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Old Friends Long Gone...

Part 2

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

The tour of the Mon Cal cruiser started at the bridge, wound its way down through the various levels, through the main briefing theatre to the dining hall of the all ranks mess, a cursory visit past the engineering and weapons systems sections, into the flight control deck and finally out onto the gantry that lined one bulkhead of the main hangar. General Kischel Yarum led the ten Imperials officers through the hatchway, with Leia following up the rear. Apart from Yarum, she was the only other Alliance representative in this entourage. She had thought that if the opportunity arose, she might be able to get Ascher's reunion with Han over and done with sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately, they had not managed to 'bump' into Han yet because, Leia suspected, he was working on the Falcon not strolling around the ship looking for Ascher. And although inconvenient, Leia knew she had been hoping for an awful lot to seriously believe they would be able to just chance across Han.

However upon entering the main hangar, her eagerness increased as she focused on the profile of Solo's YT-1300 freighter, resting down on the deck only 50 meters away. What's more, Han was on the upper hull, hunkered over one of the maintenance access bays on the starboard bow mandible, head bowed down. Actinic glare from a macrofuser lit him in harsh flashes of blue as he welded the ship's superstructure. Dark coveralls soiled with grease hid his shipboard clothing, protective goggles covered his eyes, and he looked like any of the other technicians in the hangar, not the general that he was. His lips were

moving and Leia suspected he was talking to himself about the repairs, or more likely swearing in frustration.

General Yarum was pointing out the various larger ships that were docked here, shuttles and transports, explaining that most fighter squadrons were located in their own smaller hangars. Leia nudged Ascher to get her attention but she, like her colleagues, had already picked out the Millennium Falcon as the vessel that had buzzed the conference room the previous day. General Yarum answered a few pointed questions about the battered YT-1300 freighter and her captain, trying to maintain a sense of decorum without tarnishing the reputation of either Solo or the Alliance. The general furtively tried to capture the eye of Princess Leia, his own eyes beseeching her for assistance, but the princess seemed unaware of Yarum's predicament.

Ascher glanced down at the princess, then nodded her chin in the direction of the Falcon. "Han?" she asked quietly.

Leia rested her hands on the gantry's balustrade. "Yes. He doesn't like maintenance crews laying a hand on the Falcon. He'd rather do the work himself than risk something going wrong."

Ascher sighed to herself and raised her eyebrows. "Doesn't look like much of a ship."

"She's got it where it counts," Leia automatically responded, then had the sense to look embarrassed when Ascher stared at her curiously.

"Now that sounds like something Han would say," Ascher pointed out with a smirk.

"It is," the princess agreed. "He must be rubbing off on me if I'm starting to talk like him."

"Sounds like it's time to either bail out or settle down, Princess," the commander opined glibly, then gave her a mischievous grin to show she was only teasing.

Leia was wondering if Han would stop work long enough so that she could wave to him and beckon him up onto the gantry. But then she thought twice about that as a plan, especially with all the other Imperials expressing an interest in the smuggler-turned-general. It wouldn't be fair to put him on display like that, and he would probably resent her for it. As she watched Solo working, Leia instead resolved to excuse herself from the tour, approach him separately and discuss how and when he would meet with Ascher.

Solo suddenly switched off the macrofuser, stood upright and looked up and across towards the audience he had attracted on the gantry, the goggles still

masking his eyes and half his face. As he returned the open stares, Leia noticed the posture of his body stiffen and an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Then he stuffed the 'fuser into a tool bag, collected a handful of smaller tools and threw them into the bag as well. Ripping the goggles from his head, he hitched the bag over his shoulder and headed across the hull to the top hatch, where he took the service lift down into the Falcon.

"I guess the show's over," Ascher muttered.

The princess stared at the Falcon's upper hull uneasily, wishing Han hadn't left so abruptly. She knew Han would have seen her, and would probably place some blame on her for making him the centre of attention. As a consequence, he might be even more resistant to seeing Ascher again.

Taking Solo's exit as an opportunity to get things moving again, General Yarum ushered the group along the gantry, encouraging them to continue the tour. Leia's gaze lingered on the Falcon as they moved along the walkway, then she turned and followed them out through the hatchway and into a corridor at the other end of the flight control deck.

It wasn't until they were riding back to the conference room level in the turbolift that Leia decided she needed to see Han. And she couldn't wait until the end of the next session's discussions. Echoes of the Force vision she had experienced still lingered in her mind and it was these dream-like images, along with those on the data chip given to her by Ascher, that compelled her to act on her feelings. She had to see him, and she had to see him now, before the 'unsettled' impression returned. Luke was always telling her that she needed to act on instinct, to trust her feelings more. Han certainly acted that way, though his motives were based on 'doing his own thing' rather than adhering to Jedi doctrine.

The princess waited until they had arrived back at the conference room before making her move. The session had not yet started; cups were being filled with kaffe, the Alliance officers who had not gone on the tour were slowly filtering back into the room, and representatives from both sides were taking advantage of the refresher facilities.

The only explanation Leia gave to Ascher was that she would see her later. The commander took a sip of her kaffe and frowned in confusion, then watched as the princess headed towards the Alliance chief of negotiations, General Dodonna.

Dodonna was settling into his seat at the conference table when Leia approached him. "Excuse me, General, but I'm afraid I must excuse myself for at least the beginning of the next session," Leia explained. "There are some urgent matters I must attend to."

The elderly general cast a cursory glance at the princess before his attention returned to the monitor in front of him.

"Nonsense," Dodonna said dismissively. "Whatever it is, I'm certain it can wait."

Leia held her annoyance in check. There had been a time when Dodonna would have listened to her intently, would have bent over backwards to ensure she was satisfied. However once he became aware that she and Han were lovers, he had taken to casually brushing her off, almost to the point where it was apparent that he did not entirely trust her judgement.

"It can't wait," the princess insisted. "But I'll do my best to ensure I'm back as soon as possible."

Dodonna scowled and turned to face her properly, his face flushed with irritation. "May I remind you, Princess, that you have been assigned to these negotiations and you must see them out to their conclusion. At this point in time, there is nothing else that should be occupying your attention." Leia put on her most diplomatic smile. She had barely contributed to the three previous sessions - had barely been allowed to contribute if she really thought about it. She knew she would not be missed. For once, she was going to place her own personal desires above her duty to the Alliance.

"I won't be long," she told Dodonna, overlooking the instruction he had given her. "And I can be contacted via comlink if anything urgent requiring my attention arises."

Dodonna's eyes widened at her tone and her blatant disregard for his order. He suspected Solo was somehow involved in this. "Princess -"

Leia nodded in polite leave-taking - "Excuse me, General." - spun on her toe and headed towards the door.

"Princess!" the general called after her. "Princess Leia!"

Ignoring Dodonna's hails, and the amused and curious looks from Alliance and Imperial officers, Leia palmed open the hatch and hurried towards the main hangar.

Solo was having trouble fusing the hairline crack in the maintenance access bay when he had the distinct impression someone was watching him. The macrofuser had been playing up, running too hot to allow the weld to fuse properly, and then too cold when he tried adjusting the temperature.

Preoccupied with the problems he was having, and muttering and cursing to himself, he had been just about to give up in disgust when the hair on the back of his neck rose. All thought of the repair work left his mind, and he straightened up, switching off the 'fuser at the same time. With the 'fuser extinguished, the photochromatic lenses of the goggles cleared, allowing him an open view without having to remove them.

His head tilted up slightly, easily locating the audience he had attracted. A gaggle of senior Imperial officers looked back at him from their position on the gantry that lined the closest bulkhead. They were staring at him intently, some pointing at various features of the Falcon, others directing questions to the Alliance general - Yarum by Solo's reckoning - who stood at the head of the line.

Solo's fist tightened around the grip on the 'fuser. He recalled Leia mentioning that his 'entrance' the previous day had caused heads to duck when they thought a pirate ship was attacking the cruiser. But although he was pleased he had rattled a few Imperial asses, he wasn't too keen on being the main attraction now.

His gaze zipped down the line of Imperials until he came to the petite figure clad in formal, white diplomatic robes. Of course Leia's part of this little tour group, he thought cynically, wondering if it was her or Yarum's idea to pass through the main hangar. Then it occurred to him that Ascher was one of the Imperials, and he decided to pick her out of the crowd when to his shock he realised she was standing next to Leia. His eyes ran along the faces of the Imperials again, double-checking there were no other female officers present. The tall, female commander had to be Ascher. What's more, Ascher and Leia were turned towards each other, as though they had been conferring.

Solo shook his head. Last night Leia had been so jealous of Ascher, she had refused to talk to her over dinner. Then she had pressed him until he told her about the friendship he'd had with Ascher. Admittedly, she had appeared to accept without too much difficulty that his relationship with Ascher had developed into an intimate, physical one. Yet although he thought he knew the princess fairly well, sometimes he still couldn't work out what was on going on in her mind, an aberration he attributed to being one of the mysteries about women that he would never fathom. The fact that Leia and Ascher now appeared to be reasonably cosy with each other made his scalp crawl. Another galactic mystery about women that's beyond me.

Solo hurriedly stowed the macrofuser into a carryall and crammed in an assortment of hydrospanners and prybars. He pulled the tool bag up against the back of his shoulder and spun around at the same time that he tore the goggles from his head, blocking his face from view.

Once he was safely back inside the Falcon, Solo slung the tool bag under the tech station and grabbed the relay switch he'd been working on earlier in the day. As the deckplates were open to reveal the hyperdrive innards, he sat down on the makeshift seat and allowed his legs to dangle down into the engine pit. He fished the multi-tool out of a top pocket of his coveralls and attempted to make the minute adjustments to get the damn switch operational again.

His attention was completely absorbed by his work for all of five minutes. After that, he couldn't help but wonder why Leia and Ascher now seemed friendly toward one another, and whether he had become their primary topic of discussion, not the surrender negotiations. Knowing both women the way he did, or at least the way he thought he did, he imagined that any discussions about him would undoubtedly contain minute detail. He could almost picture them together: comparing notes like xenobiologists; exchanging biographical and physiological data; listing his faults and failings; filling in the gaps of his life...

There were so many components of his life as a smuggler that he still hadn't told Leia about, and had no intention of telling her. There were even more aspects from when he was a junior Naval officer and before then, when he was a kid roaming the streets of Coronet, that he never wanted her to know about. What she didn't know about him back then, he reasoned, wouldn't harm the relationship they had now. He wanted her to love him for who he was now; he couldn't afford to jeopardise that love because of things he had done in the past. And because only Chewie knew the personal details of Solo's life prior to the point where they had joined up with the Rebellion, the Corellian never thought he would have to deal with explaining his chequered history to the woman he loved.

Ascher was an unexpected complication.

When he was an ensign, Ascher had known information about Solo that he had tried to forget. He didn't think it likely that she would've forgotten that knowledge. Not only was she a first-class operator with a quick mind and excellent recall, Ascher had committed a lethal error when she had started sleeping with the young ensign who was also her wingman; she had fallen in love with him. She had never admitted the extent of her feelings to him, and at the time Solo had been so wrapped up in himself that he had failed to notice. But with the benefit of hindsight and twelve years experience behind him, he could now recognise the symptoms. Leia had been right. Ascher had been his lover, in every sense of the word. She would no doubt remember the intimate details about him that Leia was interested in discovering. He wondered just how much Ascher would tell Leia. Had already told her.

Solo rested the relay switch in his lap and closed his eyes, remembering the last time he had spoken with Ascher. It had been in the security office of the Coronet Naval compound, straight after his court martial and while his dishonourable discharge was being formally processed. Solo hadn't known that Ascher had

been present at the court martial until the judge advocate had mentioned that his sentence had been swayed by the plea of mitigation submitted by Lieutenant Commander Saxel. The revelation that Ascher had attended the trial, had listened to the string of charges laid against him and heard the evidence to indict him against those charges, had made him nauseous. The last thing he had ever wanted to do was disappoint the woman whose opinion he so valued.

When Ascher had appeared in the security office, his survival instincts kicked in. She had asked him to explain what had happened. Why he had freed an Imperial slave? Why he had assaulted a superior officer? How he could have gotten himself into such a position that a dishonourable discharge had been the only logical outcome?

He could recall his response to her as if it was only yesterday: "I'm not justifyin' myself to you. It's happened. Live with it."

With eyes still closed, Solo wiped the side of his hand across his cheek and down to cover his mouth with his palm. His parting words to Ascher may have been harsh, but they summed up the way he lived his life - the way he had always lived his life. He had never had the luxury of regret or 'what-might-have-been'. Whatever happened, happened. You either accepted it and moved on, or drowned in your own despair.

There was one vital factor that had arisen from his court martial; Ascher's plea had seen him receive only a dishonourable discharge instead of an execution. As uncomfortable as it made him feel, he owed her something for that much.

Solo opened his eyes and looked down at the relay switch he held in his hands. Scraping idly at a patch of carbon scoring, he realised that if either Ascher or Leia had their way, a reunion with Ascher was imminent. The best he could hope for was that he might be able to repair the switch by then. But the way things were going for him, he seriously doubted his luck.

Leia found Solo sitting on side of the engine pit, drumming the multi-tool against some part of the Falcon he had been repairing. She realised he must have been a million parsecs away because he didn't notice her until she was standing across the other side of the pit from him. His gaze focused on her, the corner of his mouth lifting into a guilty half-smile as though he had been caught doing something wrong. Grease trailed a smudge down his cheek to his upper lip, and Leia immediately recalled the image from her Force vision - blood covering the face of a young Han Solo. His eyes still held a touch of the innocence and purity he'd had as a boy.

"Tour finished?" he asked, not concerned with the gruff edge that crept into his voice.

Leia ignored his tone and moved around towards him, each watching the other silently. To Solo's surprise, she knelt down in front of him, took his face in her hands and gently pressed her lips to his. Solo dropped the tool and switch, and spread his hands out on either side of himself to keep his balance as the princess slowly explored the recesses of his mouth with her tongue. When she pulled away from him, she smiled at the slightly bewildered look on his face and the mix of grease and red lip liner that now marred his upper lip. Then she fondly kissed the tip of his nose.

"What was that for?" he asked softly.

"Do I need a reason?" The urge to take him back to his cabin and make love to him competed with her desire to resolve the tension between them, and to arrange a reunion between Ascher and Han.

He shook his head and agreed, "You never need a reason to do that, sweetheart."

The taste of him, and of the grease from his face, still tickled across her lips. Using a corner of her sleeve, she wiped the grime from her palm and mouth, taking off most of her lipstick at the same time. She looked back at Solo and decided against wiping the grease from his face, as it seemed to suit him.

Still kneeling in front of him, the deckplates were starting to play havoc with her knees, but she needed to be at his eye level to clear things up with him.

"It wasn't my idea to take the Imperials through the hangar," she explained, instinctively knowing the reason of his irritability. "General Yarum led the way. I just followed up the rear to keep the stragglers in check."

"And was Asch one of the stragglers?"

Leia watched his face, now also sensing his confusion at the friendship she had developed with Commander Saxel. Han had obviously seen her talking to Ascher, and considering the hostility Leia had previously expressed towards the woman, she was not surprised he was suspicious at how quickly things had changed. There was no point in delaying this any longer.

"You need to talk to her," Leia told him simply.

He grimaced, knowing exactly what she meant. "I'm not good at talkin'. You know that."

Leia took one of his hands in hers and squeezed his fingers. "You have no problems talking to me."

"That's different." He looked deep into her eyes. "We're different. Me and Asch were never like that." Except maybe in her mind, he added to himself.

"So you never loved her?"

Sighing and shaking his head in annoyance, Han pulled his hand from hers. "We went through this last night, Leia. Yes, we 'made love'. No, I didn't 'love' her."

"You said you weren't 'in love'," Leia pointed out.

"Same thing," he said brusquely.

"It's not. And you know it's not."

He sighed again. "I was her wingman, for Kest's sake. She was a lieutenant. I was her ensign. Believe me, in the Navy you don't love your boss."

Leia waited for his temper to cool slightly before taking his hand again, which he grudgingly allowed her to do. Her fingers caressed the inside of his palm.

"Han, if Ascher ever meant anything to you, then you owe her the courtesy of seeing her and talking about what happened."

There was one more thing that he owed her - his life. Han bit the inside of his cheek and averted his eyes.

"It would mean so much to her," Leia continued, tracing the contours of his palm with her fingertips. "She's really looking forward to seeing you. But there's also things she needs to resolve with you."

Solo wished he wasn't hearing this. He knew what the 'right' thing to do was. He also knew that Leia had a way of twisting him around her little finger to get him to do these right things, no matter how painful they were; painful for him, that was.

He sighed one more time, this time in resignation, and turned his hand over to allow her easy access to his palm. As he wasn't quite ready to meet her gaze, he watched her fingers smooth across the grimy width of his hand. It was then he realised she was tracing the thin, white scar that marked his palm. His eyes shot up to hers, but he saw nothing in the brown depths of them to indicate she knew the origins of his secret.

"I'll see what I can do," he said, removing his hand from hers again, this time to collect the multi-tool and relay switch. "Got a few things to do before I head back to duty."

Leia smiled her gratitude, leaned forward and kissed his clean cheek, then brushed her lips against to his ear. "Are you too busy to head back to your cabin?"

Solo's eyes widened. Although not entirely mollified, he looked at her curiously, an amused grin slipping up his face. He could continue to be annoyed with her and yet allow her to seduce him at the same time. After all, the one you knock back was the one you didn't get. "Don't you have to be somewhere else, Princess?"

Leia's eyes sparkled with mischief. "You're starting to sound like Dodonna."

He teased her further, enjoying the chance to play 'hard to get' for a change and wanting to hear her admit what it was she really wanted from him. "Aren't there surrender negotiations you should be attending?"

She reached towards the fasteners of his coveralls. "Oh there'll be talk of surrender," she crooned, "just not the sort you'd expect." Still holding onto him, she levered herself to her feet. "But as my knees are killing me, I suggest we continue discussions in your cabin."

She made a show of dragging him upright by the front of his coveralls, but he rose on his own accord. He held his arms out in front of him and nodded at the state of his hands.

"Don't you want me to tidy up first?"

Leia shook her head. "I've never been afraid of a little dirt." She tugged on his clothing and started leading him down the ring corridor. She glanced back at him. "In fact, I like a bit of dirt."

Solo swiped a hand against the switch on the bulkhead, sealing the main hatch, and agreed, "I bet you do."

The princess decided she need a 'fresher and a change of clothes before she returned to the conference room. By then, she only had to suffer through the final half of the session and even that was bearable as she sat there, smug in the knowledge that she was the only delegate who had spent the last few hours in the arms of her lover. She was also rather satisfied with herself because she had

elicited from Han a tentative agreement that he would meet with Ascher after the session had finished.

It had been difficult to contain her eagerness. She had sent a short message to Ascher's terminal to tell her that Han would see them after the meeting. Leia had noticed the commander's face pale slightly, but she expected Ascher's reaction was due to nerves more than anything else.

Dodonna was drawing the session to a close, inviting the Imperials to remain for a few informal drinks. In her mind, Leia was already halfway to the Falcon, with Ascher in tow. Then her comlink trilled, right in the middle of Dodonna's summation. Leia averted her eyes from the austere look on Dodonna's face, excused herself from the table and took the call at the far end of the room.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Han's name on the comlink's display; he was probably calling to see where they were.

"Hi," she answered brightly. "We've nearly finished. Won't be long."

The sudden roar of ion engines drowned out Solo's words. Leia frowned as the engines became a gradual muffle in the background, and she heard the cockpit canopy of a fighter seal shut. "Sorry 'bout that," Solo apologised. "Things are a bit mad 'round here."

Leia's stomach pitched. He wasn't waiting for them in the Falcon. He was on a flightline, most likely in the cockpit of an X-Wing.

"Where are you?" she asked, prepared not to jump to conclusions just yet. She'd been wrong about him before.

"I'm- " He changed his mind about what he had been going to say, and Leia was forced to endure his silence before he continued. "Something's come up."

She asked sceptically, "Something?"

"Nothing's wrong," he quickly assured her. "I gotta head down to Bothawui for a few days."

Leia held her jaw tightly before commenting, "Convenient." And certainly going out of his way not to see Ascher.

"The Bothans want a planetary defence presence before the de-mobbing starts," he explained. "We've agreed to send down a squadron to keep 'em happy. I'll be leading the squadron."

"You've volunteered?" she asked, unable to keep the sarcasm from her voice. "Since when have you been concerned with keeping Bothans happy?"

He didn't respond, and for a few moments all she heard were the communications and life support systems running in the cockpit.

When he spoke again, his tone was almost placating. "Look, it's only for a few days. Just until things settle down."

"And you've only just returned from a mission," she pointed out. "Why can't someone else go?"

"Hey, Princess. Aren't you're always tellin' me I need to take on more responsibility?"

He was exaggerating her words; she had never quite put it like that.

"Fine then, Han. I guess I'll see you in a few days."

"Leia-" She disconnected the channel before he could say anything more.

Leia stared at the silent comlink, attempting to compose herself and to make allowances for his behaviour. Part of her wanted to be angry with him, wanted to punish him for his selfishness and stupidity. Yet images from her Force vision kept drifting back into view, and she found herself realising what had forced him to run. Again.

Despite understanding the instincts that had helped to drive him away, Leia was in no mood to talk to him or encourage him further. She set the comlink's privacy filter; she would be unable to take any calls, particularly none from Han, but any caller was free to leave a message. Besides, there was still one more tractor beam she was certain Solo would be unable to escape.

As the noise behind her suggested that Dodonna had finally finished, Leia turned back to the Alliance and Imperial officers. Serving droids entered the conference room, laden with platters of appetisers and alcoholic beverages. She looked across to Ascher. The commander had no doubt sensed the call on the comlink was private, and had remained with her colleagues until the princess was ready.

Leia forced a smile across her lips and moved to Ascher's side, selecting a glass of wine from a one of the droids before she came to a gracious halt. She took a sip from the glass before speaking. "We may as well have a few drinks, Commander," Leia told her pleasantly. "General Solo has been seconded planet-side for the next few days."

Ascher's face fell slightly, but she turned her attention to choosing a glass of a wine and a small, elaborately sliced piece of vegetable.

"The negotiations are concluding tomorrow," Ascher observed. "I guess I've missed the opportunity to see Han again."

Leia smirked into her glass before taking another sip. "Not quite. Will you be attending the senior officer reception on Bothawui?"

"Yes. It's mandatory for all officers above the rank of commander."

Pursing her lips together thoughtfully, Leia nodded. "I guarantee Han will be there as well."

Ascher glanced sideways at Leia. "You're guaranteeing his presence? Third time lucky, you figure?"

Leia spied a favourite tidbit on a platter and nimbly picked it up before the droid got too far away. "If he knows what's good for him," she said dryly, "he'll be there."

Ascher laughed as the princess popped the tasty morsel into her mouth. "You know, Your Highness, I believe I'm beginning to appreciate your particular brand of diplomacy. And I'm looking forward to seeing you work your magic on Han!"

"You and me, both," Leia agreed. She raised her glass towards Ascher. "Allow me to propose a toast."

Ascher raised her glass expectantly, watching as the princess chose her words.

"To old friends and new friends," Leia proposed. "Best friends and girlfriends."

Ascher smiled, clinked her glass against Leia's and added, "May we all wreak havoc on Han Solo."

From her position at the end of the reception line, Leia had a perfect view of the chamber the Bothans had chosen to host the official welcoming function. Although a relatively intimate room of the ostentatious Parliament House, there was nothing 'less' about the Lesser Hall.

Elaborately carved wooden entrance doors opened up to a vast room that was decorated in the understated, rustic style that was typically Bothan. Two immense woollen tapestries representing the diverse natural environments of Bothawui covered the two shorter end walls. Honey-coloured wood panelling

lined the floor and the largest stretch of wall that held the entranceway. Directly opposite the doorway, an expanse of glassine windows stretched up towards the apex of the federal building. Three doorways opened up in the window wall, allowing guests to wander freely out onto a balcony that ran the length of the room. The brilliance of the night sky and the panoramic view of the city's skyline as they glittered through the glassine were as much decoration as the wood panelling and tapestries.

With the guests comprising senior officers of the five Imperial and ten Alliance vessels, and a unknown number of Bothan politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, industrialists and local celebrities, Leia estimated that there would be close to 200 humans and Bothans in the Hall, and it still didn't look crowded. Waiting droids laden with an assortment of beverages were serving them to the guests, circulating from a central bar that hugged centre of the main wooden wall. The atmosphere had started out tense, but at last it seemed that the different groups were finally starting to mix and mingle.

Most of the guests had arrived by now, only the officers from Ascher's ship were yet to come, and Leia was grateful that soon she would be able to leave the reception line. Welcoming and being introduced to 200 people was bad enough; having to endure it with General Jan Dodonna only made it worse. At least the high-ranking Bothan leader of the Alliance, Borsk Fey'lya, wasn't here to grandstand and be his usual insufferable self. Fortunately for all, Fey'lya was stationed with the Commander-in-Chief, Mon Mothma, both of whom were somewhere Leia neither knew about nor cared to discover. In place of Fey'lya, a rather pleasant and mild-mannered Bothan - the First Assistant Secretary of the recently-formed Ministry of Foreign Affairs - represented Bothawui on the reception line.

Leia couldn't resist smoothing the fabric of her gown. The white, silken material felt wonderful, even extravagant. With thin straps curved over her shoulders, the dress scooped low across the top of her breasts, then fell down from the bodice, along the curves of her slim waist and hips, to brush across the floor in one continuous stream of material. She had thoroughly indulged herself when she had arranged for a Bothan seamstress to tailor this new formal attire for her. The measurement session had been conducted via the holonet, and although she hadn't been entirely convinced with the arrangements, the dress had fit like a glove when she tried it on for the first time nearly two hours ago.

Leia smiled to herself. The look on Han's face when she had appeared in the temporary crew room in the spaceport, in this obviously expensive gown, had been priceless. Naturally, he had been pleased to see her. 'Relieved' was perhaps a more appropriate description, for Leia had deliberately refused to accept any calls from him, and had not responded to the many voice messages he'd left for her. The only communication she'd had with him in three days was when she'd called to tell him she could be planet-side that evening and had

suggested that he ensure he was off-duty so they could spend some time together.

At the sight of Leia entering the crew room, Solo's jaw had unhitched. She was a vision in white; a princess in every sense of the word. The rest of the squadron had certainly thought so as well, for some young pilots had nearly fallen out of their seats as they struggled to attention. Although Solo's smile had been broad, he had approached her cautiously, uncertain whether she was still upset with him, perhaps even uncertain if he hadn't totally blown his relationship with her. But she had smiled back, warmly embraced him, kissed his cheek, and gave him the soft-sided clothes pack she carried. She had suggested he have a 'fresher and change into the clothes she had brought for him, promising a special night out.

Leia wished she could've witnessed Han's reaction when he'd realised the clothes she had brought him were in fact his formal mess uniform. If the grimace contorting his face when he appeared - dressed in tight-necked shirt, high-cut jacket, dark trousers and boots - was anything to go by, she knew he felt well and truly chastised. To make matters worse for him, he even knew where it was they were heading, for the smile he had given her was wan and thin.

"Cocktail party," he'd remarked. "Lesser Hall. Bothan Parliament House."

Leia had laced her arm through his and borrowed one of his phrases. "You got it, General!"

The princess now looked across at General Solo. She had asked him to remain close by, so that she could easily find him when Ascher arrived. He had not strayed too far from her, aimlessly circling the floor, his hands jammed into his pockets. Leia had watched a scowl tighten across his face whenever an unknown officer - Imperial or Alliance - stared too pointedly at the Corellian Bloodstripe he wore on the outer seams of his trousers. Obviously annoyed with the undue attention he attracted, Han had taken up a leaning position against the main wooden wall, arms folded sullenly across his chest.

He was so absorbed in not enjoying himself, it took Leia a few moments to unobtrusively capture his gaze. He jerked from the slouch into a state of anxious alert. With a graceful motion of her hand, Leia beckoned him over, belatedly realising it was a gesture she might have used on a servant. Straightening his jacket and tugging at the tight collar of his shirt, Solo assumed a position next to the princess. His eyes scanned the entrance way and passage, before turning to Leia.

"Is she here?" he asked, fidgeting with his collar again, his glance alternating between the entrance and Leia's face.

Leia's smile was fond and reassuring. "No, Ascher's not here yet. I just wanted to tell you how handsome you look tonight."

Solo's gaze slid towards the princess, his mouth set in a tight line. "You're enjoying this too much," he told her reproachfully.

Leia smoothed the lapel of his jacket and mischievously admitted, "Maybe."

Solo exhaled his frustration and anxiety into a long sigh, and thrust his hands into his pockets. The wretched image he presented moved Leia to put him out of his misery.

Touching his elbow, she said, "What I really wanted to do, was suggest you get yourself a drink. And relax."

His smile was wry. "Relax? Dressed up like this? With all these Imps crawling around the place?" Leia instinctively grasped his arm and shhed him in an attempt to lower his voice. Solo immediately played on her discomfort.

"I feel like I'm about to be arrested!" he declared.

Despite herself, Leia chuckled over her effort to quieten him. Her amusement brought a smile to his face. The fact that Dodonna had ceased his discussion with the Bothan ministry official and was staring at them harshly only brightened Solo's mood.

"If you see me suddenly barrel roll across the floor and dive over the bar, you'll understand why," Solo explained. "Now I see why you didn't want me to bring my blaster."

"Han," Leia warned him softly, trying to control her mirth. "Now you're enjoying yourself too much."

"Me?" he asked, pointing at himself in feigned innocence.

General Dodonna pointedly cleared his throat and interrupted the couple. "Is there a problem, Princess Leia?"

Solo turned his back on the elderly general and rolled his eyes at the princess. Leia gently prodded Han in the stomach.

"No problem, thank you, General Dodonna," Leia responded.

"The final guests should be here soon," Dodonna reminded her. "I trust it isn't expecting too much for us to maintain our decorum and officially welcome them to this evening's event."

"I can take a hint," Solo told Leia, but loud enough for Dodonna to hear. "I'll be checkin' out the bar. Just give me a little wave when you want me to come to your rescue."

Solo took her hand and squeezed her fingers. Leia reached up on the tips of her toes and kissed his cheek.

"Have one for me?" she asked.

"I'll have two," he promised.

Solo cast a cursory glance across the trays of beverages the serving droids were dispensing before deciding the bar might be a better option. Most sentients were content to select their drinks from the serving droids, so the saloon was relatively empty, except for the droids re-stocking their platters. He ordered a Corellian ale from the multi-appendaged 4X-VB droid, and settled himself against the blood-wood counter top.

The glass the droid deposited in front of Solo contained a pale beer with only a beading of froth and barely discernible bubbles of carbon dioxide. He frowned at the glass, then took a mouthful, wincing as the beer failed to meet up to his expectations. Another sip didn't convince his tastebuds this was a legitimate Corellian ale. He was considering telling the droid what it could do with this ersatz beer when a calm voice spoke from over his shoulder.

"Hiya, Wingman."

Wingman. The old nickname she had called him back then. To the rest of the ship's complement, he had always been 'Slick' - the name he had acquired at the Academy. But to Ascher, he had been 'Wingman', the ideal description for exactly what he had been and meant to her: her wingman - always on her wing and slightly aft; following her lead, but at the same time protecting her back.

Solo's eyes focused into the depths of his glass as memories of the time he'd spent with Ascher flashed through his mind. Their first meeting, where he'd managed to knock her meal down the front of her uniform. Then his realisation when he reported for duty that the lieutenant who's tunic he'd soiled was also the leader of the flight he'd been assigned to. The punishment she had frequently inflicted on him for his flippant attitude and ill discipline. The many sorties he accompanied her on. The occasions they'd saved each other's life. The friendship they developed. The first time they made love. The last time he had seen her...

Slowly he turned to face his old boss. Lover. Friend.

"Asch."

She stood tall and straight in the formal Imperial uniform, a sense of pride and determination obvious in her stance. The practical short hair had not changed, and although there were new lines around her eyes and mouth, she had hardly aged. Ascher Saxel had been attractive back then, and had developed into a sensual woman now.

Solo didn't know if he had expected anything different. He could tell from the way her eyes travelled over him that she was conducting a similar inspection, comparing him to what he been like as lanky 21-year-old. He knew he had changed, more than just physically, and he wondered if the same could be said for her.

His hair was longer, darker. Nose slightly off-centre, no doubt having been broken. A distinctive scar marred his chin, and the lines that ran from the sides of his nose defining the edges of his cheeks had deepened. His shoulders and chest seemed broader, and although not as slim as he had been, there was still a youthful ranginess about him. But the golden hazel of his eyes and the crooked quirk to his mouth had remained the same. The cute boy had become a handsome man.

Commander and general were transfixed by the sight of the other, neither entirely sure who should be the first speak, or what to say. But Ascher had always been quicker on the uptake than Han. "Bit of a dry argument around here, Solo."

His eyes widened, startled that he had momentarily lost his way, and asked, "What can I get you to drink?"

Ascher nodded at the beer sitting on the counter top next to his elbow. "Corellian?"

Solo made a sour face and shook his head. "Supposedly. Spiced water is more like it."

She smiled at his remark. "I'll have a dry wine then, thanks."

"Might join you."

Ordering them two glasses of wine gave him a brief respite and a chance to relax. But when the drinks arrived on the counter top, the muscles in his neck and shoulders remained tight and cramped. He turned and moved away from the relative safety of the bar, offered the glass to Ascher without quite meeting her gaze. They drifted into the centre of the room in an attempt to find a place that felt comfortable. Coming to a halt, Solo finally faced her, an uneasy smile turning his lips. Ascher raised her glass towards him, and he met her glass with his.

"To old friends," Ascher said.

"Old friends," Solo agreed.

They sipped from their drinks, aware that the friendly toast between Rebel and Imperial had drawn the scrutiny of others. The added attention, combined with his uncertainty about what to say or where to start, forced Solo's eyes to hunt out the princess. He found her involved in discussions with the Bothan Ministry official and an Imperial admiral, but even then she was aware of his situation and was able to give him a nod and encouraging smile. Ascher noticed his gaze had wandered off to locate the princess, and she allowed him the time to receive Leia's assurance. "The princess is an incredible woman," Ascher quietly remarked.

Solo's focus returned to Ascher. He studied her curiously, trying to determine if the comment held any spite or sarcasm. Hearing only admiration, he told her, "And more."

An awkward silence settled over them. Solo found himself almost gulping at the wine, and his glass was soon empty.

Hoping to get the conversation flowing, Ascher observed, "You must be thirsty."

She smirked at his apologetic smile, watched as he deposited the glass on the tray held by a nearby droid. He shoved his hands deep into his pockets, a totally inappropriate gesture when in uniform, but one she remembered well.

"Wanna get some fresh air?" he asked, indicating the balcony with a tilt of his chin.

"That's the best idea you've had in a long time."

Solo gave her a begrudging grin in reply and conceded, "You're probably right."

He led her towards the glassine wall, pausing to allow her to pass through the doorway first.

Ascher seemed surprised at his unexpected gallantry, but made no comment.

Enticed by the magnificent view, some guests had moved out onto the covered balcony, however all seemed content to return inside after a few minutes of gazing at the stars and the skyline. The result was an intermittent trickle of people, drifting out through the doors, straying not too far along the wooden decking before heading back inside. It was therefore not difficult for Solo and Ascher to find a private expanse of balcony away from the cycling doors.

Drawn to the panorama, Ascher moved over to the edge and leaned against the glassine balustrade. Solo followed and took up a position next to her. The air was

crisp against their skin, vaporising their breath. The lights from the city glittered against the dark night sky, but there was only so much view they could look at, and eventually they turned toward each other.

"You're looking good, Han."

"So are you," he replied.

She nodded at the rank clasps on his collar. "Congratulations on achieving your rank."

He grimaced and shrugged a shoulder. "Field commission. They were givin' 'em out to anyone just prior to Endor."

"Even smugglers?"

It was said lightly, but the disappointment and accusation were evident in her eyes. He had never hidden his illicit background, never been ashamed of it. He'd been a smuggler, and a damn good one at that. He could understand why she might be disappointed that he had turned to a life of crime, but she hadn't been there. Smuggling had, by no means, been his first career choice. Yet the skills required had been second nature to him. Instinctive. Inherited.

Besides, Ascher didn't know about the difficult circumstances that had followed his dishonourable discharge from the Navy. Black-listed by the Empire and unable to get his captain's licence, the disreputable side of freighting had been his only alternative if he'd wanted to continue flying. And, in his own way, he'd been able to make a stand against the Empire.

"Yeah," he told her quietly, "even me."

Ascher glanced down at the leg of his trousers. "I see you've kept the 'Stripe.'"

It seem incongruous to her that he had thrown away everything to do with the Navy - a successful career, prestige, rank - but had held onto the decoration he had been awarded during his service. Solo's jaw tightened. He had the impression that she was angry with him. Still angry with him, after all these years. This was partly why he'd been avoiding - dreading - this reunion.

"It's Corellian," he pointed out, "not Imperial. I earned it. I'll wear it."

The stiff nod she gave him in reply suggested she did not agree with him. Her gaze drifted off towards the view again while she sipped at her wine. Watching Ascher, Solo now wished he hadn't finished his own wine quite so quickly, or that he had brought another glass out here with him. He didn't know what it was he could do to appease her. He certainly wasn't going to apologise for what had

happened in the past. And he held as much resolve now as he did back then about not justifying his actions.

His eyes focused on the rank pips on the front of her tunic. Commander Saxel. This was a Navy commander standing here, not the fresh-faced lieutenant he had flown with. She had been a recently promoted lieutenant commander the last time he had seen her, and he yet he hadn't congratulated her on her promotion despite the fact she had left a personal message telling him about her news. He hadn't even responded to her call. At the time he had been more concerned with what Ascher would say if she discovered that he had been sitting on an adverse report for a few months, had been grounded and removed from flying duties, and had come close to receiving a formal warning. Back then he hadn't wanted to acknowledge it, but he had also deliberately set out to distance himself from her. He hadn't wanted to become reliant on another being, or be tied to another's expectations, especially after she'd told him she missed him. He had grown too close to her for his own comfort. By not returning her call, he had intended sending her a clear signal: Back off. Leave me alone. I don't need you. I don't need anyone. He now wondered if he owed her an apology for being so damn selfish and immature back then.

"I guess I should be the one congratulating you," Solo conceded.

Ascher frowned at him.

"Leia tells me you're ship's XO." He tried a grin to lighten the mood. "That's a long way from the lieutenant I remember barking at me to do push-ups." When she didn't respond to his levity, he sobered. "You've earned your rank the hard way, Asch. You should be proud of your achievements."

Her eyes hardened. "I've been a commander for over four years, and that's as far as I was ever going to get, even if the Alliance hadn't won." The smile she gave him was humourless. "No promotion prospects, you see. I spent eight years as a lieutenant commander, Han. Eight years. Most of my colleagues were at that rank for less than five. And I'm the only living member of my Academy class who is still a commander."

He moistened the inside of his mouth. Ascher had been an outstanding flight leader when she was a lieutenant. She toed the line, instilled discipline in her pilots and inspired them to achieve their best. She had been a highly capable pilot, as well. Consequently, she had received her promotion to lieutenant commander exactly on schedule. He didn't doubt that, long after he was out of the scene, her career would have gone from strength to strength. She probably did deserve more than she had achieved, but the odds had been stacked against her.

He shrugged apologetically. "That's the Navy, Asch. It's always been difficult for women."

"Try 'impossible'," she huffed.

There was nothing more he could say to placate her. She was right. But then it occurred to him that he could have made things worse for her. If it had become known that she'd had an affair with a wayward lieutenant - her subordinate - who had been court martialled, her judgement and motives would have been called into question. Not unlike the way Leia had been considered when her relationship with a former smuggler had become common knowledge. Except any treatment handed out by the Imperial Navy would have been substantially harsher.

"Did they ever find out about you and me?" Solo asked quietly.

Ascher arched an eyebrow, then shook her head when she understood his concern. "There were rumours," she admitted. "Especially after I submitted the plea of mitigation on your behalf. I was even questioned about the extent of our relationship," - 'interrogated' is probably closer to the truth, Solo thought - "but they were never able to pin anything on me. It's fortunate we were reasonably discrete."

Pressing his lips together, Solo could only nod in agreement.

"I don't think your discharge had anything to do with my career," Ascher explained. "It's more to the point that I'm a woman."

"The Alliance operates a little differently," he suggested, then realised his comment would be either too-little-too-late or wasted on the career Imperial officer.

"Obviously, if they made you a general."

It took him some effort to resist the urge to react to her taunt. "Tell myself that every day. I got no delusions about why I'm where I'm at. I know how lucky I am."

Solo looked over his shoulder and back into the reception hall, searching for Leia and wondering if it would be more painful to return inside and mix with the rest of the Imperials or remain out here with Ascher. He hoped that Leia would see him, sense his predicament, and come to his rescue. But from this angle, he was unable to see her.

Ascher's voice suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

"You know, Han, the one thing I've always regretted, above everything else, is that we never got to talk the last time we saw each other."

Without turning to face her, he griped, "Might've had somethin' to do with the fact I was on the receiving end of a court martial."

"That wasn't my fault." Her inflection was calmer, the sensible and logical tone of the boss he remembered. "You got yourself into that one all on your own."

His head whipped around and he stared at her accusingly, his eyes as dark as his voice. "Why did you put in that plea of mitigation for me?"

His resentment was palpable, and she understood why it was there. Han had always refused to feel indebted, that he owed anyone anything.

"You realise they were going to execute you?"

He nodded grimly. "They had me locked up for so long, I had resigned myself to that happening. Think I was almost lookin' forward to it, just to get the waiting over with and to get outta that brig."

"You don't mean that."

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"I submitted the plea because I didn't believe you deserved to die for what you had done, even if I didn't understand your motivation. Granted, I thought you'd been extremely foolish. But you were my friend. My wingman." She allowed her words to sink in before continuing. "I wanted to be there for you, in the only way I really could. The only way that would make a difference. So I just reminded the judge advocate about a few of your good points."

The corner of his mouth lifted into a sneer. "And what do I owe you for that, Ascher? Huh?" She blanched. "I don't want anything from you, Han. I never have."

"You sure about that?" he goaded. "Cos it sure seems like I'm missing something here. Why else did you wanna see me?"

They stared at each other silently for long moments, the years of repression, anger, denial and bitterness shifting between them. When Ascher finally took a deep breath, Solo averted his gaze and ran a hand through his hair.

"All I've ever wanted," she told him quietly, "is to understand."

Solo met her eyes again and shook his head. "I can't explain it, Asch," he said. "I don't know why. It just happened."

I'm not spying, the princess reasoned to herself, shifting her position slightly so that she could maintain Han and Ascher in her line of sight. Through years of dedicated practice, she had developed the ability to converse with dignitaries while keeping an eye on something totally unrelated. By using this skill, she had managed to watch Han and Ascher, and chat politely to the Bothan official and Admiral Vonniiton at the same time. Even when they had moved out onto the deck, she had positioned herself so that a casual glance out the corner of her eye kept them in view.

Her interest in watching them was not born of jealousy or fear. She was the one who had gone out of her way to ensure this reunion occurred. If she had wanted to be a bitch about it, she could have arranged for Han to be sent on a mission out of the system, but then neither she nor Ascher would've been able to see him.

I'm not spying, Leia told herself again. She wasn't. She just wished she could overhear what they were talking about. However, she did know that whatever they were discussing, this would be difficult for Han. After all, it had taken him three years to admit his feelings towards her. How would he react to seeing someone from his past? Someone he'd once been close to. A woman he'd been close to...

Leia couldn't work out why the unsettled feeling had returned, particularly if she was neither jealous nor afraid of Han being alone with Ascher. This was what she wanted. This was her idea. Then it occurred to her that she may have been so attuned to the aura Han generated in the Force that she was sensing and reflecting his emotions, which was a possible reason for her apprehension. The princess allowed her gaze to linger on Han and Ascher for longer than she had previously. Even from this distance she could detect the tension between them. She wondered how much longer she should leave them out there on their own, before she went to his rescue. Or should she leave well enough alone and wait for them to return inside on their own volition? Either way, any action or inaction she took might impact on the fragile bridges they were trying to establish.

Despite her uneasiness, Leia had a sudden, compelling impression that she was required at the entrance to the Lesser Hall. She glanced at the doors. All seemed quiet, but the feeling remained. "Excuse me, gentles," the princess told the admiral and the ministry official. "There is something I must attend to."

The Imperial and Bothan nodded graciously as the princess left their company. The main doors opened at her approach. She recognised the distinctive growls of a Wookiee before she even saw him.

Across the expanse of tiled lobby, an increasingly frustrated Wookiee was arguing with five armed security guards. His voice was loud but relatively composed for a Wookiee, and above the soothing murmurs from the water

feature, she caught the odd word as he attempted to make his way past. The Bothan guards may have been shorter than the Wookiee, but they were no less intimidating. Weapons raised, the tips of their fur stood on end as their purple eyes flashed with determination; there was no way they were going to allow the Wookiee access to the Hall.

The two Bothans guarding the entrance way snapped to attention as the princess left the Hall. Pleased to see him but thoroughly surprised nonetheless, she hurried across the lobby, waiting until she was a few metres away from him before calling, "Chewbacca!"

Chewbacca had been on Kashyyyk with his family for close to two months now, thanks to Han somehow 'requisitioning' an Alliance shuttle for his friend to use. Leia wasn't too sure when Chewbacca had been scheduled to return. As it had been a considerable time, in human terms, since he had been home, Leia certainly hadn't expected to see him just yet. If anything, she had expected him in another three or four weeks, not right in the middle of a formal reception for senior Imperial officers.

Princess! Chewbacca brushed past the protesting guards, deliberately ignoring their raised blaster rifles and their commands to halt.

"It's all right, Sergeant," Leia reassured the closest corporal, promoting the Bothan guard in a ploy she had learned from Han. Chewbacca smothered her in a hug. "Chewbacca is an old friend." She quickly returned the embrace, extricating herself to ensure the guards were appeased. "I can personally vouch for him." Yet she had no idea why he had come all the way down to Bothawui when he could've waited for them on the Azure Blue.

Leia watched the security guards warily. They weren't entirely convinced, but at least they lowered their weapons when they realised the Princess of Alderaan was on friendly terms with the Wookiee. *Is Han here?* His blue eyes shined with excitement. *I've got some great news to tell him!*

Leia repressed a grimace. It would be rude to turn Chewbacca away, especially as he had only just returned and there was something he wanted to share with Han, something that he was obviously eager to tell him. But she also didn't want to interrupt Han, not in the middle of whatever was happening with Ascher. And there were so many Imperials in the Lesser Hall, she wondered if the temptation would be too much for Chewbacca to cope with.

"Han's inside," she admitted.

Then let's go!

The princess refrained him with a gentle hand on his arm. Chewbacca regarded her curiously, waiting for her to explain. Leia cleared her throat, unsure quite what to say.

"It's wonderful to see you," she told him. "We missed you while you were gone."

The blue Wookiee eyes slowly blinked at her.

"How are Malla and Lumpy?"

Is something wrong, little Princess? he asked.

Leia guiltily averted her eyes.

He touched her shoulder. *Princess?*

His voice was soothing, calming, and she felt her uneasiness seeping away. She met his inquisitive gaze again, and suddenly everything was clear.

She shook her head and smiled. "There's nothing wrong, Chewie. Welcome back."

It took a few platitudes, a few regal touches, and a personal mention of the Foreign Affairs ministry official, before the guards eventually allowed the Wookiee to pass. Leia stopped Chewbacca before he entered through the main doors leading back into the Hall.

"I need to warn you about something before we go in."

Chewbacca's eyes widened expectantly. *Yes?*

"This is a formal reception. A formal reception for Imperial officers."

The corner of his mouth lifted up in a grin. *I noticed their vessels when I docked.*

"The surrender negotiations were extremely successful, and the de-mobilisation process is about to commence. It is our honest belief that we can trust these Imperials. They have been more than cooperative, and we may even accept some of them into the Alliance forces."

Chewbacca sighed and rolled his eyes. *And...?*

Leia swallowed and requested, "I need you to control yourself."

Slipping his arms through hers, Chewbacca chuckled and reminded her, *Leia, you forget. I'm not Han!*

Ascher closed her eyes and drained the remains of the wine from her glass. This evening was not turning out the way she had hoped or expected. Her initial excitement at seeing Han again had become overwhelmed by all the negative emotions and unanswered questions she had nurtured for twelve years. Not once during that time had she ever imagined that she might have the opportunity to see Han again. But now that she had, it was nothing like she had anticipated.

Following his court martial, it had been as if he was dead to her; taken from her as quickly as if he had been killed on a mission. She had attended his trial without his knowledge, watching him from a distance with concern and compassion as the charges had been listed. The evidence against him had been damning and complete, the witnesses credible. The charges of insubordination, assaulting a superior officer, and releasing an Imperial slave had been easily proven. Except to her. Ascher had been unable to understand what had happened to make the Academy honours graduate and early promoted lieutenant attack a major from the Survey and Engineering Corps, and then abet the major's indentured Wookiee to escape, in an Imperial shuttle no less.

The last time she had spoken to Han in the security office of the Coronet Naval compound as his discharge was being processed, it has become apparent that the ensign she had known and loved had changed. He had been underweight from over a month's detention, his eye and mouth severely bruised, no doubt from punishment inflicted by the stormtroopers who guarded him. Reticent, sullen, and in no mood for explaining himself, he had told her, "I'm not justifyin' myself to you. It's happened. Live with it." And so she had, even if she couldn't understand what had happened.

Life without Han in her orbit had been quieter, less enthralling. But, she had reasoned to herself, their relationship had practically been non-existent anyway, withering after he had departed the squadron on posting to another ship. She had known then that he had been trying to push her away. Leading up to his court martial, they had barely communicated. It had therefore surprised her at the trial to learn about the adverse report he had earned, the grounding that had resulted after he had roughed up an intelligence officer, and the formal warning his flight commander had nearly placed him on. And, in their own way, the litany of his failings had helped to justify the dishonourable discharge.

To ease the pain, Ascher had used her own form of justification to reason why their relationship had been doomed from the start. To begin with, she had been too old for him; at their respective ages back then, a seven-year age difference had been significant. While she had been looking for someone who could offer

her a commitment, Han had been a twenty-year-old kid out for a good time. The whole situation had been all her fault anyway. She had led him on, had seduced him. She shouldn't have allowed her attraction to him to develop into a sexual relationship, especially as she had been his superior. If knowledge of their fraternisation had ever gotten out, it could have seriously jeopardised both of their careers. As it was, in spite of what she had told Han, she believed that her promotion prospects had been curtailed after the mitigation plea she had entered for him at the trial had aroused suspicion.

Despite her attempts to forget him, Ascher had sporadically searched Imperial databases for any mention of Han Solo. He had been difficult to locate, travelling under aliases as he was, she now assumed. But she had come across the occasional reference to him. Imperial Customs had commenced a dossier on Han Solo when, not long after his discharge, he had come under suspicion for smuggling. Much to her dismay, his criminal record had steadily grown from there.

After five years or so of checking out his record, Ascher had told herself enough was enough. She had to let him go. It was only recently that she had decided to look him up again. The Navy had been defeated at the Battle of Endor; the second Death Star destroyed; the Emperor dead, killed by the hand of Lord Vader; and considerable elements of the Imperial forces were surrendering to the Alliance. For Ascher, the Empire was over and a new republic was in the process of being formed. On a whim, she had searched the databases for information on Han Solo. It was then that she had discovered that he had been associated with the Rebellion for at least the last four years.

Supposition had placed him at the Battle of Yavin and the destruction of the first Death Star. There were reports of Rebel missions he had been involved with, battles he had participated in, and the significant casualties he had inflicted. The database had also established links between Solo and the infamous Rebel commander, Luke Skywalker, as well as the former Imperial senator, Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan. Information gleaned from the newsvid programs and rumours that spread rapidly indicated that Han had risen to the level of general in the Alliance forces.

When Ascher had learned of this, she had found it difficult to contain her resentment and jealousy. Here he was, a pilot dishonourably discharged from the Imperial Navy at the lowly rank of lieutenant, had subsequently turned to smuggling and terrorist activity, who was now her superior and on the winning side. Ascher had seethed for weeks. Eventually though, she had come to see the Empire for what it had been: a corrupt clique of upper echelon politicians and military officers who had used hatred and fear to rule the galaxy for their own personal benefit. Han was lucky to have escaped from it when he had.

She had been fortunate that the majority of the officers on her ship had been keen to capitulate to Alliance forces as quickly as possible. At the time, she could not have imagined that being part of the flotilla of Imperial vessels that presented itself to the Alliance for surrender negotiations would eventually lead to a reunion with the now General Han Solo.

Her wineglass empty, Ascher's gaze returned to Solo. He was staring past her shoulder, ostensibly looking at the view, but she could tell he was agitated; the muscles in his jaw were clenched and he bit on the inside of his cheek, a trait she could remember from when she used to reprimand him as an ensign.

She regretted the tone of voice she had used with him, the acrimony that had overwhelmed the enjoyment of seeing him. All she had wanted was an explanation from him. Princess Organa had virtually guaranteed that Han would be willing to explain what had caused him to act the way he had. But then again, the princess had considerable faith in Solo. Ascher, on the other hand, had been consistently disappointed.

"Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea," Ascher said quietly.

His eyes flickered across to hers. "Maybe it wasn't."

Maybe it wasn't, she repeated to herself, ignoring the remorse that seeped into her soul. It's always difficult to go back. What's past, has passed.

"Would you like to go back inside?"

There was a mixture of relief and regret in his grimace, but he nodded.

Ascher's eyes widened in alarm as she suddenly realised an immense shaggy being had stolen up behind Solo while she had been talking to him. She had only a moment to react, to call out Han's name, before the creature wrapped its clawed hands across Solo's eyes and growled menacingly. Initially startled, Solo noticeably jumped, however he quickly regained his composure and folded his arms over his chest.

"What do you mean, 'Guess who?'" he asked sarcastically.

Solo's calm reaction to the creature - a Wookiee, Ascher recalled - stopped any thoughts she had of wrenching its hands from his head. A Wookiee? she repeated to herself. Surely it's not...

The Wookiee made a sound that could only have been a chuckle, and his blue eyes gleamed with good humour. He growled at Solo again, only this time giving Ascher a conspiratorial wink. Ascher's mouth opened in wonder, her jaw

dropping even further when she noticed that, underneath all the Wookiee hair, a grin had appeared on Solo's face.

"Guess who?" Solo asked again with exaggerated patience. "All right, lemme see. Is it Luke?" The Wookiee shook his head and muttered a negative.

"Lando?"

Another no.

"Can't be Leia," Solo guessed. "Even she doesn't have this much hair," he added, spitting out a mouthful of the Wookiee's pelt.

The Wookiee responded with a snarl and a light clip across Solo's head that quickly became an exuberant embrace, physically lifting the Corellian up so that his boots left the deck. Despite his protests to be put down, Solo returned the hug, reaching up to scratch behind the Wookiee's neck.

When the Wookiee eventually complied and released him, Solo tackled the creature around the chest in a roughly affectionate gesture.

"Missed you, pal," Solo told him gruffly. "Told you I could look after myself for a while." There was an accusing tone in the growl that followed.

"Okay," Solo conceded. "So maybe it was Leia looking after me. But I'm in one piece."

The Wookiee ruffled the hair on Solo's head, then grabbed his shoulders, shook him excitedly and snarled something else at him that Ascher couldn't understand.

An indulgent grin spread across Solo's face. "Yeah?" he asked. "What's your big news?"

Putting on a self-satisfied air, the Wookiee puffed himself up to his full height and mumbled a few words.

Solo's whoop of laughter exploded into the cool night air and he hugged his friend fiercely again. "You sly vrelt!" he accused. "Certainly don't let those wroshyr twigs grow under your feet for too long, or anywhere else of your anatomy for that matter. Talk about making up for lost time. It's lucky you were only home for two months!"

The two friends departed from the embrace and Solo pushed a knuckle into the Wookiee's ribs. Then the Corellian sobered slightly, took the Wookiee's massive hand in his and shook it warmly.

"Congratulations, Chewie."

The Wookiee humbly accepted the tribute.

"Hey!" Solo suddenly crowed. "I'm gonna be an uncle again!"

Ascher frowned. Was this the same Wookiee from twelve years ago? She was already amazed at the close friendship between them. It was shock to see Han interacting with another being so warmly. He had always been a loner, and to see him such close friends with someone else - especially a non-human - was unexpected. Added to this was the ease with which Solo understood the growling Wookiee language, and she was thoroughly confused. How could whatever news the Wookiee have told Han, now mean that he was going to be an uncle - again - especially if Solo had no family?

While Solo was chuckling and talking to himself, the Wookiee became aware of the Imperial commander openly staring at them. Ascher realised the Wookiee had focused on her, and visibly gulped. In an attempt to gain his friend's attention, Chewbacca gently nudged Solo. Solo's smile wavered as he followed Chewbacca's eyes.

"Chewie's gonna be a father again," Solo explained softly.

The furrow in her brow deepened. "Oh."

The Wookiee pushed at Solo's shoulder and the Corellian looked slightly embarrassed, chastised for forgetting the introductions.

"Ah, Asch, this is Chewbacca."

The Wookiee bowed slightly and murmured an eloquent greeting.

"Chewie, this is Asch-" He corrected himself, "Commander Ascher Saxel."

Chewbacca nodded thoughtfully, then asked his friend a question. Ascher was surprised to see the blood flush Solo's face.

"Yes," he replied stiffly. "That Ascher."

He must be the same Wookiee! Fascinated that the Wookiee appeared to know about her, and elated that Han had even bothered to mention her to his friend, Ascher watched with some amusement as Chewbacca fired a cacophony of grunts and growls at the Corellian. Solo shook his head in refusal. Chewbacca pushed a hand at his friend's shoulder and added a gentle request. Solo shook his head again.

"No."

Solo was tight lipped and already shaking his head again when the Wookiee repeated his entreaty. Cocking his head at the Corellian, Chewbacca then folded his arms across his chest and included what could only be an element of extortion, if the look of panic on Solo's face was anything to go by.

"All right. All right," Solo grumbled. "I'll tell her." He pushed away the friendly paw ruffling his hair again. He looked at Ascher and grimaced. "Chewie says 'Thank you.'"

The unexpectedly shove to his shoulder was enough to push Solo forward a few stumbling steps.

"Okay! Take it easy!" Solo appeased. He met Ascher's gaze again and swallowed, the larynx bobbing in his throat. "If you hadn't put in that plea for me, I'd've been executed. And if that'd happened, then Chewie couldn't have given me his Life Debt. And he needed to do that to resolve his past, his future, his life." Han shrugged a shoulder uneasily. "So he wants to thank you. Thank you for rescuing me."

Ascher blinked. The sentiment may have come from Chewbacca, but Han had spoken the words.

Combined, the two somehow made everything seem clear. It was as if the faith she had lost had suddenly been restored. It now all made sense. Whatever had happened in the past, had happened for a reason. And this, all of this, was the reason.

Ascher smiled and told them, "I didn't rescue Han, Chewbacca. You did."

The shuttle crew had completed pre-flight checks and was now paging the passenger who had not yet boarded.

"Commander Saxel. We're ready for take-off at your convenience."

Ascher glanced apologetically at her wrist comlink. "Thank you, Lieutenant. I won't be long."

Ascher looked up at Han and Leia. "I guess I better be heading off."

As one of the last Imperial officers to commence demobilisation, Ascher had spent the last week liaising between the Alliance and Imperial ships. She had spent many hours working with the princess, and perhaps just as many in the

company of Leia and Han on a social basis. Finally, though, it was her time to be repatriated. To lose the trappings of an Imperial officer and become a private citizen again. She was fortunate that the days she had spent with the couple had helped prepare her for this transformation.

The princess smiled at her warmly. "Good luck, Ascher. I hope we meet again sometime in the future."

Leia surprised the commander by leaning forward and kissing her on the cheek. Ascher clasped Leia's hand in hers.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"Leia," the princess corrected.

Ascher nodded. "Leia. It has been a honour to meet you." She gestured at Solo with a tilt of her head. "I hope you have more success with Han than I ever did."

Solo opened his mouth in protest. "Hey!"

Pretending to ignore him, she continued, "He can be quite a handful."

"Two handfuls," Leia agreed.

Ascher turned to Han, smirking at the way his mouth twitched with embarrassment.

"I guess this is it, Wingman."

Solo pressed his lips together and exhaled deeply. "Guess so, Boss."

Ascher smiled in gratitude at the old nickname he had used. "Take care of yourself, and the princess. And do what she tells you. Okay?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Okay."

There was a moment of uncertainty between the two old friends, then Ascher straightened herself to attention and touched her cap in salute; commander to general, subordinate to superior. Solo responded to the compliment with immaculate precision, returning the salute with the ease of an old soldier. Then he dropped his hand and held it out towards Ascher. She accepted his hand gratefully, allowed him to pull her towards him and gently embrace her. She wrapped her arms around his back and returned the hug, closing her eyes as she felt the kiss he lay against her cheek.

"Be good," she whispered.

"I will," he promised.

Releasing him, Ascher attempted a smile but felt her bottom lip tremble. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and composed herself. Her eyes teared, and she adjusted her focus to take in the profile of the Millennium Falcon. Chewbacca had stopped his maintenance work on the freighter's upper hull, and raised a hand in farewell. She briefly returned the wave, then spun on the toe of her boot. Ascher squared her shoulders and, without looking back, marched up the ramp of the shuttle.

Solo and the princess moved away from the shuttle as the whine of its engines increased. Silently, they watched as the vessel lifted up on its repulsor power, turned slowly towards the entrance of the hangar, passed through the magnetic field and out into open space.

Leia smiled as Solo pulled her against him, placed his hands on her stomach and rested his chin on the top of her head. She covered her hands over his and leaned back into him.

"You've got some very interesting history, Solo," she told him.

His gaze was distant as he hugged her closer. "Yeah." Then he realised what she had said, and he considered her curiously. "You and Asch were gettin' rather cosy there."

Leia sighed, "Mmhmm."

"Did you talk about me much?"

To his annoyance, she repeated, "Mmhmm."

Solo held her tighter. "So. What did she tell you?"

Leia's response was non-committal. "Just girls' stuff."

He squeezed his arms around her. "What sort of girls' stuff?"

Leia had trouble keeping a smirk from her lips. "You know. Girls' stuff."

He moved his cheek down the side of her head and whispered into her ear, "Play nice now, Your Highnessness."

She squirmed and wiggled further into his body. "Or else...?"

His breath was warm in her ear. "Or else I'll have to take matters into my own hands. And come up with a few special ways to get it out of you."

Chuckling fondly, Leia took his hand and turned in his embrace so that she could face him. "Ascher told me you used to have trouble keeping your mind on one thing for too long. She said you had a stunted attention span."

Solo pulled a face. "Is that all she remembered?"

Leia laughed at the disappointment in his voice and the bewildered look he gave her.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head, reached up on the tips of her toes and kissed him on the mouth. She pulled back from him and silently acknowledged how at ease this man made her feel. Happy. Content. Settled. "Sounds like it's time to either bail out or settle down, Princess."

Perhaps, she admitted, it was.

End

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