

[Back To Index](#)

This story was written just for fun and is not an attempt to make money or infringe on any copyrights or trademarks. Only the original ideas contained within the works on this nonprofit web site are the property of their authors, and please do not copy or link these stories to any other website or archive or print without permission of the author.

Old Friends Long Gone...

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

Unsettled. It was not a word that Leia had ever thought applied to herself, yet that was the only description she could come up with for the way she currently felt. The way she had felt for the last ten days.

It was nothing she could really put her finger on. Through the Force, she sensed no danger or trouble. Yet the skin of her scalp was stretched tight, a weight sat in her stomach, and she found it increasingly difficult to keep her mind from wandering. Wandering to worry about Han, she chided herself.

From her position at the large oval table in the Azure Blue's main conference room, the princess had an impressive view of the variety of vessels now in orbit above the Bothan homeworld, Bothawui. Despite her best efforts, she could not get used to the sight before her. In addition to the ten ships of the Rebel Alliance Task Force, including the Calamari cruiser Leia was stationed on, a flotilla of Imperial Naval vessels hovered ominously nearby. The closest Imperial vessel to the Azure Blue, the largest and positioned not one ship's length away, was the command ship, an immense 1,600 meter long Star Destroyer. Nestled below the horizontal plane of the Mon Cal cruiser, the destroyer's command tower filled half the viewport. Beyond the wedge-shaped vessel lay three more Imperial-class Star Destroyers before she could discern the bulbous profile of the Blue's sister ship, Girt-by-Sea. The remaining ships of the Alliance Task Force - Corellian corvettes, escort frigates and fish-shaped transport vessels - boxed in a lone Lancer-class frigate, according it a level of respect derived from the reputation it had as a formidable capital ship of the Empire. In a gesture of mutual trust and respect between Imperial and Alliance forces, all vessels had lowered their shields. The other distinctly odd feature about this conglomeration of forces was the lack of fighters conducting patrols. Alliance and Imperial commanders had agreed that while cessation of hostilities negotiations were being conducted, it

would be wiser to refrain their respective squadrons of fighters from mixing. Better that any confrontations were reserved for the official functions scheduled to take place on Bothawui's surface, that was providing negotiations were successfully concluded. And if the first session was anything to go by, things would be wrapped within a matter of days.

General Dodonna was now summarising the day's proceedings, intoning banal pleasantries towards the Imperial senior officers seated around the table and discussing plans for the small formal dinner scheduled for that night.

The princess glanced impatiently at her wrist chrono. Han was due back within the hour, having been absent from the Task Force for the last ten days as he led his squadrons in an operation to rout pirates from a neighbouring system. Leia had tried to absorb herself in her duties while he was gone, but had felt unsettled the entire time. It was difficult to believe he had only been away for one Standard week, but she had felt every minute of those ten days.

When he had initially told her about his mission, her blood had run ice cold. The hollow in her chest had then been subsumed by an ache as she had watched the Millennium Falcon pull out of the hangar bay and take lead position in front of the three squadrons under General Solo's command. Leia knew Han was all right; he was safe and well, despite the losses that his squadrons had sustained. The regular reports and updates on their sorties in the Roon system had helped to allay her fears. She supposed that one of Han's squadron leaders was filing the reports, knowing all too well the Solo attitude towards datawork and orders. But although she had proof that Han was alive, she had still been unable to shake her unsettled mood. The princess suspected she would not be able to relax until the Falcon was safely back inside the hangar bay and she was in her lover's arms.

Focussing on Solo, Leia observed the mismatched flotilla of friend and foe from the Corellian's point of view. She knew for certain that Solo would have a fit when he saw the proximity of the Imperial vessels to the Task Force elements. And when he discovered that Alliance vessels had been sitting there for the last 10 hours with all shields down, the fit would degenerate into paroxysms. Twisting the chrono around her wrist, Leia tried not to fidget in her seat. Ten days, Leia reminded herself. It's only been ten days. It may as well have been ten months. This was the first time since Han had been freed from the carbonite and rescued from Jabba's palace - over 120 days - that they had been separated from each other for longer than the duration of a ten-hour shift. The old Leia would have seriously questioned her mental stability; it was ridiculous for her to have become so absorbed in Solo that the only way she could sleep without having him spooned around her was to wear one of his shirts. Damned Corellian. Ridiculous, and yet she had also become addicted to the adrenaline rush that overwhelmed her whenever she thought about him.

Leia had effectively been on her own throughout the duration of Solo's absence. Luke had 'abandoned' her while he took a well-earned sabbatical on Dagobah. Lando had returned to Bespin with Rogue Squadron in an effort to overthrow the Imperial garrison that had been stationed there for over a year. Even Chewbacca had departed the fleet, returning home to Kashyyyk for a long awaited reunion with his family some two months ago. At least if Chewie had been here, it would have provided Leia with a palpable reminder of Han.

If only Dodonna would stop his incessant droning, Leia thought, she might have time to jump into the refresher and change from her formal robes into something more alluring before Han returned. And then... well, then she and Han would have their own 'reunion' to attend to. Their own 'mating rituals' to initiate.

Trying not to allow these Solo-induced fantasies to distract her, Leia's gaze moved across the Imperial officers. All impeccably dressed in their stiff collared steel-grey uniforms, they appeared to be reasonable, rational human beings, and not altogether different from the Alliance officers seated on the same side of the table as herself. Well-spoken and more than willing to negotiate, the Imperials had displayed considerable concern for the welfare of their troops throughout the discussions.

In spite of this, Leia still wasn't comfortable in their presence. The war against the Empire had left an indelible impression on her that perhaps only time could resolve. And not for the first time that day, the princess wondered what in the stars could compel men such as these to follow a regime founded on hatred and destruction.

And women, the princess added as her eyes fell on the attractive female seated across the table from her. Leia had been surprised to discover that the executive officer of one of the Star Destroyers - Commander Saxel - was indeed a woman. In order to attain the rank of commander and be appointed as ship's XO, Leia knew that Saxel would have to be an extremely competent operator. Even to successfully graduate from the Academy would have been a feat on its own. As a former senator in the Imperial Senate, the princess knew only too well how the Empire had developed misogyny into a fine art. Under a different set of circumstances, she might have admired Commander Saxel. But for now, a healthy level of disdain coloured her view.

Dodonna's voice finally penetrated Leia's thoughts. "And with that, gentles, may I invite you to re-convene here at 1700 hours, and we can settle down to other more pleasant business." Leia was on her feet even before a polite murmur of laughter emerged from the gathering. She bade a quick farewell to the colleagues on either side of her and moved towards the main door as discretely and quickly as she could.

"Princess Organa!"

Leia hesitated at Commander Saxel's call. They had only briefly spoken during the session, a cool greeting and the clarification of a few points that had required the Organa diplomatic touch. But Leia had had a feeling since the beginning of the meeting that the commander wanted to discuss something else with her. The princess hoped this wouldn't take long; she wanted to spend as much time alone with Han before she was forced to attend the dinner.

Repressing a sigh, Leia turned on her heel and faced the commander. Saxel strode confidently around the conference table, moving past the milling crowd of Alliance and Imperial officers. Lithe and athletic-looking, Saxel stood taller than Leia, only slightly shorter than Han, she realised. Her blond hair was cut short, yet not in a severe style that Leia would have expected from a female Imperial officer. As the woman drew nearer, Leia noticed a trace of faded freckles across the Imperial commander's nose and cheeks, making her appear younger than her age, which Leia had guessed at mid to late 30s.

Saxel stopped in front of Leia and smiled at her apologetically. It was a quick smile and one that lit her face with hope.

"Princess Organa," the commander began, "may I have a moment of your time?"

Leia's smile was tight and blatantly forced in reply. She resisted the urge to check her chrono again. "Of course."

Saxel was not oblivious to the level of distraction in the princess. "I'm hoping you may be able to help me. Or point me in the direction of someone who may."

As she had no intention of making this easy for the Imperial, Leia did not respond or encourage the other woman to continue.

"I'm trying to locate a friend," Saxel quickly clarified. "An old friend. Someone who used to be in the Imperial Navy, but I understand that he may now be an officer in your forces."

Old friend, Leia sneered inwardly. Try 'lover' instead. But at least this had attracted her attention. So, you want to see if those sparks still fly, Commander? Or do you just wish to ingratiate yourself with the Alliance? After a quick transfer, at level of course, to the winners' side?

"I'm sure you're aware many former Imperials are now part of the Alliance, Commander Saxel," Leia explained with condescending patience.

"I've heard rumours he may be a general," Saxel added, as if this somehow helped to justify her request.

Leia's immediate thought was: Madine! But somehow the Commander didn't seem to be Crix Madine's type. Too confident and polished. Plus, Leia quickly recalled, the blond Corellian general had been in command of an elite Special Forces element, not a member of the Imperial Navy. Besides, if it was Madine that Saxel was talking about, there was no way Leia was going out of her way to assist with this reunion. Madine was definitely no friend of hers and his attitude towards Han frequently bordered on outright violence.

"Commander, I'm not certain I can be of assistance. The Alliance is comprised of many Task Force elements, many generals and officers of all ranks. Relatively speaking, I know only a handful of people."

The other woman's eyes narrowed and Leia heard the coldness in her own voice. You've got that 'bitch attitude' nicely sorted out there, Princess, she could hear Han telling her. She briefly considered if she should be more accommodating, but the Imperial uniform made it difficult to persuade her otherwise.

"Perhaps I could put you in touch with our Personnel Division," Leia offered. "You may be able to track your friend down that way."

Saxel's eyes dropped and her lips twitched knowingly. "Of course."

The commander hid her disappointment with practised skill, annoying Leia so much that she almost considered apologising for being so abrupt. "If you'll excuse me."

Leia had already half-turned away before the commander added, "Thank you for your time."

Heads suddenly snapped around as the distinctive shape of a Corellian YT-1300 freighter arched over the cruiser's hull and rushed past the viewport, the blast from its ion engines causing the transparisteel to shudder in its frame. The stocky ship barrel rolled into a split-S manoeuvre and doubled back towards the conference room, wagging its bow mandibles from side to side, the forward running lights aimed as effectively as the quad cannons mounted on the upper and lower hull. "Pirates!" an Imperial captain yelled as he leaned against the viewport to gain a better look. The battered freighter certainly had all the hallmarks of a pirate ship. There was no discernible name or registration details, mismatched plating, and extensive carbon scoring from laser fire. And from the look of the formidable firepower she appeared to be carrying, it was not a moment too soon that three squadrons of X-Wing snub fighters appeared to chase her off the cruiser's hull.

"Solo," Dodonna growled through clenched teeth. The elder general's eyes blazed with fury. If that damned Corellian upsets these negotiations...He could imagine the warning klaxons that were currently sounding throughout the

Imperial vessels at the moment, and no doubt there were many hasty reassurances being communicated from the Azure Blue's bridge to allay Imperial concerns.

Dodonna sought out the princess to see her response. The slight smile turning her lips only caused him to seethe further. Solo's character was starting to adversely influence the behaviour of the princess. Perhaps it had been a mistake accepting her back into the upper echelons of the Alliance. The decision to remove her from her leadership and diplomatic role just prior to the Battle of Endor had been as a result of her unexpected leave of absence to rescue Solo. At the time, the Alliance High Command had called her judgement into question, and she had been relegated her to a lesser role upon her return to the fleet.

Following the Rebels' overwhelming victory at Endor, the High Command had been forced to relent. It became apparent that they needed leaders such as Leia who were skilled at diplomatic negotiations and schooled in the fine etiquette of politics. And so she had been accepted back into their clique, despite rumours that she and Solo had established an intimate relationship. Still, Dodonna reasoned, someone needed to have a quiet word with the princess and advise her that having an affair with a Corellian smuggler was doing nothing for her reputation, and may even jeopardise her credibility.

"My apologies, gentles," Dodonna explained to the concerned Imperials. "An erstwhile smuggler in our midst who's obviously pleased to be home." He caught Leia's eye and aimed his next remark at her. "And if he's not careful, he may be an erstwhile general before too long."

Not entirely convinced, the Imperial officers anxiously watched as the Millennium Falcon lead the 30-odd X-Wing fighters into the cruiser's docking bay.

Leia smiled pleasantly and inclined her head towards Dodonna. She reigned in the urge to poke out her tongue at the white-haired general. I'm not his keeper! she felt like yelling, trying to ignore the fact that Dodonna had every right to be angry with Han. It had been reckless of him to 'buzz' the Calamari cruiser, particularly in an unidentified ship with five, potentially twitchy Imperial vessels in close proximity. But that was Han. She would have as much luck in changing his behaviour, as Dodonna would have at making a short speech. And if you hadn't kept droning on, she thought, I could've been changed by now. As it is, well...now I'll just have to share a shower with him!

"General Solo?"

Frowning, Leia turned towards Commander Saxel, caught off guard at the sudden question. The commander's cheeks were bright with expectation. "That freighter?" She nodded out the viewport towards the empty space where the Falcon had just been. "Is the pilot General Solo?" A chill raised the hair on the

back of Leia's neck. She studied the elder women with morbid fascination, as if watching a collision in slow motion.

"Han Solo?" Commander Saxel continued. "Corellian? Early 30s. Brown hair, hazel eyes. About 1.85 meters tall?"

Leia nodded woodenly as something twisted in her stomach. Saxel even knew exactly how tall he was. Exactly.

The commander smiled smugly. "You can stop looking, Princess. I think I've just found my friend."

"Stand fast!"

The pilots of his three squadrons rose in weary unison as General Han Solo strode down the centre aisle of the briefing theatre, his three squadron commanders matching him stride for stride.

Although other generals may have preferred their juniors to walk behind them, Han had no concerns that Capra, Spiel and Sacul kept pace with him. The majors were all exceptional pilots who knew how to keep a strong rein on their squadrons, as well as ensure their wing commander did not get himself into too much trouble. As far as Solo was concerned, the three humans were his equals in all but rank, and as he didn't place much credence in military status, he was more than happy to have them at his side. They had certainly proved themselves worthy of that position over the last ten days; all three squadrons had performed remarkably well, especially because for some, it was the first time they had come under enemy fire.

Enemy fire, he thought darkly. From the proximity of those Navy ships, it would certainly be more than 'fire' if the Imperials took it into their heads to pre-empt the outcome of the surrender negotiations. It would be more like a supernova. Solo couldn't believe the commanders of the Alliance Task Force had been stupid enough to get cozy with the Imps, and then leave their shields down. But there was no point in worrying about that now, and most likely nothing he could do to convince Dodonna otherwise. His main concern now was finalising the mission with his pilots, then spending the next twenty hours in bed with Leia.

Not one who normally wore an Alliance uniform, for the past mission Solo had conceded in order to instil solidarity amongst his pilots and to provide a cohesive focus for them. He unfastened the front of the flight jacket, tugged open the throat of the dark blue flight suit as he headed towards the front of the theatre. He shook his head uncomfortably at the level of respect these weary young men and women gave him. He did not deserve their reverence. He was just a guy

doing his job. "Sit, sit!" he ordered as he moved down the rows of pilots. "Take it easy."

"At ease!" Capra's strident voice broke the relative quiet and went straight into Solo's ear. He cringed at the woman on his shoulder. She caught the pained expression of his face and hastily added, "Sorry, General."

"Obviously a drill sergeant in a former life, Cap?" he asked with a rueful shake of his head.

"Remind me never to let you give Leia any shouting lessons. Not even if she begs for 'em."

The young Corellian woman smirked. "Yes, General."

It did not take much to convince the pilots to resume their seats. Many almost collapsed back onto the hard chairs, pushing hands through sweat-slicked hair, their haggard faces hardly relaxing. Capra, Spiel and Sacul assumed their seats in the vacant front row. Solo stopped next to the imposing lectern, pivoted on the toe of his boot and turned to face his pilots.

"Okay, I'll make this quick," he began, noting the immediate sense of relief this caused. He had no intention of keeping a bunch of exhausted pilots any longer than was necessary, despite the fact regulations dictated that complete intelligence de-briefings and a lengthy 'wash-up' should now occur. They may only have been absent for ten days, but it had been a harrowing, stressful ten days. There was no way these kids could concentrate for anything longer than another few minutes. "You all look like you need a good meal, a hot shower and about twenty hours sleep." Solo refrained a grin at a personal thought; sleep was not part of the equation that included Leia, himself, her bed and twenty hours.

"Are you our mother now, sir?" Spiel quipped from his seat.

"Someone's gotta keep an eye out for you lunatics," Solo replied.

He hitched himself up onto the desk that stood next to the lectern, and waited for the chuckling to die down. Rubbing a hand across the week's growth of beard on his jaw, he allowed his mood to take on a more serious tone.

"It's been a long, hard mission," the Corellian general told them, his gaze travelling over individual faces of the pilots. "We had some lucky escapes. Some outstanding successes." His gaze lingered on the four pilots who had crewed on the Falcon with him: two gunners, a co-pilot and navigator/comms officer. For a reasonably inexperienced crew, they had performed remarkably well. "And, unfortunately, we lost six good people. Six good friends." Five from one squadron alone, he reminded himself. He hoped Sacul's troops could get over losing nearly

half their strength. He sought out the remaining seven pilots from 42 Squadron; all but the mature Bothan kept their eyes averted. "But let's remind ourselves that we sent those pirates running, freed up Roon's subspace routes again, and saved countless lives in the process."

A solemnity settled over the group. Now was not the time to harp on their mistakes. With the benefit of hindsight and some solid sleep, they would be more receptive to his words, to the lessons they needed to learn, and perhaps even willing to offer their own opinions as to what had gone wrong and how things could be improved so that next time losses could be minimised. Still, it couldn't hurt to give them something to mull over until they re-convened.

"There's some things we need to go back over in training," the Corellian explained. "A few basic spacer skills we let slip there. One of those is, 'Wingmen: you gotta stick with the boss. No matter what.'"

A few of the younger pilots stared into their laps, but there were mutters of agreement from the more experienced flyers. Out of curiosity, Sacul turned in his seat to see who had spoken.

"In the meantime," Solo continued, "I think you all deserve a few days off. In fact, I'm gonna stand you down for the next three shift rotations." He didn't notice the pilots' sighs of gratitude because a thought suddenly occurred to him and he pointed his index finger at the female major.

"Cap, can I do that?"

Capra smiled and shrugged at him. "You're the general, General."

He nodded in agreement. "Yeah. You're right." He turned his attention back to the pilots. "Okay, I don't wanna see you guys near the ready room for another three shift rotations. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" they barked out.

Solo kept his grin to himself. He knew from personal experience that if their enthusiasm for time off was any indication, his squadrons would recover from this mission.

"Do I have to ask if there's any questions? No? All right then, you're free to go."

Capra raised the squadrons to their feet with a clipped, "A-ten-tion!"

There was a shuffling of boots as the pilots stood upright again. The general nodded in recognition of the salute and Capra dismissed them. The pilots grabbed their kit bags and quickly filtered from the room. Solo pushed himself off

the desk and strode across to where his three squadron leaders were now milling in front of their seats.

"You better be right about this, Cap," Solo warned the young major, folding his arms across his chest.

Capra frowned and opened her mouth to protest that she had not sanctioned his actions. "Sir, I didn't-"

"I mean about me being a general," Solo elaborated. He shook his head in a slightly bewildered gesture. "There's gotta be a mix up here."

Spiel and Sacul caught onto the jest before Capra did and they chuckled, both at Solo's remark and at Capra's expense.

"Maybe they forgot to collect the uniform off you after Endor?" Spiel suggested with a grin.

The three majors quickly noted that Solo's face was impassive, and their humour came to an abrupt end. Spiel wondered if perhaps he had found the limit to the Corellian general's self-deprecation. Solo's gaze was serious. "I do the jokes, okay, Spiel?"

Spiel swallowed nervously. "Y-yes, sir."

The general pointed a finger at him. "You're the straight man. And yet that's the second time today you tried to crack a joke. Sloppy, Spiel. Very sloppy."

Spiel's eyes betrayed his confusion, but he responded in the only way he knew was appropriate. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Now it was Capra's turn to laugh at Spiel's expense; she had quickly picked up on the teasing glimmer in Solo's eyes. The younger woman's delight was infectious, and Solo could not curb a grin. Still, he continued to point a lecturing finger at the bewildered Spiel.

"Now let's get this right. You're the straight man. Cap's the drill sergeant. Sacul's the sensitive soul. And I do the jokes."

"And why do you get to do the jokes?" Cap pouted playfully, settling into the rhythm of this banter. Solo raised an eyebrow, as if it was blatantly obvious and yet still he had to explain. "'Cause I'm the one with the clown outfit, remember?"

A warm sense of love and pride spread through Leia as she watched General Solo instruct his pilots. She had entered the briefing theatre from a front entrance, and had remained unobserved near the hatchway, content to allow him to complete his duties without interference. Not for the first time, the princess marvelled at Han's natural rapport with his pilots, particularly the way he commanded their respect and attention when they were so obviously exhausted. And in typical Solo fashion, he used humour to lighten the situation when it was called for. She wasn't too sure he was entitled to stand his squadrons down for three shift rotations without reference to higher authorities, but the gesture had been genuinely compassionate and heartfelt.

Now, as the pilots departed the briefing theatre, Leia gave Han a few moments to confer with his squadron leaders. Her smile grew as he made some remark that had his majors chuckling. There was another brief exchange between them that ended with more laughter and Solo affectionately clutching the shoulder of one of the majors. Deciding she had waited long enough, Leia started towards her lover.

Solo noticed movement out the corner of his eye and looked up and across towards the other side of the theatre. As soon as he saw the princess, a brilliant smile lit his face, a smile that melted her insides and extinguished her anxiety. The squadron leaders noticed Solo's distraction and turned in the direction he was staring.

Solo's gaze remained fixed on the princess, but he muttered out the corner of his mouth, "Didn't I tell you the Alliance appreciated our efforts. They've even sent a royal delegation to welcome us back."

"To welcome one of us back, anyway," Sacul whispered under his breath, receiving an elbow in the ribs from Capra for his comment.

As he was focussed solely on the princess, Solo didn't hear the remark. "I'll catch you guys later," he told them dismissively. "Much later." Then he moved to meet Leia.

Capra hustled her colleagues into leaving the theatre to allow the couple some privacy. Although the men put up dumb resistance to begin with, Capra was persistent enough to ensure that they were halfway down the centre aisle by the time the general had swept his princess into a loving embrace. Leia pressed her face against Solo's chest and held onto him as his arms encircled her back and shoulders. A sigh escaped her lips and she exhaled the tension from her body, then breathed in his scent, filling herself with his very essence.

"Gods, I missed you," she murmured, melding her body along the length of his.

"Love you," was his husky response. He pulled her head up and leaned his own down, brushed his cheek against hers, the stubble of his beard rough against her

jaw. "Love you," he whispered into her ear. "Missed you. Need you. Want you." He tugged her harder against his body so there was no doubt exactly how much he wanted her.

His mouth sought hers out and they kissed, desperately, ardently, as if they were about to be separated, not had just been reunited. When their lips eventually parted, Han rested his forehead against hers, only marginally loosening his hold on her. She stared into his sparkling eyes and smiled, the rasp of his beard still tingling across her mouth.

"Hi," he said. "Did I mention I love you?"

Leia chuckled fondly. "Once or twice."

"Just making sure. Been a while since I told you."

She snuggled her head against his shoulder. "An eternity."

He dropped his arms down around her waist and kissed her forehead. "Ten days, four hours and some odd minutes."

"Some very odd minutes," she agreed. "Solo, you're a helpless romantic. You know that?"

"Only when it comes to you, sweetheart." He smoothed his lips across her temple again. "What's wrong, Princess?"

Leia smiled into his shoulder. Despite her best efforts to ignore the discomfort that had plagued her for the last week, the traces must have been perceptible enough for Solo to detect.

"Nothing's wrong." He squeezed her gently in rebuke, and she elaborated. "Everything's fine now that you're back."

"You sure?"

She straightened up and pulled away from him slightly so that she could look at him squarely. "It's just...I've missed you terribly. And I don't like missing you." Reminded her too much of the year he had been frozen in carbonite.

He smirked and asked, "You missed me terribly?"

Leia gently pushed at him for making fun of her. She knew ten days was no match for ten months, but he didn't have to highlight this difference. "Or at least I thought I had. Now I'm not so sure."

His easy laughter drew a rueful grin to her lips. "Maybe I should just stay away and you can continue missing me. Or loving the idea of me without having to endure the reality."

"Don't tempt me."

Solo's eyes widened and he wagged a finger in front of her face. "That's what you say now," he chided, "but I guarantee that once you get me in your bed, you'll be begging me to stay."

Leia tried valiantly not to smile. "Begging?"

Solo pursed his lips and nodded. "Groveling. Genuflecting."

"Now you're trying to impress me with your vocabulary."

"That's not all you're gonna be impressed with."

Leia shrieked as he grabbed her firmly on the behind and lifted her hips to his. Looking around furtively, she stepped back out of his grasp. "Han! Someone may be watching."

"Let 'em watch," he told her flippantly, then cast a prudent, cursory glance around the empty briefing theatre. He reached for her again but, with a girlish giggle, she pulled further away from his roving hands. "Playing hard to get, Princess?" A knowing look gleamed in his eyes. "You want me to chase you around the ship, do you? Like I did that other time?"

Leia's knees weakened at the memory of Solo relentlessly pursuing her around the cruiser after they'd had a minor disagreement, about exactly what she couldn't recall now. Things had started off rather tamely, with her refusing to talk to him on the comlink and walking away from him when he had sought her out at her workstation. However, she had found it difficult to ignore him in the meeting they both attended, especially when he kept staring at her, all the while covertly running his tongue across his lips. By the end of the meeting, she was aroused instead of angry, but still she had not wanted to give in. They had then played a game of 'felinoid and vrelt' around the ship, Solo relentlessly pursuing the princess until he pounced on her in an empty corridor and convinced her to accompany him into a nearby storage locker so they could continue their disagreement in private. Unfortunately, now she had neither the time nor the energy to encourage him in this direction.

Leia relented and cautiously took his hand. Hoping she could tame him if she took the initiative, she suggested, "Come on then. Back to my suite so you can 'impress' me."

With a brilliant grin across his face, Solo allowed the princess to lead him from the theatre. "Impress. Depress. Unpress. Express. Any way you want it, beautiful."

"Ah. I don't think 'unpress' is a real word," she noted.

He shrugged congenially. "I'm Corellian. What do I know about talkin' proper Basic?"

The ship's crew paid little attention to the princess and the general as they walked hand-in-hand to her quarters. The relationship between the princess and the ex-smuggler was 'old' news, no longer the scandal it had once been, nor worthy of open stares and gossip. It was also rather common for the couple to hold hands while traversing the decks of the cruiser, despite being neither regally or militarily correct. It was just another idiosyncrasy that characterised this strange relationship.

"How are things going with the Imps?" Solo asked once the crowd had departed from the turbolift car they were travelling in.

Leia laid the heel of her hand against his chest and adjusted the collar of his flight suit. "They were very impressed by your entrance." Solo made a self-satisfied half-laugh, and she continued, "Nearly leapt out of their skins. They thought you were a pirate."

"Don't they know I only play 'dress up' for you now?" he asked wickedly. His voice lowered to a sensuous rumble. "How does that fantasy of yours go again? Me. Naked, except for my boots and gun-rig."

"Your fantasy," she corrected. "In mine, you lose the boots and blaster as well."

"I like a woman who knows what she wants." He grinned and moved back to their original conversation. "What did Dodonna think?"

Leia's eyes narrowed. "Dodonna's not in my fantasy. How did he get into yours?"

Solo slipped his hands loosely around her throat and pretended to throttle her. She responded just as melodramatically by rolling her eyes back and gagging on her tongue. He quickly gave in and ended up stroking her cheek fondly. Leia regained her composure and slid her arms around his waist. "Old Dodders was not very happy with you, I'm afraid, General," she told him. "Another black mark against your name."

He raised his shoulders in a self-effacing gesture. "I aim to please, Princess."

The turbolift stopped at the senior officers' accommodation level. As Solo preferred to maintain his cabin on board the Falcon, he had not been allocated a room. In reality, however, he effectively lived in Leia's suite, which was the arrangement he preferred anyway.

The corridor was relatively empty, and Solo casually slung his arm around Leia's shoulders. "So," he drawled into her ear, "you finished for the day?"

"There's a formal dinner at 1700, so we've got about an hour."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Fine with me. I won't need long."

Leia prodded him in the stomach. "You may not, but I will!"

"A demanding woman who knows what she wants," he whined. "What have I gotten myself into?"

The princess ignored his comment and said quietly, "You've been invited to the dinner as well."

Solo frowned. "Me? Why me?" He knew that Dodonna wouldn't invite him to dine with dignitaries for any good reason.

She met his questioning gaze. "I arranged the invitation for you. Don't look at me like that," she added when he pulled a sour face. Somehow his reaction made it easier for her to continue. "You've got a friend amongst the ranks of the Imperials."

"Friend?" Han swallowed. Was it possible that people he had known from his days in the Navy were still serving? It's only been twelve years, he reminded himself, though it felt like a lifetime. Two lifetimes, if he was truthful; the life of a smuggler before he fell in love with Leia, and the life of an Alliance general after. He had previously wondered if he had flown against Imperial pilots who had once been his colleagues. Had he killed men who were once squadron buddies?

Anything was possible, including the chance that some of his ex-colleagues could have obtained a reasonably high rank in that twelve-year period.

"I don't have any friends," he protested.

His denial was what she needed to hear. The last thing she wanted to believe was that Han had been friends, let alone lovers, with the Imperial commander.

"I would've said that, too," she joked, trying to lighten the mood. "But that's what she described you as. A friend."

Something stuck in his throat. "S-she?"

The waiver in his voice cramped a knot into Leia's chest. She found it difficult to look at him. "The XO of one of their ships is a woman. A commander. Ascher Saxel."

The bottom dropped out of Solo's stomach. "Oh." He hadn't seriously thought about Ascher for years now. The last time would probably have been when he had become an unofficial member of the Rebel Alliance. Hooking up with Rebels and coming into violent conflict with Imperial forces had dredged up memories of his short time in the Imperial Navy. Ascher had been an inevitable part of those memories. And now, it seemed, here she was - an inevitable part of his reality.

They reached the hatch to the princess' suite and Leia keyed in the access code. Grateful that she had something to momentarily keep her eyes from his, she casually asked, "Do you know her?"

The hatch slid open but they remained on the threshold. When he hadn't responded after a few seconds, she turned towards him expectantly, her look demanding nothing short of the truth from him. His shrug was almost apologetic. "Umm...yeah. Kinda."

For a moment, Leia was lost at what to do next. What did he mean - 'kinda'? Then Han ushered her through the hatchway and closed it behind them.

"I've been lookin' forward to this since before I left," he told her brightly.

His unexpected change in mood caught her off-guard. "Looking forward to what?"

Solo swept her into his embrace. "My homecoming."

Homecoming. She smiled at his sentimental remark, his open admission that he was committed to her. And if he thought of this as 'home', then he must think of her as... Any concerns she had about Ascher Saxel were quickly shelved.

"You up for a 'fresher?" Leia asked, her eyes sultry-dark with promise as she tugged open the front of his flying suit.

Han smiled and winked at her. "You know I'm always 'up' for a 'fresher with you, sweetheart." His hands moved over her possessively. "And if I'm not up now, I soon will be."

Despite their best intentions to share a 'fresher, they failed to make it that far. Helping each other undress proved to be their undoing. The love they made was quick, hard and passionate - a torrential downpour to drench the short-lived drought. Han apologised for not taking his time or being gentler, but Leia assured him she would not have wanted it any different; her hunger and desire for him had been just as consuming as his had.

As they had a dinner to attend in less than 40 minutes, Leia knew she could not afford the luxury of relaxing back in Han's arms. Tossing his hair, she kissed him on the cheek, reluctantly left their bed and headed into the refresher. Standing inside the cubicle, she allowed the sonic waves to gently cleanse and buffet her, while her mind jittered over exactly what would happen at the dinner. Or more precisely, what would happen between Han and the Imperial commander.

The sonic cycle came to an end and Leia stepped out of the cubicle. She slipped her arms into a lightweight robe and spent the next fifteen minutes rolling her hair into an elegant style and applying make-up to her face. Finished with her efforts, she tried a smile, then rubbed the blemish of lip liner from her front teeth. Only then did it occur to her that Han had not stirred from their bed.

Suspecting he may have fallen asleep, Leia moved back out into the sleeping area. Han was in exactly the same position that she had left him: lying flat on his stomach, his head turned towards her and just failing to rest on the pillows. It was surprising to see that his eyes were open, and he watched her as she strolled past the bed and towards the closet. She glanced at him as she selected a dark blue dress - the only outfit she had that was suitable to wear to a formal dinner. "Are you going to have a 'fresher," she asked, "or go with the scent of me all over you?"

She didn't mention that he also needed to do something about the stubble on his jaw. There was no doubt the short beard made him appear more gorgeous, and she had enjoyed the feel of it across her body, but from another perspective it could also have been seen as scruffy. Gorgeously scruffy. "You'll need to get moving." She hoped the prompt didn't sound too much like she was nagging him.

"Your dress uniform's still in the closet from last time."

Han slowly rolled over, propped himself up on the pillows and softly asked, "Do you mind if I don't come?"

Leia was both delighted and disappointed by his request. As much as she wanted to appear on his arm at this dinner, she was even more pleased to hear that he was hesitant at meeting his 'friend'. She gave him an easy excuse for his non-attendance. "Tired?"

He was receptive to her suggestion. "A bit." The dark marks under his eyes indicated he was more tired than just 'a bit'. He shrugged and added, "I'm not much in the mood to deal with stuffed shirts. Alliance or Imperial."

Although she understood, she also felt tempted to test this unknown friendship he had. "What about your friend?"

He was silent for a moment as he considered what he would do. "Your talks are still happening for a few more days, right? I'll catch up with her later."

Leia nodded and turned back to the dress, holding it up to herself to see how it looked, as if she had a closet-full to choose from.

"Besides," Solo said quietly, "you wouldn't want me embarrassing you."

Leia swung around to look at him again. She held his gaze and solemnly told him, "You never embarrass me, Han."

He grimaced. "You know what I mean. I'm liable to say something not politically correct." "Perhaps," she conceded. "But never believe that you ever embarrass me."

"I love you, you know that."

"Don't change the conversation. You never embarrass me, all right?" He nodded reluctantly, and she sighed and added, "I love you, too. Nerfherder."

He rolled his eyes towards the upper bulkhead. "Now she insults me."

Leia unexpectedly tilted his head down and kissed him firmly on the mouth. She drew back from him and stared into his eyes.

"Will you be here when I get back?" she softly asked.

The side of his mouth lifted into a half-grin. "Who else would have me?"

She kissed him again. "I'll only stay for as long as necessary, for the sake of appearance."

"Take your time," he assured her. "I'll only be catching up on sleep."

"Don't forget to have something to eat."

"I won't."

Leia glanced at the bedside chrono. "I better get moving. I don't want to be late."

Solo watched her while she dressed, making alternately complimentary and suggestive remarks much to Leia's amusement. However his running commentary gradually wound down as fatigue caught up with him. By the time she was ready to leave, his eyes were closed and his breathing had deepened. She kissed his forehead, turned off the lights and departed for the dinner.

The princess managed to apologise for the absence of General Solo without drawing too much attention to it, or disclosing the extent of her relationship with him. She simply explained that General Solo expressed his gratitude for the invitation, but he was unable to attend due to some pressing business he needed to resolve. From the look on Dodonna's face, it was apparent that he did not believe that Solo had actually said those words. But the elder general seemed pleased that the Corellian had not shown for dinner, and Leia was grateful that Han would not have to suffer through Dodonna's snide comments.

Leia kept her eyes averted from Commander Saxel's gaze when she explained Han's non-attendance. She did not want to see how much his absence affected the other woman, and did not want Saxel knowing that she and Han were lovers. Though the princess wasn't sure why she didn't want these things to happen.

The dinner was very civilized, the conversation lively and amusing. Leia may even have enjoyed herself if she hadn't spent the time speculating about how close Han had been with Saxel, and wondering if he would still be in her bed when she returned, or if he would have sought out the familiarity of his bunk onboard the Falcon.

With the formal sit-down meal concluded, the Imperial and Alliance officers adjourned to the anteroom to continue their discussions in more comfortable surrounds and sip on fortified wines. Leia declined the small glass of torp that was offered to her by a serving droid and clasped her hands behind her back. She had positioned herself on the edge of the informal groupings, on the raised level adjacent to the transparisteel viewport, trying to find a way to leave as gracefully as possible without appearing overly anxious to depart. Commander Saxel had not spoken to the princess throughout the dinner, but Leia had not taken the rebuff personally. If anything, it meant that she did not have to answer any private questions about Han that might reveal how close she and the Corellian general were.

As if cued into Leia's thinking, Commander Saxel attempted to make eye contact with the princess. Leia hurriedly averted her gaze out the viewport. Saxel seemed undeterred and joined the princess on the raised level. Knowing she couldn't ignore the commander for long, Leia feigned surprise at seeing the other woman standing behind her shoulder and turned to face her.

Leia formally acknowledged Saxel. "Commander."

Saxel's reply was equally official. "Princess." The commander glanced down at her hands, then met Leia's eyes again. "Thank you for going to the trouble of inviting General Solo to dinner."

Leia studied Saxel's face, trying to gauge her sincerity. "It was no trouble, Commander. You are his friend, after all."

Saxel nodded, perhaps a bit sadly. "I'm sorry he wasn't able to make it. I've been looking forward to seeing him. We didn't part under the best of circumstances."

I don't want to hear this, Leia thought desperately, wishing she could turn and leave, or at least block her ears with her hands.

"How long has it been since you saw Han?" Leia found herself asking, not certain why she had asked the question. Was she genuinely interested or just making polite conversation?

Saxel's voice became wistful. "Over twelve years. I think he must have been all of 21 when I last saw him."

Leia stomped on the envy that reared inside her, instead tried to focus on how unbearable a 21 year old Han Solo would have been, not imagine how boyishly cute he must have looked.

"That was just before he left the Navy."

Something inside Leia bristled. "You mean court martialled?" she pointedly asked.

Saxel abruptly stopped her reminiscing and tilted her head at the princess. "He hasn't hidden that from you then?"

"Why should he?"

Saxel gave her a wry smile. "It wasn't pretty, Your Highness."

Leia pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow. "From what I understand, court martial never are." Saxel looked amused. "And I'd say it was lucky for you that he was."

You don't know the half of it, Leia thought, wondering how she could safely get out of this conversation, and the room, without it appearing as though Saxel had chased her away. That Saxel had won.

"May I ask you a personal question, Princess?" Saxel didn't give Leia time to respond and continued, "Is it commonly known throughout the Alliance that you're involved with Han?"

Leia felt the anger rise through her. She suspected that Commander Saxel had been testing her, prodding her to get a response, to determine whether she and Han were lovers. The smile she gave Saxel was cold and stiff. "It's known," Leia advised her, "just not officially acknowledged."

"So you're the right person to talk to then." Leia frowned and Saxel explained, "I've got twelve years to catch up on. Can you enlighten me as to what's happened to Han in that time?"

Leia tried not to revel in the sense of power now open to her. That would have been beneath her. Far too common and vulgar. "Perhaps you should ask Han that."

The commander's open and amiable demeanour suddenly closed as she folded her arms across her chest. "Perhaps I should."

Leia assumed her best political face, her most polite smile. She hadn't liked this female commander to begin with. Leia took some satisfaction in knowing that her instinctive dislike of the woman had been vindicated. Now all she wanted to know was exactly what sort of a relationship Han had had with Saxel, and then ensure that she did everything possible to ensure they never met again.

"If you'll excuse me, Commander."

Saxel bowed her head in feigned deference. "Of course, Your Highness."

There was no way Leia would suffer this occasion, or this woman, any longer. She had already been separated from Han for far too long as it was. Another minute, and she was certain she would surely scream.

Not giving Commander Saxel a second glance, Leia quickly moved down the short steps to the rest of the dinner guests, bade goodnight to her colleagues and other Imperial officers, and left the anteroom.

The journey back to her suite seemed to take forever, and it didn't help that the ship and its crew appeared to be conspiring to unduly delay the princess. The corridors she took seemed unusually busy with sentients and droids, and one of the turbolifts was unserviceable due to technical problems.

Upon reaching the door to her cabin, she sighed in gratitude, and took a few moments to compose herself and push aside the encounter with Commander Saxel. She keyed in the access code, set the hatch to open just far enough for her to sneak through without letting in too much ambient light from the corridor, and manually over-rode the sensor that would activate the lights when she entered. Despite her precautions and light footsteps, Solo briefly stirred as she entered the cabin. He was usually a light sleeper; a trait Leia assumed was ingrained from his time as a smuggler and the constant need for vigilance.

She sshhed the sleepy call of her name and reassured him she wouldn't be long. With the hatch to the 'fresher closed, she undressed, removed the make-up from her face and loosely plaited her hair into two braids. Naked, she hurried back to her bed, slipped under the covers and snuggled into him backwards. Solo rolled onto his side, draped an arm around her waist and pulled her into the curve of his body. He rested his freshly shaved jaw on her shoulder, kissed her cheek and made a satisfied noise deep in his throat.

"Missed you," he mumbled.

Silently echoing his confession, Leia allowed herself the luxury of enjoying the warmth of his body spooned around hers. From the first moment on that fateful trip to Bespin, she had always felt loved when enfolded in the strength and gentleness of his arms. Safe. At peace. Beneath it, though, the unsettled feeling she'd had for the past ten days still lingered.

She laid her palm across the top of the hand that was now stroking the smooth skin of her belly. "You were asleep," she gently chided. "How could you miss me?"

Now most definitely awake, Solo caressed the curve of her hip. "You're always in my dreams, Princess."

Leia shivered at the touch of his lips on the nape of her neck. She rested her own hand on his hip, encouraging him to move closer to her. The contact of his skin against hers allowed her to discern the different textures of his body: the fine hair on his chest and legs; the bones of his knees, hips and ribs; the muscles of his upper thighs. The touch of him invariably led to her arousal, and although she felt inclined to allow her basic instincts to take over, she could not let go of her need to find out how close Han's friendship had been with Ascher Saxel.

"Did you have something to eat?" she asked innocently.

He replied as he nuzzled on her neck, "Mmhmm. Glad I saved room for dessert."

"Our dinner was very nice." She noticed his hesitation - a moment when his lips left her skin - before he continued kissing her neck. "Your friend was disappointed you weren't there."

Now he did stop, rolled his chest away from her back and shoulders. Leia immediately noticed the temperature difference from the loss of his warmth.

His sigh held a sense of resignation. "Go on," he told her softly. "Ask me."

She was grateful the darkness hid the guilt that flushed her cheeks, but she remained coy. "Ask you what?"

He unsuccessfully tried to relax the muscles in his jaw. "What do you want to know, Leia?"

The sudden tension between them caused her to turn in his arms, pull away from him, and he removed his hands from her body. The numerals of the bedside chrono cast a pale blue light across them, but his eyes were dark with shadows.

There were many ways for her to answer, yet they had travelled this path before. She had previously told him that she wanted to know more about him and his history. She only hoped that their relationship was mature enough to allow him to talk about past relationships.

"When did you last see Ascher Saxel?" Leia asked.

Solo looked off to one side, shook his head to himself, then turned back to her. "About twelve years ago. The day I got court martialled." There was a touch of exasperation in his tone. "She put in a plea of mitigation on my behalf."

It gave Leia a small sense of pleasure that Han's recollection matched Saxel's. Then she realised exactly what he had said, and suspected Saxel would not have placed an appeal on his behalf unless she had been his superior.

"And why did she put in a plea of mitigation?"

He exhaled heavily before replying, "She used to be my boss. A flight leader in the first squadron I was posted to."

Leia was tempted to turn on the lights so that she could look into his eyes, but she suspected it would be easier for both of them if they remained in the dark. In spite of this, the pulse thumped in her throat.

"Were you lovers?"

He moistened a dry mouth. "There was never any love involved. We were just friends who went one step further."

Like us, Leia immediately thought, recalling how her friendship with Han had rapidly developed into something more during their escape to Bespin. Then she tempered that idea. Not like us. We love each other. We always have.

She frowned, her thinking now confused. "You weren't lovers?"

He shook his head. "We weren't in love. Just screwed around."

Leia was very much aware of Solo's previous reputation for casual affairs with no love involved. A concept that was distinctly alien to her.

"But she knows exactly how tall you are." Surely that was an intimate fact you would only remember about someone you loved.

The sound of his laughter was unexpected.

"You're jealous," he accused.

Leia was momentarily flustered. "I am not."

Solo pushed at her shoulder, his teeth gleaming in the blue glow. "Yeah. You are."

She pushed him back. "No. I'm not."

"Well, what did you and Asch talk about over dinner?" he asked, the grin evident in his voice. She tried to overlook the familiar name he used for Saxel. "We...we didn't speak much."

"You ignored her." He nodded his head knowingly. "You must really be jealous."

"I am not jealous." She pushed his shoulder again and he chuckled louder. The only argument she could come up with now sounded shallow and weak. "How come she knows and remembers exactly how tall you are?"

His laughter calmed, and he considered her fondly, brushed a hand across her cheek and up into her hair. "Asch is a top rate officer. She was a great boss back then. Knew everything about her pilots. Height, weight, eye colour, boot size, service number. And I was her ensign for nearly a year. I'm not surprised she'd remember something like that about me."

Her night vision had improved and she was clearly able to make out his features as she stared at him, trying to unravel what she felt about his revelation. Solo

reached to pull her into his embrace. To his astonishment, Leia gripped his biceps and kept herself at arm's length "If she was such a great boss, what were you doing sleeping with her?"

He shrugged, let her have that one. "All right," he agreed, "maybe a lieutenant shouldn't have seduced her ensign. But she was seven years older than me." He leaned towards her and whispered, "And I was pretty irresistible back then."

He melodramatically cried out at the gentle punch she landed on his arm. "Owww! It's always violence with you."

Her smile betrayed the sternness of her words. "You're incorrigible, you know that."

"But it's true!" he protested, his eyes wide with innocence. "Ask Asch."

She had to chuckle at the imagery that came to her mind. "Oh, I can see that working a treat at surrender negotiations. 'Excuse me, Commander Saxel, could you please explain what led you to have carnal relations with my lover when he was your subordinate?'"

He grinned, grateful she was taking this so much better than he could have expected. "Don't make it an agenda item, okay?"

Leia was mildly surprised at how quickly her jealousy had dissipated once it had been drawn to her attention. She snuggled into his chest and wrapped her arms around him. Granted, Han may have slept with Saxel, but he was here with her now and they loved each other. Any relationship he'd had with Saxel had happened such a long time ago - long before the princess and the smuggler had met - it now hardly seemed to matter. His honesty with her was also endearing and comforting. Perhaps this was a significant stage they had reached in their relationship; the point where Han trusted her enough to openly share his past.

The princess rubbed her cheek against the hair on his chest, tilted her lips up and kissed his throat. And now that she had resolved her emotions, she felt inclined to help him come to terms with his own.

"So why don't you want to see Ascher?"

Han grimaced against the top of her head and held her tighter. She could read him as easily as he could read her.

"I'll see her," he admitted. "Just didn't wanna do it right now."

"Just didn't wanna do it right now," Leia mimicked, exaggerating his drawling accent.

She squealed as he pinched her on the bottom. When she attempted to return the favour, he grabbed her wrist to stop her. A brief, playful struggle ensued, and he easily over-powered her, held her wrists down on either side of her shoulders and pressed her against the bed. There was a menacing gleam in his eye but Leia only giggled into his face. To shut her up, he kissed her hard. Her sighs were muffled and she willingly returned his ardour. The kiss ended and they stared at each other breathlessly, until she sniggered again.

Han rolled his eyes and released her arms. "You sure know how to ruin a romantic moment."

Leia grinned. "I love it when you get so aroused and virile."

Amused but suspecting his desires would not be fulfilled again tonight, he shook his head wearily. "And then you laugh at me. Maybe I should've stayed away for another 10 days."

"Maybe you shouldn't have changed the conversation."

He pulled back from her but she wrapped her arms around him before he got too far away. He rolled onto his back, taking her with him. She sat up, straddled his waist, then reached across and turned the lights on to a low level. Solo squinted at the sudden brightness, and shaded his eyes with his arm as he looked up at her expectantly. Leia smiled down at him, ran her fingers up the underside of his arm that lay dropped across his brow.

"Do you know what I think?" she purred.

He looked at her suspiciously but played along. "What do you think?"

Her other hand traced down his arm that rested across his stomach. "I think that you pretend you like being in control all the time, that you always want to be the boss, lead rather than follow... but in reality, you really like to be dominated."

Solo smirked. "Oh, I do, do I? How'd you figure that?"

Her fingers encircled his wrists. "Women's intuition." She gently took his arms and he compliantly allowed her to position them so that she held his wrists above his head. "And your track record." She leaned down towards his face, kissed him softly on the lips, opening his mouth to hers and guiding him through the moment. Any resistance quickly left him. They parted and she released his wrists to caress the side of his face. His arms remained up on the pillow, as he lay prostrate beneath her.

"So dominate me, Princess," he whispered.

She did.

When the chrono alarm sounded, Han convinced Leia to turn it off and spend another forty minutes in his arms before rising. Consequently, the princess arrived late for the beginning of the third session of surrender negotiations. By the time she reached the cruiser's conference room, the Imperials were already mingling with the Alliance officers, sipping on cups of kaffe and making small talk.

Upon entering the room, heads turned curiously in her direction, and Leia had the distinct impression they had been waiting for her. She hesitated for a moment, feeling a mixture of guilt and disregard for the fact that she was responsible for holding up proceedings. She glanced at their faces, but ensured she did not meet the gaze of Ascher Saxel. Although she was no longer jealous of the relationship the commander had shared with Han, Leia somehow felt embarrassed that the only other woman in this room had had sex with the man who was now her lover.

Years of political experience and training quickly subsumed Leia's mixed emotions. Acting as though her tardiness was nothing out of the ordinary, she took her seat at the table behind the holographic name plaque that labelled her as 'Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan'. While none of her colleagues used their home worlds to identify who they were, Leia had insisted upon reminding these Imperials that she represented a planet that had been destroyed by the Empire.

The Alliance and Imperial officers followed Leia's lead and assumed their seats. The princess feigned preoccupation and busied herself by calling up the minutes of the previous sessions on the thin screen in front of her. She glanced through the transcriptions that had been recorded, compiled and annotated by the conference room's automated systems. She fiddled with a stylus, pushed together a sheath of flimsy, before she noticed a data chip sitting next to the interface board. Her fingers hovered above the chip, then stopped when she read the hand-written label: Han - images.

Leia's eyes zeroed in on Saxel. The commander was seated diagonally opposite, watching the princess intently. She offered Leia a small smile, nodded encouragingly, but the princess retracted her fingers from the chip as if she had been scalded.

"Gentles." Dodonna called for their attention. "I trust you all had an enjoyable evening." There were murmurs of agreement from Imperial and Alliance officers alike. Dodonna's affable smile twitched into a sneer. "And I apologise for the delay in commencing this session." He stared dourly at Leia but she refused to avert her eyes. "The schedule for this session is to table Imperial resources: human, droid, mechanical, munitions, and other supplies. This should lead us into plans for decommissioning your vessels and demobilisation of your troops.

We will then break for a meal. Following this, and at the request of Admiral Vonniiton," - Dodonna nodded respectfully across the table towards the senior Imperial officer - "I'd like to take you on a tour of this magnificent Mon Cal cruiser."

Dodonna's proposal was a winner amongst the Imperials; smiles and comments of anticipation rippled around the table. When silence settled again and kaffe cups had been refilled by attending droids, business turned to the matters at hand.

After the first opening sentences of the discussions, Leia knew she would find it difficult to concentrate. Not only was the listing of inventories the subtlest form of torture she could imagine, she now also had an enticingly labelled data chip begging to be accessed. She looked across at Commander Saxel again, but the other woman was dutifully focussed on her captain as he quietly conferred with her. The princess ran a fingernail along the edge of the chip, wondering exactly what the 'images' were and whether they were offered in a gesture of goodwill or malice. Would this give her an innocuous insight into Han's time in the Imperial Navy, or would this be personal, intimate images Saxel wanted to rile her with?

Saxel risked a glance at the princess, and Leia raised her hand from the data chip, casually tucked a tendril of hair back behind her ear. She decided she would not open the chip here. Instead, she would wait until she was back in the privacy of her cabin, and preferably before Han arrived. She knew how to resist temptation. After all, she had resisted Han's advances for three years; she could resist this for ten hours. She folded her hands in her lap and turned her attention to the proceedings.

By the time the third executive officer had completed detailing his ship's inventory, Leia's focus had well and truly deteriorated. She bit her lower lip. It was now Saxel's turn to formally read out the detailed list of resources belonging to the Star Destroyer that she was XO of. The commander was engrossed in her dissertation, and so did not see Leia slip the data chip into the interface port of her terminal.

A 2-D image album automatically launched in a corner of the princess' monitor. She glanced sideways at her neighbours, however they were both keeping track of the Imperial assets, not looking at her screen. Leia increased the size of the album to full screen and directed the application to commence its display. Her heart lodged in her throat as the first image faded into view - a young Imperial officer, standing in his cabin, looking directly into the lens of the imager.

She recognised Han immediately. He was younger - barely out of his teens - lankier, his chest and shoulders not yet fully developed. His cheeks still had the fullness of youth, but there was no mistaking the glint in his eye or the turn of a smirk on his lips. It was strange to see his chin unmarked by the familiar slash of

scar. His hair was also cut far shorter than she had ever seen him wear. Regulation length, it had been clipped around his ears and the back of his neck, and cut spiky-short on the crown of his head. However the way his fringe sat ruffled across his forehead softened the look and suggested rebelliousness in his nature.

Leia smiled ruefully to herself. He was right, damn him. He had been 'irresistible', but then again, she knew she was biased. The black Imperial uniform he wore emphasised his rangy physique and almost took her breath away. If I'd known him back then, she considered wistfully, I probably would have remained a loyal citizen of the Empire. The rank pips indicated he was an ensign and she estimated his age at 20. A quick calculation and Leia realised she had been only nine years old when the shot had been taken. She tried not to dwell on the absurdity of a nine-year-old Alderaani princess having a crush on a 20-year-old Imperial pilot.

Leia called up the next image. Han in uniform in his cabin, but this time with a civilian gun-rig slung low around his hips and a heavy blaster pistol drawn, posing for the imager. She recognised the holster and blaster immediately; he had worn them since she had known him, wore them even now. Except in the image, they looked almost brand new, barely nicked. This knowledge surprised her slightly. She had thought Han would have taken to wearing the gun-rig during his time as a smuggler, not when he was in the Navy. There must have been another factor in his life that had influenced him to wear a weapon and develop his speed draw to near-legendary status.

Leia kept a grin in check - Show off! - and examined the rest of his cabin. The crisply folded bedclothes of the regulation made bunk. The neat and tidy desk with a terminal rising from it, and a pilot's kitbag next to that. A secure locker above the bunk, probably where he stored his weapon. And on the other bulkhead, a small shelf held a metallic model starfighter mounted on a base that bore an inscription, a trophy or award possibly from his Academy days.

This tantalising glimpse into his past enticed her further. It was amazing how different and structured his life had been back then - and how different his life now could have been, if not for his court martial... Leia resolved to never again comment on the dishevelled state of his cabin onboard the Falcon.

The next few images were of Han in a holographic target range, going through the speed draw sequence she had seen him practice before, though now he usually practiced against a target remote. From what she could tell, his technique appeared to be less natural back then, not the flowing style that he had since perfected. But the final image, when he turned and smiled down the imager lens, showed how proud he had been of his developing skill.

She moved onto images of Han in his black flight suit, sweat plastering the hair to his head, sometimes with other pilots - his friends and colleagues - sometimes on his own, but always with the familiar lopsided grin across his face. The young ensign looked happy with his life, Leia reflected. Confident. Comfortable. Capable.

She ceased her musing as a stunning image dissolved onto the screen. Han in his full ceremonial uniform, the black cap pulled low over his eyes, standing at attention, his gaze riveted ahead. There were ranks of pilots and troopers behind him, so he was obviously on parade. An official Imperial crest superimposed in an upper corner of the frame indicated this was an official Navy image; it wasn't a personal shot from Ascher's files.

The following image was from the same parade, only this time Han had stepped forward, away from the rank he had been standing in. Wondering at the significance of the parade and why he had been singled out, Leia called up the third image and caught her breath. A senior officer was formally fixing the red piping of the Corellian Bloodstripe to the leg of Han's trousers.

Leia was aware of the significance of this ceremony. The Bloodstripe was an infrequently awarded military decoration, an affectation the Corellian Sector of the Imperial forces held onto. It was awarded for heroic acts, to appropriately distinguish and honour the recipient. When Solo had first become involved with the Rebellion, many Alliance officers, particularly those of Corellian extraction, had commented on the incongruity of a smuggler wearing the Bloodstripe. Some had even suggested, rather archly, that Solo must have killed the original recipient of the decoration and have claimed it for himself. Leia had always thought differently, however. At first her belief had started out as a feeling, based mainly on how 'right' the decoration looked on him. As they had grown closer, he had answered her questions about the decoration, albeit with a level of reticence: yes, it was the Corellian Bloodstripe and no, you didn't get one just for keeping your nose clean. That was the extent of his admissions to her, about the award and his time in the Imperial forces. Luke had been able to discover more, and he in turn had passed on the information to Leia. It had been Luke who had told her that Solo graduated from the Academy with honours, had been a pilot in the Navy, and had reached the rank of lieutenant before being court martialled for freeing Chewbacca from his life as a slave.

Leia could only speculate why Solo would not discuss his life as an Imperial pilot with her. Admittedly, she hadn't exactly asked him; she'd always found it difficult to ask him personal questions about his past, mainly because he didn't freely offer up the information. At least she could now partially understand why he did not want to talk about it. These images showed Han in his element: laughing, joking, enjoying himself. The Solo she had originally met had been a cynical, jaded smuggler. The contrast between the two was astounding.

Leia had always thought that Solo's silence was due to a deep-seated shame that he had been an Imperial. But now, having seen these images, she suspected he had buried the memories and emotions from that time, buried them so deeply he did not even know how to recall them. Yet after seeing the images of him receiving the Corellian Bloodstripe, she realised that she no longer needed to know the background to why he had been awarded it. It was enough to acknowledge that he had been a worthy recipient.

The princess accessed more images of Han receiving the Bloodstripe, the smart salute he snapped out to the presenting officer. Then the images depicted another ceremony, more official Imperial documentation. This time Ensign Solo, complete with Bloodstripe, received his lieutenant pips. Leia found herself smiling at the image of Lieutenant Solo saluting the senior officer, bemused that she could feel proud of him, even if it was an Imperial ceremony.

It was with some disappointment that she came to the final image. A profile shot of Han sitting on a bunk that was not his own, for the layout of the cabin was slightly different from previous images. His feet were bare, long legs drawn up onto the bunk, and he wore only his trousers and a black, sleeveless undershirt. He was staring ahead, looking out of frame, his chin resting on a fist. The shape of his face was sharper, more like the way he had looked when he had rescued her from the Death Star, and a frown marred his forehead. Broodingly handsome, was the description that immediately came to Leia's mind.

She restarted the album and scrolled through the 24 images again, taking her time, studying them in minute detail. When the sequence came to an end, the princess sighed to herself. Her excitement had been dulled by a yearning ache. It was pointless, but she wished she could share these memories with Han. Wished she could be a part of his past as well as his future.

The princess looked across the table towards Ascher Saxel. The commander had finished listing her ship's inventory and was now taking questions from one of the Alliance officers, but she acknowledged Leia's gaze with a curt nod of her head. Leia gave the other woman a small yet grateful smile. There was no malice or spite in Ascher's gift, and Leia felt slightly ashamed of herself for originally thinking so. These images provided an unexpected and privileged insight into a part of Han's life that been previously inaccessible. If anything, Leia owed Ascher a debt of gratitude.

Leia turned her attention back to the terminal. She re-sized the 2-D album, pulled up a text editor window and authenticated with Commander Saxel's terminal. Ascher was too busy responding to another question, but Leia sent the message regardless.

Commander Saxel. Thank you for the data chip. It was very thoughtful of you. Leia Organa. She considered disconnecting from the message service into

Ascher's terminal, but on a whim decided to remain on-line to see if the other woman would respond. Her attention returned to the 2-D album, and she cycled through the images again while the discussions continued. She had just reached the images of Han at the holo-range when a text message window appeared on her screen.

]You're most welcome, Your Highness. I hoped that you would appreciate them.["

Leia quickly responded. _I do. Thank you again._

The two women looked up from their terminals, glanced around guiltily to ensure that none of their colleagues knew what they were up to, and then smiled at each other. This is almost like passing notes in class, Leia thought, then read the next message on her screen from Ascher.

]This is almost like passing notes in class.["

The princess suppressed a laugh but the noise she made was enough to turn curious heads in her direction. She placed a hand to her mouth, took a sip of water from the beaker in front of her. "Excuse me," she mumbled.

She pretended to pay attention as the discussions proceeded, but when she looked at her screen again, there was another message from Ascher.

]Oops. Sorry for nearly dropping you in it, Your Highness.["

For the first time since they had met, Leia realised that the commander was Corellian. Although the woman had no discernible accent, the colloquialism she had used was most definitely Corellian, and one that Han used. If Han and Ascher had been friends, Leia wondered how much alike the two of them were.

Please, call me Leia. After all, she added to herself, we've shared the same man.

]And I'm Ascher.["

There was a moment of inactivity on the screen, before Ascher wrote:]I'd like to apologise for my behaviour at dinner last night. It was rather inappropriate of me to speak to you like that.["

They may have been friends and compatriots, Leia realised, but Ascher was nothing like Han. _Thank you. However, I was also a bit hypersensitive. Anything you said was likely to rile me._

]How long have you known Han for?["

Leia gave careful consideration to the question, then realised it was probably to be expected; the only thing they had in common was Han.

I've known him for four years. He helped rescue me from the Death Star.

Leia watched Ascher's eyes widen as she read the revelation.

]I had no idea.[

The princess smiled to herself. _Neither did he, at the time._

The next comment surprised Leia.

]Sounds like Han.[

It was tempting to ask exactly what Ascher had meant by that remark, but Leia thought it was probably easier to go back to the beginning.

Where do you know Han from?

]He was posted to the same squadron as I was. I first met him when he was fresh out of the Academy. Loud, arrogant and full of his own self-importance.[

Well, Leia wrote, _he hasn't changed then._

Across the table, Ascher sniggered into a cup of kaffe.

With a congenial atmosphere established, Leia felt confident in broaching the next subject. _I understand you and Han had a relationship._

There was a moment's hesitation before Ascher responded:]Yes, I suppose you could call it that. It effectively ended not long after Han received his lieutenant pips and was posted to a new squadron. Besides which, I don't think he really took it that seriously to begin with.[

There was the unwritten inference that Ascher had been serious about the relationship. Leia had no desire to head down that path.

]When I look back on it,[Ascher continued,]it was pretty stupid of us to even start. We could have ended up in a lot of trouble.[

Leia was aware that fraternisation was forbidden between members of the Imperial forces. The fact that Ascher had been Han's superior probably would have made matters worse if they had been discovered. Still, Leia could not help herself and responded, _Han ended up in a lot of trouble anyway, didn't he?_

The window on her screen was momentarily blank before Ascher wrote,]Yes. He did.[

There was an unexpected break in discussions that Leia only noticed because everyone at the table suddenly rose and moved towards the refreshments that a pair of serving droids had brought in. Only Ascher and herself remained at the table. As tempting as it was continue her private conversation with Ascher, Leia knew it would not be politically correct to remain at the table while the rest of the gathering mingled over pastries and kaffe. The two women grinned at each other meekly, then left their places to join their colleagues, but not before locking their monitors off from prying eyes.

Leia used the break in discussions to visit the refresher facilities. When she returned, she collected a cup of herbal tea from one of the droids and deliberately avoided straying too close to Ascher. Although she had enjoyed her discussion with Ascher, she wasn't quite ready to test if they could maintain an amiable conversation face-to-face. Fortunately Ascher did not approach her, and seemed content to remain off to one side with a few of her colleagues.

The break was really only meant as a leg-stretch, to freshen the kaffe and keep the hunger pains at bay. The delegates soon resumed their seats, and discussions moved onto the plans for decommissioning and demobilisation. Initially, Ascher was rather involved in the planning process and so had no time to continue on-line 'chatting' with the princess. Leia did her best to keep track of discussions, but as she really had no part to play, her attention soon wandered back to the 2-D album. She found herself scrolling through the images, and trying to imagine the story behind each one. She wondered if it would be prudent to ask Ascher about Han's life back then, or if she should just be grateful for the images and be done with it.

A text window launched onto Leia's screen and Ascher picked up from where they had left off.]Han's done rather well for himself, hasn't he?]

Leia wasn't certain if Ascher was referring to his rank or the fact that he was sleeping with a princess. Her response was non-committal. _Yes, I suppose he has._

]Especially when you consider the background he's come from.[

As she didn't know what his background was, Leia was at a decided disadvantage. She considered agreeing with Ascher, pretending that Han had told her everything. But then she realised that may ruin any chance she had of learning more.

I'm not aware of his background. My knowledge of Han only goes back four years. Prior to that, it's a bit blurry.

Leia's eyes met Ascher's. As the commander did not reply, Leia continued.

_ Han doesn't like to talk about himself. No, that's wrong. Han doesn't like to talk about his past, with me, anyway. I think he's afraid I might not respect where he's come from. Or that I may pity him._

Ascher agreed,]He's always loathed pity.[

_ I wish he'd tell me more._ She hesitated for a moment, before adding, _ There is no way it would ever change the way I feel about him._

]Leia, if it's any consolation, Han never told me anything either.[The two women looked at each other across the tops of their terminals.]Everything I know has come straight from his personnel file.[

Leia did take comfort in Ascher's words. It was satisfying to hear that Han's reticence stretched over many years and was not restricted to her alone. Then she suddenly realised that Ascher would've had access to extensive personal information about Han because she had been his flight leader.

_ Would it be possible for you to tell me a few things about his background?_

The screen was blank before more words appeared:]What did you want to know?[_

Leia didn't want to appear greedy. There was so much she wanted to know about Han, and yet she suspected there would be a limit to Saxel's knowledge and the extent that she would reveal.

_ Ascher,_ Leia began, _ does Han have any family?_

Family had always been important to Leia, especially as hers had been so brutally ripped apart.

Now, all that she had left that she considered as family was Han, Luke and Chewbacca. She couldn't understand how some people were able to function without the love and support of relatives, and had always wondered if Han had abandoned his family on Corellia when he chose a life of smuggling, or if they had disowned him following the court martial.

Ascher's reply managed to convey a sense of sobriety.]I don't believe so. I understand his mother died when he was very young.[

Leia's heart twinged in empathy. She knew what it meant to lose your mother a young age. Even now, she occasionally pined for the mother she had hardly known.

]His father was murdered in a public plaza in Coronet. His psych file mentioned that Han witnessed it. I think he was about twelve years old when it happened.[]

Leia closed her eyes as the ache subsumed her being. That one piece of information explained so much about who Han was, it was almost like viewing him from a new perspective. She found herself loving him even more as a result.

]Don't pity him,[Ascher reminded her,]he'd hate that.[]

Leia's response was totally inadequate, but she needed to keep the conversation flowing. _I had no idea._

]Does he still practice that speed draw of his? With a wicked, custom-made DL-44?[]

Yes.

]And he's good? Very, very good?[]

Outstanding.

]I've always suspected the two are related. The death of his father, and his obsession with being fast with a blaster.[]

Leia had a sudden flash of insight. Yes, she silently agreed. That's exactly why he's perfected his speed draw. He doesn't want to be caught out, like his father was.

]I asked him about it once,[Ascher continued,]but he refused to tell me. Got angry that I even knew.[]

You can't just ask him things like that, Leia told herself, recognising that Ascher didn't really know Han that well if she had seriously expected an answer to her question. He won't discuss things that hurt him. Remember what happened when you asked him about the scar on his hand?

Leia was suddenly overwhelmed by something she could only describe as a 'Force vision'. Far more than her previous 'flash of insight', her mind was bombarded with an amalgam of images, a jumble that was like catching glimpses of a holo-feature in slow motion. She watched a vaguely familiar-looking dark-haired man dressed in spacer attire, strolling across an unfamiliar plaza. The man raised his hand in greeting to someone Leia could not see. She heard a shout in the distance, a young voice screaming out, "Da!" The man's face froze, became ugly, and he reached inside his vest, fumbled to retrieve a holdout blaster from the hidden holster. In that instant, his chest exploded into a twisted

mess of flesh, bone and muscle as a projectile tore through his back. He'd been shot from behind.

The crowd in the plaza panicked. There were screams and shouts, and people in all directions, panicked by the seemingly random act of violence. Amidst the noise and confusion though, Leia heard ragged breathing, as surely as if it was her own. Someone desperately trying to push their way through the crowd. Then she saw him; a young boy - tousled-haired and shoeless - dodging past people as he ran towards the scene of the killing. The boy collided with a stranger and went tumbling to the ground, his hands spread out in front of him. A shard of pain speared into Leia's own hands, and she felt the gravel slice into the boy's open palm.

The boy staggered to his feet and wiped a hand across his cheek, leaving a smear of blood across his face. He continued on towards the body of the dark-haired man, and crumpled down next to him. For a moment, the boy was at a loss at what to do; he stared in horror at the remains of the man's chest, overwhelmed that there was anything he could do to help. Then something in the boy's hazel eyes became hard and he placed his hands into the gaping wound, vainly trying to stop the flow of blood. But Leia knew the man was already dead. His eyes were open, the gaze dull, lifeless. The projectile had crashed through the spine, destroying the heart and lungs.

The vision faded out, leaving Leia with an image of the boy cradling the body of his dead father, blinking back the tears, valiantly refusing to let them fall.

Leia rubbed her thumb across the top of her palm, recalling the thin white scar that marked Han's hand. She had only recently asked him about the scar. They had been playing a simple game in bed. A game where she found one of his scars, he told her how he received it, and then she rewarded him by kissing the mark. He told her the stories behind the old blaster wounds on his arm and the slash across his chin. But when she asked about the scar across his palm, his shields had come on-line. He closed himself to her, said he couldn't remember, then rolled from the bed and had a 'fresher. At the time, Leia had been annoyed and frustrated by the way he shut her out. Now, though, she understood. Han did not want to remember how he had gained the scar. The memories were too painful to allow them to surface.

Not certain how much time had passed, Leia looked down at her screen. Ascher's last comment was still there:]I asked him about it once, but he refused to tell me. Got angry that I even knew.[Leia suspected the Force vision had only taken a few seconds.

Not wanting to share her personal revelation with Ascher, Leia instead ventured, _What happened to Han after the death of his father?_ ...to that poor boy left holding his dead father?

]The records weren't that clear. There was a mention of him being placed in the care of the Corellian Children's Services, so I assume that means numerous foster homes, and all the nurturing and affection that implies.[

Leia didn't know quite how to react to the spiteful tone in Ascher's words, so she wrote, _Oh._ She had grown up under the adoptive care of Bail Organa and had experienced nothing but love and affection. But she was aware there would have been a marked difference between her childhood in the palace at Aldera and Han's under the care of the Corellian state.

]No pity.[Ascher reminded her again.

No pity. Leia agreed. The princess studied the woman across the table. _Han told me you were his flight leader._

]That must've taken some effort to pry out of him.[

I've got a few special methods that work on him. Leia advised cryptically. _What was he like back then?_

]You mean apart from loud, arrogant and full of his own self-importance?]

Yes.

]Vibrant. Alive. At times almost wild, verging on undisciplined, but he hid that well. He was also a sarcastic son-of-a-bitch. And cute as anything.[

Leia smiled in agreement; the data chip had shown her proof of how cute he'd been.

]But beneath it all, there was a darkness that haunted him. An 'aloneness'.]

Not wanting to focus on the images from her vision, Leia pressed, _Was he a good pilot?_

]The best in the sector. Far better than me. And didn't he know it.[As if she was tired of supplying all the information, Ascher suddenly asked,]So what did Han do between his time in the Navy and joining the Rebellion?]

Leia thought it best not to sully Han's reputation too much with an old friend and colleague. _After the discharge, he became a free trader._

]You mean smuggler?][Ascher asked rather bluntly, and Leia belatedly realised she had chosen the wrong description; 'free trader' was the Corellian euphemism for 'smuggler'.

Leia could almost read the shrug in Ascher's next comments.]Oh well. I suppose it was to be expected. I understand his old man was a trader. Like father, like son, hey?]

I hope not exactly alike, Leia thought to herself. She shivered away the image of Han's father lying dead in the streets of Coronet, his blood staining the clothes of his son.

Oblivious to the rest of the proceedings, the princess was surprised when Ascher was able to answer a question that had been directed at her by her captain. Her captain seemed satisfied with the response, and nodded his approval.

Ascher waited to see if she was required again before turning back to the interface board and typing:]Where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?]

Leia shook her head in admiration. The two women continued their discussions, swapping tidbits of information and sharing recollections. By the time the meal break arrived, Leia felt closer to Ascher than she ever thought possible. And all thanks to the one thing they had in common - Han. As the delegates filed from the conference room and into the dining area, Leia waited by the doorway for Commander Saxel. Ascher inclined her head respectfully and accompanied the princess into the adjoining room.

"So, Princess," Ascher ventured, taking up from where their written conversation had concluded. "Can you tell me why Han threw away a successful career with the Navy, just to free a Wookiee slave?"

Leia blanched and averted her eyes. The two women may have established a friendly rapport, but the commander's attitude towards slaves bespoke of her Imperial background. What disturbed Leia more was Ascher's inability to understand what had possessed Han to act the way he had twelve years previously and free a Wookiee slave. Free Chewbacca, Leia emphasised to herself, needing to distance herself from the description Ascher had used. And perhaps even more perturbing, was the touch of anger apparent in Ascher's exasperation, as though she was a scorned lover. Leia again wondered if there had been more to the relationship than Han was letting on.

The princess returned her gaze to Commander Saxel. She regarded the other woman carefully, wondering if this was a question she had the right to answer on Han's behalf. Although Han had never spoken about why or how he'd freed Chewbacca, Leia now felt she had enough pieces of the puzzle and knew him intimately enough to make a reliable guess about what had happened.

Han may have been an Academy honours graduate, but it was obvious he didn't have a military bone in his body. He would have achieved such a high level of

success through skill, dedication and, knowing Han, sheer bloody-mindedness. But his innate distrust of authority figures, his disdain for discipline and protocol, must have severely chafed him during his time in the Navy.

Han's natural leadership ability notwithstanding, the turmoil must have brewed inside the young Imperial junior officer. Leia also knew that deep in his heart, Han had never been an Imperial. His spirit had been too pure and innocent; she had seen that much in the eyes of the twelve-year-old boy cradling the corpse of his father.

Seeing the injustices of Imperial rule, the pain and suffering inflicted upon the weak, would no doubt have forced Han to question his allegiance. No, not question, she corrected. React. Han would have instinctively reacted to Chewbacca's suffering. He would have freed Chewie, and then wondered about what he had done later. However by then, his fate would have been sealed. It would have been too late to undo, too late to take back his actions.

Leia tilted her head questioningly. "Do you really believe Han would have had a successful career?" Ascher dropped her gaze, as if realising her view was not necessarily the right one to express in an Alliance environment, especially during surrender negotiations. She did not respond until she and Leia had assumed adjacent seats at the dining table.

"Han's still the best pilot I've ever met. No one else has come close," Ascher explained quietly. "If he'd stayed in the Navy, he could've been an admiral by now. In command of his own sector."

Leia didn't believe Ascher's assertion. She could not imagine Han carving out a long and illustrious career with the Imperial Navy. Yet even if Lieutenant Solo had taken a different course, if his life hadn't crossed paths with Chewie's and he had remained a loyal officer of the Empire, he would now be very much on the wrong side. Or dead, Leia thought. Killed in some battle against the Rebellion. Regardless, I wouldn't be here either.

Leia pursed her lips. "Ascher, if you want to know why Han took the course that he did, that's something you really need to ask him." She was aware she had said something very similar the previous night after dinner, except this time her words carried no spite.

"Last time I saw him, I tried." Ascher grimaced and nodded to herself, as if suddenly understanding why her actions had been in vain. "Straight after the court martial. He wasn't in the mood for explanations."

Leia touched Ascher's forearm and looked into the elder woman's eyes. Ascher had given her a glimpse into Han's past. In return, Leia felt obliged to help Ascher resolve her own past, to let go of the young lieutenant she had been in love with.

And maybe if Han explained what had occurred and Ascher could see the veracity of his actions, it would also help in her transition from being a soldier of the Empire.

"Try him again," the princess suggested. "There's a lot of distance since then. And despite what I said, he has changed, even in the time I've known him. I'm sure he'll tell you."

Ascher raised a dubious eyebrow. "You certainly have a lot of faith in Han."

The princess rested her hands in her lap, conscious of the men seated around the table, though they all seemed absorbed in their own private discussions or were selecting meals from the menu. "He deserves my faith," Leia admitted. "He proves himself to me every day."

Ascher's lips twitched. "Then he has changed." Her tone was clipped, the traces of long repressed anger evident.

Leia could think of no response to Ascher's comment or her animosity. A serving droid was now hovering over her shoulder, waiting to take her meal order, and she hurriedly perused the menu. She requested a small salad and a glass of juice.

After Ascher placed her order, there was a strained silence between the two women. Neither seemed comfortable with the other, or with what other topic of conversation, besides Han, they could discuss. To fill the lull, Leia spoke briefly with the Alliance general, Kischel Yarum, to her left. Her attention, however, continued to stray back to Commander Saxel. She needed to find a way to get Ascher and Han to meet, to resolve past history, and ensure they were prepared to hear the other out. Though at this stage, she wasn't too sure she liked her chances.

When the serving droid returned with their meals, Leia took the opportunity to pick up where she had left her conversation with Ascher.

"If you'd like to see Han," Leia offered, "I'll arrange something."

Ascher stopped picking at her food and looked at the princess. Leia was relieved to see the latent hostility was absent from Ascher's eyes.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I'd like that very much."

Leia gave her a small smile and reminded her, "Please. It's Leia."

Ascher nodded but said nothing.

Now, Leia thought, all I've got to do is convince Han.

[Continue to Part 2.](#)

[Back To Index](#)