at herself in the mirror. It would have to do. Besides, she had nothing else to wear. The rest of her clothes were far too restrictive to wear to bed and Solo would think something was wrong if she suddenly changed from what she usually wore.

Something is wrong, she told herself. I'm about to go to bed with a man. Not just any man, but a Corellian smuggler. And a very attractive one at that, with incredible eyes. Deciding that thinking about what might happen – and Solo's damn eyes – could only make things worse, the princess tried to push it from her mind. It didn't work.

Leia brushed her teeth, then spent a moment tidying up the 'fresher for Han to use, wiping down the vanity and stuffing her dirty clothes into the auto-valet. Taking a deep breath, she prepared herself for the night ahead and for sharing it with Solo.

The lighting had been dimmed when she returned to the main room of their cabin. Solo was stretched out on one side of the bed, feet bare, legs casually crossed at the ankles and propped up a pillow as he watched the holo-vid display. He held a small remote control, and Leia could hear the channels changing as he flicked through them at a pace that suggested he was barely watching anything. She also noticed that their luggage had been secured away.

His face brightened as he saw her, and he sat upright and explained, "Two hundred and fifty channels and nothing to watch." He switched off the vidscreen. "Feeling better?"

Leia nodded and gave him a small smile as she moved towards him. She realised that he had turned the covers down next to him, and the pillow he rested his feet on sat on the sheets at the opposite end and side of the bed. He had chosen their sides for them.

Choosing sides. It sounded like politics or a game of smashball; Leia imagined that when it came to loving Solo, both were probably good analogies.

She stopped at the end of the bed. Loving Solo...? It disturbed her that this idea had come to her unbidden. She had never thought anyone had or ever could love Solo, except perhaps his mother. And now she was daring to consider the possibility that someone could love him. She wondered what sort of woman it would take to achieve that. No doubt someone as crazy as he was.

Solo rolled from the bed. "Hop in. I won't be long."

Leia frowned at him. "You're going to have a 'fresher now? Aren't we about to depart in a few minutes?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. No problem. I'll find something to hang on to in there."

"Isn't that a little dangerous?"

He raised a dismissive hand. "Nah. I've done worse before."

"That I can believe."

He grinned at her and she smiled back, enjoying the moment they shared. Then she noticed his gaze stray down towards her breasts. Bastard. He must have been staring at her in a sexual way throughout the entire trip, and she'd been too naïve and trusting to realise.

Deliberately folding her arms across her chest, Leia turned from him and studied the bed.

"Which side is mine?"

Solo unfastened the front of his shirt as he spoke. "Take the right-side. That way you get the table."

As she looked at the bed, the side on her left had the covers turned down. Knowing that she usually got thirsty during the night, Solo had placed a beaker of water on the side table for her. She turned back towards him to thank him for the kind gesture when she realised he was admiring her legs. She quickly tugged at the bottom of her shirt, trying to pull it lower.

"Stop that," she demanded.

Solo gave her his best innocent face, his eyes wide and guileless as he removed his shirt. "Stop what?"

Leia's face flushed. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like...you know!"

He grinned and shook his head. "Like I don't know."

She pushed at him, her hands slipping from his shoulder to his bare chest. Her fingertips tingled where she touched him. "Go and have a 'fresher."

He allowed himself to be pointed in the direction of the cubicle. "You're keen," he observed. "Let me guess. Princesses like their men stripped and washed before taking them to their royal chambers."

Her cry was one of anguish and frustration. "Han!"

He swung his head around and stared at her seriously. His voice was soft and deep, almost a plea. "Leia."

He ducked at the pillow she had grabbed from his side of the bed and shied at his head. Chuckling, he snatched up the pillow and threw it back on the bed, then headed into the 'fresher with his shirt casually draped across his shoulder. The door closed behind him.

Once he had left the room, Leia collapsed onto her side of the bed, struggling to calm down. Her pulse was racing high in her throat, and an unexpected rush of adrenaline quivered in her blood. She tried to be annoyed that Solo must have been covertly ogling her for the last fifteen days, but she was also elated and empowered that he found her attractive. And touching his bare chest had been amazing. These confusing emotions only made her more irritable.

I'm tired, she reasoned. Not thinking straight. I need some sleep.

The sound of a rhythmic thumping coming from the refresher cubicle brought her to her senses. She propped herself up on her elbows and stared at the door. What in the stars was he doing in there? No, she decided with uncompromising finality. I don't want to know. The less she thought about Solo, the better.

A warning tone sounded and the PA voice advised that departure was now only two minutes away. Leia pulled the covers over herself and manually activated the bed's safety field to ensure she would not be thrown out by any undocking manoeuvres or the jump to hyperspace. Not long after that, she heard the engines increase their power, and felt the gentle nudge as the cruiser dislodged itself from the docking arm. A surge of thrust forced her back against the mattress and the ship moved away from the transit terminal, heading for the jump point. She wondered how Solo was coping in the 'fresher. At least the thumping had stopped.

She must have dropped into a light doze because the next thing she was aware of was the sudden increase in thrust and the ship shuddering as it made the jump to lightspeed. She thought she'd also heard another thump inside the 'fresher just before the cruiser jumped, as if a body had crashed into a bulkhead, but she couldn't be sure. If it had been Solo hitting a wall, it was his own stupid fault. She had warned him against having a 'fresher.

Leia felt the bed's safety field automatically ease to a less restrictive mode, and she snuggled deeper under the covers. She closed her eyes and found herself using a trick she had learnt from Solo during this trip. Syncing herself to the soporific hum of the engines, Leia tried to use the sound to lull herself to sleep. When that didn't work, she gave up and pretended she was asleep. Anything to stop her from seeing the way Han looked at her. Or even worse: seeing Han in those skin-tight shorts he wore to bed.

Thumping his head against the bulkhead had not made Solo feel any better.

He couldn't believe he had been stupid enough to get caught blatantly staring at Leia. He couldn't believe he had then made such an overtly sexual comment to her. 'Let me guess. Princesses like their men stripped and washed before taking them to their royal chambers.' You wish, Solo. You wish. Moron. If we wanted to gain her trust and respect, he was certainly going about it the wrong way.

Solo stopped and stared at himself in the mirror. This wasn't like him at all. What the hell was wrong with him? Was he acting this way just because he was attracted to Leia and wanted to sleep with her?

He shook his head at himself, then gingerly touched the spot near his temple that had been in contact with the wall. The face in the mirror was not his. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and the beard made him seem a stranger. Despite being two weeks old, the beard was occasionally itchy. Wearing it had also meant that he had not been able to fully appreciate the touch of Leia's finger when she had stroked his face. But she had only touched him in the first place because of her fascination with the beard.

He knew he was tired; he looked tired. Beating his head against the wall was symptomatic of that. Allowing the princess to rest her head on his shoulder was symptomatic of that. Fantasising about kissing her – and worse, wondering if she could love him – were more symptoms. He'd never acted like

this before because of any other woman. It had to be because he was tired. Getting some sleep would sort out his head.

Solo felt the cruiser's engines increase their thrust. He held onto the edge of the vanity as the ship released its docking tackle and moved away from the terminal. The departure manoeuvres gave him the chance to stare at his reflection longer, and by the time he was able to let go of the vanity he had decided the beard had to go.

His thinking had only become skewed since he had been posing as Jerin Forschler. But as they were now on their way out of the Corporate Sector, he could safely ditch the beard and return to being Han Solo again. His relationship with Leia had significantly improved since he'd taken on the guise of the bearded starship technician. It would be interesting to see what happened once the beard and Jerin were gone.

He could've kicked himself when he realised his shaving gear, and everything else he needed, was in his bag in the closet. He didn't want to head back out into the room and admit to Leia that he had completely forgotten his stuff. A quick hunt through the drawer of the vanity uncovered cheap toiletries and an old shaver provided for use by passengers. With grim determination, Solo used the shaver to tackle his beard, hoping the blades were still sharp enough to be successful. He was halfway through the task when he was unexpectedly thrown back against the sanit unit and into the bulkhead. The cruiser had made the jump to hyperspace.

It took him a few moments to recover from the collision and to finish cursing himself for not paying attention to the ship's warning tones. Another symptom? He picked himself up off the deck and continued removing the beard. Each stroke of the shaver wiping Jerin Forschler away and resurrecting the smuggler called Solo.

When the job was finished, Solo rubbed his hand across his jaw, checking for any trace of beard that remained. It was nice to see a familiar face in the mirror again. He had a 'fresher, then used Leia's toothbrush to clean his teeth, trying to ignore the explicit images of Leia that came to his mind when he realised that she had recently used the toothbrush. This toothbrush had been in her mouth, exploring the recesses, bumping against her teeth, passing over her tongue...

The princess was asleep when he returned to the main cabin. The lights had automatically dimmed to an unobtrusive night mode, but he could still see her. Her face was relaxed as she lay on her side, the bed covers tucked around the small mound of her body.

Because he'd taken none of his gear with him into the 'fresher, Solo had been forced to dress in his trousers again to give him a semblance of modesty. Stroking a hand down his clean-shaven jaw, he padded across to the closet and quietly opened his bag. He changed the taupe trousers for the legged trunks he'd been wearing to bed during this trip. The trunks weren't as comfortable as wearing nothing, but they meant Leia didn't have to endure seeing him naked, especially first thing in the morning when parts of his body had a mind of their own.

Not wishing to disturb the sleeping princess, Solo climbed into bed with unusual caution and tucked the palm-gun he'd brought with him from the 'fresher under his pillow.

As soon as his head touched the pillow, something felt wrong. It could have been because he was lying at the wrong end of the bed. But there was something further to it than that. The feeling was stronger, more intense.

The bed, as he'd noted before, was not that big; probably a body width wider than his bunk on board the Millennium Falcon. Yet Leia took up hardly any space and she was perched on her side of bed, about as far away from him as she could get. Despite the small bed they were sharing, he didn't believe it would be uncomfortable sleeping with her. How could it ever be uncomfortable sleeping with Leia? he wondered.

They may not have been touching, but he could sense her body next to his. Smell the scent of her in the sheets. Hear her breath as she softly exhaled.

Shaving off the beard had not worked, he decided. Jerin Forschler may have been gone, but the desire to touch her was still there, and as agonising as ever.

Solo turned onto his side, faced away from her and drew the pillow over his head, something he had been doing more frequently since travelling with Leia. He closed his eyes and sought the solitude of sleep.

Solo woke from a restless sleep, muscles knotted with fatigue, and immediately realised he and the princess had rolled together during the night. She was now only centimetres from his body. In some places they were so close, if he moved an arm or leg just slightly he was rewarded with a gentle caress of her skin. He suspected the mattress had a low spot in the middle and they had

gradually slipped towards this point during the night. Whatever the reason for their closeness, his desire for her had not dulled overnight. If anything the dreams and unfulfilled fantasies had heightened the ache.

He lay there quietly, listening to Leia's deep breathing, and suspected she was still asleep. As the lights were dimmed, remaining in bed would ensure he didn't trip any sensor that might bring them to full strength and wake her. Besides, there was no rush to get up, nothing they had to do and no point, he knew, in arguing with his instincts. He wanted to touch her. Here was his chance.

Tensing already tight muscles, Solo pivoted on his buttocks and turned onto his side so he was looking toward her. Leia faced away from him, her legs pulled up slightly and the top of her shoulder in line with his feet. Han gently shuffled down the bed so that his hips were behind hers. Releasing the breath he'd been holding, he allowed his muscles to relax. His body tilted towards hers, slowly and exquisitely, until his lower abdomen almost touched her backside. For the briefest of moments, something exploded inside him. He closed his eyes and rode the aftershock of emotions.

Leia stirred, muttering in her sleep. Solo pulled back slightly and held his breath until she settled again, then returned his hips to shadowing hers.

Leia's foot shifted backwards, brushing against his chest as she rolled over towards him. She draped her arm over his shins and snuggled into his legs, the warmth of her breath tickling the fine hairs. He tensed again, waiting for her to wake. When she didn't, he decided to relax, to just lie there and enjoy the sensations. Until she moved again and drew her knee up sharply into his groin. Another explosion – this time of pain – rocked his entire body. He groaned in agony and clutched at his bruised anatomy.

His anguished cries woke the princess. She was instantly alert, but unsure exactly where she was. Recognising the groans as coming from Solo, she became concerned for his welfare and sat up to orient herself. The events of the last day came rushing back to her. She was on-board a cruise liner heading for Coruscant and she had agreed to go to bed with Solo. Share a bed with Solo, she amended. And there he was, lying next to her, crumpled on his side and grimacing in obvious pain. Something told her she was the cause of his pain. She moved her leg slightly and her thigh touched his. And now she knew what she had done.

“Are you all right?”

His eyes were screwed shut, teeth clenched together and hands protectively clasped down across the lower half of his body. He managed a nod. She didn't believe him and wondered how much damage she had caused.

“Han?” She leaned across and touched his arm. “Han?”

He shook her hand away and croaked, “I’m fine. Really.”

Embarrassed that she was the cause of this intimate injury and that she didn’t know how to help him or make amends, Leia retreated to the safety of the refresher cubicle. She sat down on the sanit unit and covered her face with her hands. She’d suspected that sleeping with Solo could only cause trouble. Here was proof of that. There had been many times in the past when she had wanted to express her displeasure or annoyance with Solo. Back then the idea of kicking him in the groin had been enticing, but something she had not taken up. And now that she had done just that, he hadn’t done anything to deserve it. The irony of the situation suddenly occurred to her, and her embarrassment turned to chuckles.

She wondered if this would be a warning to him, make him wary of trying anything while they shared a bed. But she knew Solo better than that; he took scant regard of warnings. It would be interesting to see what he would do next time they shared the bed. At least she had one defence she could use against him.

As she was in the ‘fresher cubicle, she decided she may as well have one. It would give Han the chance to recover and he may also have forgiven her by the time she finished.

She released her braid and brushed it out, moving the hairbrush down her hair in long strokes as she tipped her head to one side. Once in the refresher stall, she enjoyed the buzzing of the sonics as they revived her skin, raising her hair slightly as it cleansed the strands and follicles. She took her time, luxuriating in the simple pleasure of being clean and relaxed.

With her refresher finished and hair braided again, she dressed in the freshly laundered pants and blouse she had retrieved from the auto-valet, then shoved in the shirt and underwear Solo had left crumpled on the floor. She had picked up after him so often on this trip it was becoming second nature to her. In some instances, she mused, the guise of being his wife wasn’t that far from the truth.

That thought stopped her. There had been something different about Han when she had seen awoken. The beard was gone. He was no longer Jerin. No longer her husband. Now that she looked at the vanity, she could see where his beard had gone. He had tried to clean up, but there were still traces of hair left in the basin.

Leia was in two minds over how she felt about this. The beard had been a nice and unexpected change. It had matured and softened his features, made him look more respectable, more like a man she would be interested in. Their relationship had certainly been more amicable, even considerate, since he'd had the beard. At the same time, he had a fascinating face without the beard, a face she enjoyed looking at. A firm square chin with the intriguing slash of scar, the strong jaw, dark brows and intense eyes. Those eyes... It always came back to his eyes.

There was a faint buzzing noise then she heard Solo outside the refresher cubicle, and for a moment she panicked, thinking he was about to come in. He didn't. Instead he passed by and the cabin's main hatch hissed open. He spoke to someone for a moment, closed the door and moved back past the 'fresher. Her curiosity got the better of her. She quickly finished tidying her hair and headed out into the room.

Solo was sitting on one of the hard chairs at the counter, and he looked up from the tray in front of him. He still wore his shorts and had thrown on a shirt without fastening the front of it, rolled the sleeves up his forearms. The palm-gun he'd been carrying throughout this trip rested on the counter, close at hand.

Although she was prepared for it, it was a surprise to see his face without the beard. A shadow had grown across his jaw since he had shaved, and he scratched at it as he smiled at her, his fingers crackling on the stubble. Leia's stomach did a little flip. His eyes were green again.

"I was starting to worry about you," he said.

She smiled at him apologetically. "I was worried about you."

He moved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Don't. I'm fine. Besides, you didn't do it on purpose."

"I should've been more careful."

"You're not used to sleeping with someone." He grinned at the blush that coloured her cheeks. "Don't beat yourself up about it."

"No," she agreed. "I'll reserve that for you."

He chuckled at her comment. "I'll take that as a warning."

She found the strength to meet his gaze and replied with the same word he had used. "Don't."

His eyes widened and he noticeably pulled his head back. His face betrayed the fact that he didn't quite know how to respond to her. Then the tray caught his attention out the corner of his eye and he glanced down at it. "I got us some breakfast."

Us. It was nice to hear him refer to them as 'us', even if he didn't have the beard. "Oh, good. I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry."

His observation was right. Her appetite had been off the scale lately. It seemed as though she had never eaten as much before as she had since travelling with Solo.

She sat down in the other chair and looked over the selection of fruit and bread he had ordered. She picked up a green wedge of melon and took a small bite, while Solo munched on a crust of bread.

"What happened to Jerin?"

Solo touched his face subconsciously. "I shaved him off. Figured we didn't need him any more."

"Speak for yourself," she muttered under her breath. She had grown to enjoy the company of her temporary husband. Solo, on the other hand, she was less sure of.

If the Corellian heard her, he didn't acknowledge it. Instead he popped a couple of purplish berries into his mouth and added, "And he was starting to annoy me." He caught her frown and explained, "Bit of an itchy character."

"Oh." It had never occurred to her that wearing a beard could be irritating. "Well it would have been nice if he had said good-bye." It was weird, even a little childish, talking about Han's alter ego as if he was a real person. But it was a good way to keep up the friendly banter and Solo seemed prepared to oblige.

Solo took a sip from a mug of kaffe. "He was in a hurry. But he did ask me to look after you."

She stiffened a bit at the suggestion that she needed someone to take care of her, but was also pleased that he cared enough about her to assign

himself this task. And again, here were these conflicting emotions he aroused in her.

“I don’t need anyone to look after me,” she told him, assuming the familiar role of indignant princess. “I’m more than capable of doing that myself.”

He appraised her coolly, finished his mouthful and agreed, “I’m sure you can, Princess.” He pointedly looked down into his lap. “You proved that to me earlier.”

Leia blushed again, but Solo’s chuckle brought a smile to her lips. “That’s not what I meant. That was an accident.”

“I’d hate to see you in action when you mean it.”

A moment of wickedness overcame her discomfit. “Oh, you’ll know when I mean it.”

Solo nearly choked on the kaffe he had just swallowed and he burst into laughter. She grinned and watched him laugh, enjoying the sound and the fact he found her amusing.

Solo poured two beakers of juice and offered one to Leia. She thanked him and took a sip.

“So what are our plans?” Leia asked, pulling at the flaky pastry of a particularly sweet fruit flan.

He gave her a small half-grin. “First we need to check out the details of the itinerary and decide where we’re gonna get off. After that, I figure we should kick back, relax. Take it easy.”

Leia repressed a laugh behind her hand and shook her head indulgently.

Solo’s eyes sparkled with curiosity. “What?”

“Only you can make lying around in our cabin doing nothing for days on end sound attractive.”

He shrugged. “We can’t really afford to live it up with the rest of the passengers. Either financially or for security reasons.”

"I know, I know," she agreed. They'd been successfully keeping a low profile throughout this mission, and now with the end in site she did not intend to drop her guard.

"You got a problem with the plan, Princess?"

"Maybe a problem with you," she impishly suggested, "but definitely not with the plan."

"The plan's okay but there's a problem with me?" Solo's eyebrows raised and he shook his head the way she had. "Only you can give a guy a compliment and an insult in the same sentence."

She gave him a dazzling smile. "Well, now that we've finished complimenting and insulting one another, perhaps we should get on to the plan."

Solo called up the itinerary on the vidscreen, and they discussed their options over breakfast. Solo pointed out that if he had been piloting the liner, he would've run the ship straight down the Hydian Way from the Corporate Sector to Arkania, before diverting off the trade route and heading to Coruscant. But as this was a cruise ship, the route was circuitous and meandering, providing the passengers with a range of planets to visit and sights to see. There may also have been seventeen stops, but not all of them involved a visit planet-side. This only served to further complicate matters by reducing their choices.

Solo ran through the list of destinations, giving the princess the pros and cons on whether they should jump ship and look for a Rebel cell, while Leia added her own analysis based on her knowledge of the politics of the local governments and whether they might be able to locate groups affiliated with or sympathetic to the Alliance.

For Solo, the list read like a flight plan for all the places he had ever visited during his smuggling career. Only hours away now, their first stop was Ruuria, the first habitable planet in the Meridian Sector on the way out from the Corporate Sector. From there, they moved across to Almanian, and then to Lianna on the edge of the Tion Cluster. Elom was next on the itinerary, though here and at Ord Radama, the liner would only make a low orbit of the planet before heading back into hyperspace. The two transit stops next in line, Korriban and Phindar, seemed the most likely places they would be able to find assistance for getting back to their Alliance Task Force.

Leia observed that one of the systems in the Mid Rim would have provided them with the quickest and easiest way back; although heavily patrolled by the Empire, the systems of the Mid Rim had only been partially explored and chartered, and the Alliance was heavily represented in this part of the galaxy.

Unfortunately, the only stop in the Mid Rim was a short fly-past of the Roche Asteroids, before heading to Aquaris in the Expansion Region.

The Imperial presence from there on was as virulent as a bacterial infection. The first Inner Rim world they were due to visit was Obroa-Skai then Carida, home of the Imperial Academy. Solo didn't have to say anything to convince Leia neither of these planets would be likely contenders. Once the cruiser liner entered the systems of the Core, it picked up the Perlemian Trade Route and made daily visits to other Imperial-ruled worlds of Ralltir, Rhinnal, Esseles, Brentaal, Chandrila and Corulag, before making the final jump to Coruscant.

There was no argument between the princess and the smuggler. Korriban and Phindar were the best choices, and they agreed to try Korriban and if that failed, then move onto Phindar. At the least, that meant they had about ten standard days to keep themselves occupied without venturing out of their cabin too often or for too long.

Despite Solo's previous idea that they should use the time to relax, for both of them ten days – a whole Standard week – sounded like a lifetime. The Corellian realised this time would be particularly difficult for him. Not only would they be confined to the cramped space of the cabin, the cruise liner travelled much too slow for his liking and he could never stand being on-board a vessel he had no control over for too long. As if this didn't make things difficult enough for him, he would have to spend all of that time with the princess. Leia – the beautiful woman he also had to share a bed with and yet couldn't touch. Solo knew he'd be stir-crazy by the end of the first day. He had to come up with a way to keep himself occupied, otherwise he'd most likely do something or say something to Leia that they both might regret.

Then Leia smiled at him again, suggested they tidy up the mess they had made of the bed before settling back on it to watch a few holovids. But Solo knew the first thing he had to do was have a 'fresher – and a cold one at that.

tbc

end

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