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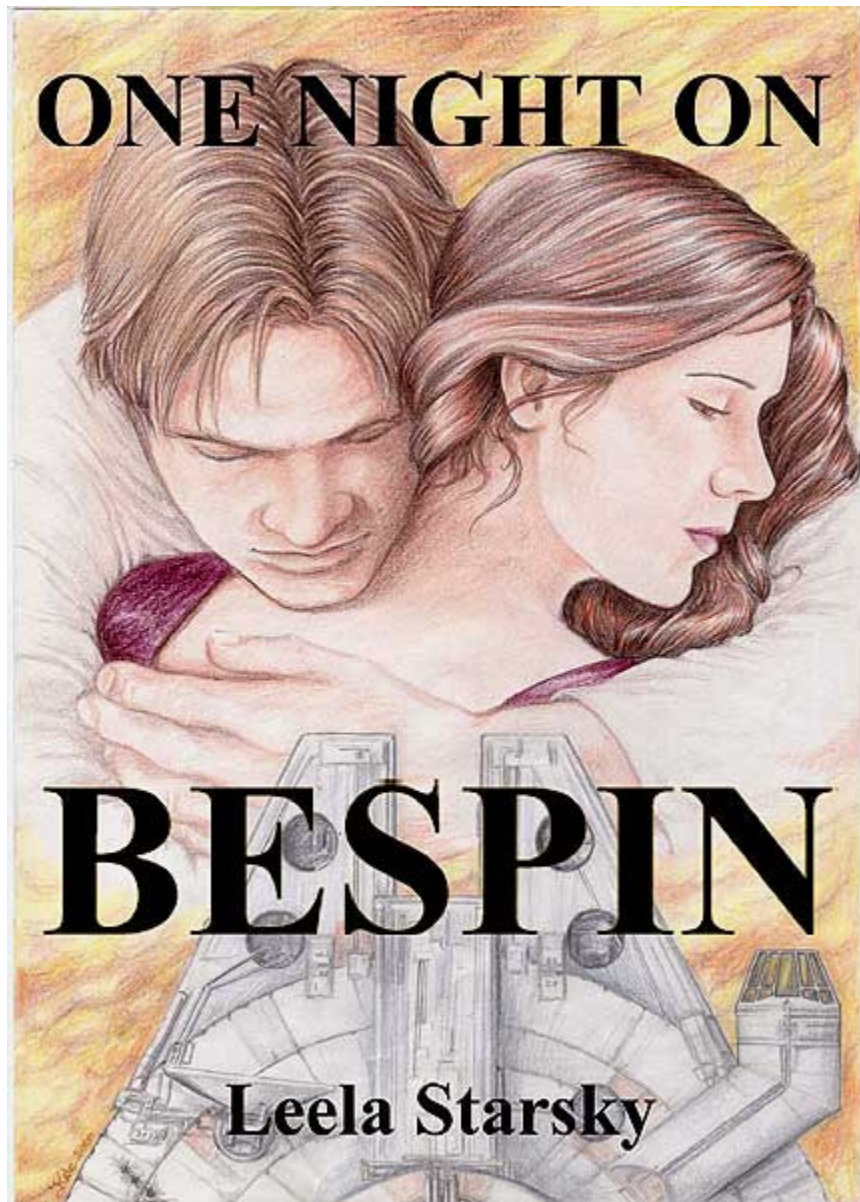
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## **One Night on Bospin**

by [Leela Starsky](#)

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

*Inspirational music: "The Mummy" soundtrack by Jerry Goldsmith, "Moulin Rouge" soundtrack by various artists, "Tarzan" soundtrack by Phil Collins and Mark Mancina, "Touch" by Sarah McLachlan, and "The Mask and the Mirror" by Loreena McKennitt.*



It was a mammoth city, hanging in the clouds like the forgotten toy of a god, gleaming pink and gold in the afternoon sunlight. Solo followed the cloud cars across the top of it, then descended among the spires of buildings as they did until they reached the designated landing platform. Then he faultlessly brought the *Falcon* to rest.

They all stared at the empty platform for a long moment and, Solo suspected, none of them thought it bode well. Where was security? Where was Lando for that matter? Either he was still too angry with Han to contemplate seeing him or he no longer cared, and Solo really couldn't see *that* being an option.

The truth was, every alarm system, every gut feeling in his body was screaming at him to lift off and get the hell out of there. But he had no options. He couldn't go anywhere without a hyperdrive.

Solo started locking down the ship and Chewie fell into routine with him. He chanced a look at Leia and caught her staring out at the loudly vacant landing platform. She met his gaze briefly and was suddenly galvanised into action. Releasing her safety restraints and climbing out of her seat, she left the cockpit and Threepio followed her.

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"Oh, no one to meet us," Threepio said as he came to the end of the *Falcon's* landing ramp and stopped.

Leia stopped beside him, obviously unsettled. "I don't like this," she growled.

"Well, what *would* you like?" Solo snapped, then thought snidely, *A royal delegation?* Nevertheless, he had enough sense to leave it unsaid. He was as unhappy about the situation as she was.

"Well they *did* let us land," Threepio observed helpfully.

"Look," Solo said, trying to mollify her, "don't worry. Everything's going to be fine. Trust me."

The door to the landing platform *whooshed* open and a squad of armed security guards moved into place, lining the entrance to the city. Then a dark skinned man stepped from their midst and walked towards the *Falcon*, his cape billowing in the sharp wind.

"See?" Solo said. "My friend."

Leia folded her arms defensively and regarded the newcomer with reservation.

Solo started forward to meet the approaching figure and paused beside Chewie. "Keep your eyes open, okay?"

Chewbacca growled a low affirmation and Solo moved to meet his friend. He paused when the cloaked figure stopped three meters away and glared at him

"Why you slimy, double-crossing, no-good swindler!" the man said darkly. "You've got a lot of guts coming here, after what *you* pulled."

*Me?* Solo indicated himself innocently. Calrissian approached, glowering, then abruptly lunged at the Corellian. Solo, feeling sure he was about to be hit, raised his fists in self-defence. And was surprised to find himself being embraced in enthusiastic greeting.

"How you doing, you old pirate?" the man crowed exuberantly. "So good to see you!"

"Well," Threepio said, "he seems very friendly."

"Yes," Leia agreed warily and followed Chewie towards Solo. "Very friendly."

"What are you doing here?" Calrissian wanted to know.

Solo gestured over his shoulder at the Falcon. "Ahh... repairs. I thought you could help me out."

"What have you done to my ship?" Calrissian demanded with mock outrage.

"*Your* ship?" Solo jabbed a finger at his chest. "Hey, remember you lost her to me fair and square!"

Calrissian noticed the Wookiee's approach and asked, "And how are you doing, Chewbacca? You still hanging around with this loser?"

Chewbacca gave him a reserved response and Calrissian's eyes suddenly lit upon the princess.

"*Hello,*" he said with sudden admiration. "What have we here?"

Solo rolled his eyes as Calrissian moved past Chewbacca to give Leia his full attention.

"Welcome," Calrissian said smoothly. "I'm Lando Calrissian. I'm the administrator of this facility." He reached for her hand as he asked, "And who might you be?"

"Leia," she responded coolly.

"Welcome, *Leia,*" he said, gallantly kissing the back of her hand.

As far as Solo was concerned, Lando had gone far enough. "Alright, alright," he said, taking Leia's hand and interposing himself between them. He grinned at

Calrissian and scolded, "You old smoothie." The warning was there, despite his smile, and he knew Calrissian had seen it.

Leia couldn't quite stop the smile that spread across her face as he steered her towards the entrance, and for a moment Solo saw a whisper of the Leia who had been sharing his bunk for the last three weeks. He caught her eye and saw the hostility in her demeanour lessen slightly. She gave him a reserved smile then removed her hand from his.

"What's wrong with the *Falcon*?" Lando was asking.

"Hyperdrive," Solo replied, forcing himself to pay attention to the man.

"I'll get my people to work on it," Calrissian assured him matter-of-factly.

"Good," Solo said, and wondered when Lando would want to discuss payment. But Lando, it seemed, was set on impressing the princess.

"You know, that ship saved my life quite a few times," he told her. "She's the fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy."

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Watching Calrissian as he led them into the city, Leia could tell he was older than Solo by several years. Which didn't really surprise her. Like herself, Solo had been forced to grow up fast, and it was not unusual that he had moved in an older circle. Han had realised at an early age that his survival depended on his ability to learn fast, and that there was little to learn from his peers. That was why he had survived not just his youth on the streets of Coronet, but his life as a smuggler and the Imperial Academy as well.

Solo had warned her about Lando's prior ownership of the *Falcon*, largely, she suspected, because he knew Calrissian would make an issue of it. She got the feeling that losing the *Falcon* to Solo was something Calrissian had never quite got over and wondered exactly what sort of stunt Solo had 'pulled' on him.

"How's the gas mine?" Solo was asking. "Is it still paying off for you?"

"Oh, not as well as I'd like. We're a small outpost and not very self-sufficient. And I've had supply problems of every kind. I've had labour difficulties..."

Leia heard Solo snigger and obviously so had Calrissian.

“What’s so funny?” he demanded.

“You,” Solo said, chuckling. “Listen to you. You sound like a regular businessman, a responsible leader. Who’d have thought that, huh?”

*‘Who’d have thought that’,* Leia echoed in her mind. *Sounds a little like someone else I know,* she thought. She slowed as Calrissian paused to look at his former friend.

“You know seeing you sure brings back a few things,” he said.

Solo regarded the man with equal intensity and Leia suspected there was a lot not being said. He squeezed Calrissian’s shoulder and agreed, “Yeah.”

Calrissian started them walking again. “Yeah, I’m responsible these days,” he said. “It’s the price you pay for being successful.”

Leia took the time to study the city as they moved through it. It was certainly beautiful, there was no denying it and, despite Calrissian’s supply problems, the inhabitants looked well fed and happy. The architecture of the city reminded her of Alderaan and she suspected the architect was from her homeworld or at least a lover of it. Smooth, clean lines and lots of curves that suggested decorative without being frilly.

Chewbacca left her side suddenly and headed back the way they had come, leaving Leia wondering if he thought he’d forgotten something. Then she dismissed him. Chewbacca could look after himself. Whatever he was doing she was sure he’d have a good reason for it.

By the time Calrissian led them to the apartment he had set aside for them at the top of one of the upper spires, Chewie was back and Leia made a mental note to ask the Wookiee about it once Calrissian had left.

The Administrator opened the door with a grand flourish and said, “The *royal* suite.” They all must have looked a little startled at the claim, Leia decided, because he hurriedly added, “Well, not really, but royalty did stay here once. Or so I’m told.”

He was bragging, Leia realised and suddenly found herself doubting his claim. The comment disturbed her and she came to the unhappy conclusion that Lando Calrissian knew who she was.

The apartment was elegant, in a minimalist sort of way, and Leia decided it was probably the sort Calrissian reserved for business partners and visitors with money. People he wanted to impress. And wondered if he was deliberately setting out to intimidate Han. There was a panoramic window on the far side of

the circular lounge, looking out over the city, and a large skylight overhead. The colours of the sunset had painted the room and caught the different angles of the tall, abstract sculpture in the centre of the lounge making it appear to glow like a frozen flame. Until Calrissian turned the lights on and shattered the illusion. Leia suspected she had chanced seeing the sculpture at its most impressive and decided that the artist would not have been all that impressed with Lando.

Calrissian swept around the perimeter of the suite and opened one of the four doors off the lounge.

“Bedroom,” he said, indicating with his hand, then pointed at the door closest to the entrance. “Refresher.” He waved at the doors on the other side of the lounge and said, “Same on that side.” *Only two?* Leia thought, suddenly affronted at his assumption that she and Han would be sharing, then Calrissian looked at Chewbacca and added, “I assumed you’d want to stay with the ship.”

Chewie growled an affirmative and Leia wondered why she hadn’t considered that herself. Of course Han and Chewie wouldn’t trust anyone near their ship unsupervised. She wondered if she would be spending her time in the apartment alone while Han abandoned her to concentrate on his ship, then felt guilty for wanting him all to herself.

Calrissian was explaining the vagaries of the comm system to Han and she looked inside the bedroom. It was as spartan as the lounge area with only a large bed in the centre. A *very* large bed. Luxury after the small bunk they had been sharing on the *Falcon*...

She walked through to the ‘fresher which could be accessed from the bedroom as well as the lounge area. It was large and luxuriously appointed, the central feature being a large spa pool. The water in it glimmered enticingly in the light reflecting off it from an overhead skylight that looked like a smaller version of the one over the lounge, and Leia wondered how long she would be able to resist the temptation to plunge in.

She walked back into the bedroom and noticed there was a balcony area outside the large window. Walking across to it, Leia opened the access and stepped out on to it. The view was magnificent and the air was surprisingly mild. Lights could be seen all over the city now, despite it still being bathed in sunset colours, and she could see transport systems and distant throngs of people in the lower, open areas.

She looked at Han and Calrissian as they stepped out onto the balcony beside her and suspected that Solo had come looking for her.

“It’s a lovely outpost,” she admitted to Calrissian.

“Yes, we’re very proud of it,” he replied. “You’ll find the air quite special here... very stimulating.” He smiled meaningfully at her and added, “You could grow to like it.”

Solo didn’t miss Calrissian’s flirtatious glance and obviously didn’t like it. “We don’t plan on staying that long,” he said brusquely.

Leia raised an eyebrow at her simmering lover and said mischievously, “I find it quite relaxing.”

Calrissian chuckled and they followed him back inside. As they walked through the bedroom to the lounge area, Solo caught Leia’s eye and indicated the bed with his eyes. Like her, its size and possibilities had impressed him, and an amused, intimate look passed between them.

“I’ll organise a repair crew for the *Falcon* now,” Calrissian was saying. “Feel free to settle in; have a look around the city.” He smiled at them. “Whatever takes your fancy.”

His innuendo made Leia feel dirty, particularly as the sight of such a luxurious bed had prompted just such thoughts in her. Irritated, she moved to the panoramic window in an attempt to put as much distance between Calrissian and herself as she could.

“As I mentioned before,” he continued, “I do have other matters to attend to. Perhaps we could get together tomorrow morning for a late breakfast?” He patted Solo on the back and headed for the door. “We can talk over old times; what do you say, buddy?”

Solo muttered something non-committal and Chewbacca succinctly told Calrissian that he would return to the *Falcon* immediately and await the repair crew and parts.

“Come on then,” Calrissian encouraged and swept out the door with Chewbacca close on his heels. “You can make sure I order the right parts. Who knows what you two lunatics have done to her systems?”

The door shut, cutting off Chewbacca’s reply, and Leia relaxed marginally, glad to see the back of Lando.

Immediately, Solo produced a small scanner from one of his pockets and proceeded to sweep the apartment for surveillance devices. Leia watched him affectionately. Han and his bug-hunts... Then he moved into the other rooms, systematic in his sweep, and Leia turned back to the sunset. It occurred to her that Threepio had not followed them to the apartment but, knowing the droid’s propensity for wandering off and getting distracted, decided that he had probably



gotten lost. She hoped he would have enough sense to simply retrace his steps and go back to the ship.

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Solo re-pocketed his scanner, finally satisfied that the rooms were 'bug-free', and stepped back into the main lounge area. He turned and looked at Leia, silhouetted against the magnificent sunset visible through the panoramic window. He approached at a leisurely pace, walking around the lounge area, etching this view of her into his memory, his boots clicking softly on the polished floor. Leia looked up at him as he approached, and smiled. A soft, intimate smile that, Solo knew, was a smile she only gave to him. He returned it in kind and cupped her face with one hand, watching the changing light play across the contours of her face.



“Will Chewie be alright?” she asked quietly. “Do you need to go with him?”

“He’ll call me if he needs me,” he said. Tracing her hairline with a finger, he

added, “He won’t be back ‘til the morning.”

He was undressing her with his eyes. Leia licked her lips and smiled almost bashfully. “What about dinner?”

“Nah,” he assured her, drawing her close. “He likes scouting around in the spacer bars; finding out what the gossip is-”

“Seeing how *safe* it is,” she said, correcting him.

Solo looked at her for a moment, then answered honestly, “Yeah.” He leaned down and kissed her jaw, just beside her ear, and Leia couldn’t help responding, leaning into his embrace as he nibbled her neck.

“He knows who I am, Han.”

Solo paused then frowned at her. “Lando? What makes you think that?”

“A feeling,” she admitted.

Solo considered that for a moment. She was probably right. Lando wasn’t stupid. He was certainly astute enough to follow the smuggler gossip network; to keep up with who was shipping what and for whom. No doubt Lando knew he had been working for the Rebels for the last couple of years, but would he have recognised the Princess of Alderaan? And what would it mean if he had? Solo doubted the man would want to risk his reputation, business, not to mention the safety of his city, for a quick sale of information that was likely to bring the big guns of the Empire down on his head.

No, if he *had* recognised the princess, Lando would want them out of there as fast as possible, which meant he would have the ship fixed sooner rather than later. And that, in Solo’s opinion, could only work in their favour.

Leia slid her hands up under his jacket, tightened her embrace, and he reciprocated, sensing her unspoken apology for the tension that had been between them for most of the morning. Solo kissed the top of her head then started removing pins from her hair, felt her tense for a moment. She pulled away a little to look at him, her eyes glimmering in the soft light, but he continued to remove the pins, slipping them into his pocket as he went.

Finally, the plaits tumbled down and he carefully unwound each one, revelling in the silken feel of it sliding through his fingers.

“Which bed d’you wanna try first?” he murmured into her ear.

She responded huskily, “The biggest one,”

“I think they’re the same size,” he said, without stopping his nuzzling.

“The closest one,” Leia amended.

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In another part of the City, hidden from all but those who needed to know, was a room containing several Imperial officers, whose current duty involved monitoring the movements of the crew of the *Millennium Falcon*.

The remains of the nosy protocol droid, which the stormtroopers guarding the entrance had blasted, had been gathered up and disposed of. Now the technicians were concentrating on the screens relaying data from a network of the most up-to-date spy droids available and assuming that the blasting of the droid would be the most interesting thing they would see for the next fifteen hours.

They had a mobile probe following the Wookiee and one waiting to follow the Corellian and the princess should they leave the apartment they'd been given. There were also fixed 'spies' on the landing pad with the *Millennium Falcon* as well as in the apartment.

Two of the screens were currently focussed on the Wookiee, who was busy abusing the technicians trying to repair his ship, while the other five had been dedicated to the apartment. The black uniformed officers were variously eating, drinking and chatting, while keeping a respective eye on their particular screen. The boredom involved in this sort of surveillance was usually acute and such liberties were one of the perks.

Abruptly, one of the officers sat up, taking a keen interest in his screen, then announced lasciviously, "Heads up, boys; we've hit the jackpot!"

Boredom and tedium forgotten, the three screens not devoted to the Wookiee were switched to the bedroom which had their targets active in it.

With the latest Imperial Digital Imaging, depending on the amount of spy-imagers used, almost any angle and any zoom could be achieved in a surveillance, and the present officers knew how to use it to its full advantage.

Thus, when Darth Vader entered the room some twenty minutes later, it was to a room of excited, engrossed and highly amused officers, to whom the Dark Lord's arrival was like a bucket of cold water.

Three screens flicked back to their original surveillance of the apartment's other rooms, and several officers hustled back to their posts.

Vader was not stupid; he could guess what was going on. As could Lando Calrissian who had followed in directly behind the Dark Lord. He glared at the officers and winced as his own eyes strayed to the screen. Han did not deserve this, nor did the young princess.

“Lord Vader, is this *necessary*?” he growled, waving a hand at the screen while trying not to look at it.

Vader turned and seemed to regard him for a moment, although, with the mask, Lando could not be sure.

“It is relatively harmless, Calrissian.”

The city administrator steamed impotently and tried to put as much outrage as he dared into his voice. “It is a *complete* invasion of their privacy!!”

“Compared to what will happen to them in the morning, it is nothing,” was Vader’s callous response. He turned to the officer in charge, a thin, pale-skinned man who, Calrissian thought, could do with a month on a planet with some decent sunshine. *Coruscant born and bred*, he decided.

“Are the repairs to the *Millennium Falcon* going as expected, Commander?” Vader asked.

The officer nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

The Sith Lord studied the screen showing the Wookiee. “Has the Wookiee been a problem?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“And the interrogation preparations?”

“A scan grid and several interrogation droids were brought from the *Executor* before it left the System, my lord. I have the technicians assembling the grid now.”

Calrissian flinched mentally at the mention of a scan grid and chose not to think too closely about it. Vader had moved to the screen showing Solo and the princess and watched as they completed their copulation. The volume for all the screens had been set low, yet the cries of passion from Solo and his princess seemed loud in the otherwise still room. Calrissian couldn’t remember feeling more uncomfortable or embarrassed in his life. If the girl had simply been the sort of trivia Solo usually attracted, it wouldn’t have been so bad; but she obviously meant something to him, and he to her. Calrissian shook his head; Han was in too deep this time, and there was nothing he, personally, would be able to do to

help them. Lando suspected he'd be lucky to come out of this fiasco with Cloud City intact. And he knew for certain that if Solo survived whatever abominations Vader had planned for him, he would *never* forgive Calrissian.

The couple on screen were recuperating, talking quietly, and Vader asked, "You are recording, Commander Rosonger?"

"Yes, lord Vader-"

"Analyse every word. They may discuss where they had planned to rendezvous with the Rebellion."

Rosonger inclined his head, "Yes, my lord."

"I want transcripts of all their conversations, do you understand, Commander?"

"Yes, sir-"

"*Every* word," the Dark Lord insisted.

"Yes, Lord Vader!"

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Leia took a moment to catch her breath then looked across at Han, on his back, recuperating, and smiled. She rolled towards him, settled into his side, and he draped his arm comfortably around her shoulders, drawing her closer. As an afterthought, Leia twined her leg around his and Solo eyed her warily.

"You're feeling enervated," he croaked and attempted to clear his throat. Leia grinned sheepishly and nodded, running her hand over his abdomen. "You're gonna kill me, you know?" he pointed out, suppressing an urge to flee. She was ten years his junior after all.

Leia grinned and lifted herself onto one elbow so she could look him in the eye. "And you thought it'd be Vader or Jabba who killed you!" she teased. "Little did you know the true bane of your life was *me*."

"Oh, I knew alright," Solo replied then grinned. "I just couldn't help myself."

Leia lay her head on his chest and hugged him. "Me either," she murmured.

They lay quietly for a while, then Solo asked, "What did you want to do tonight?" His mouth twitched up on one side as he anticipated her answer. "Apart from more of this."

Leia smirked but asked, "What did you have in mind?"

Solo ran his hand through her hair. "I thought we could maybe go somewhere nice to eat. *Real* food, you know?"

Leia lifted her head and looked at him. "Do you think we should?"

"Eat real food?"

"Eat *out*," she clarified.

"Why not? No one here's interested in us."

"I hope not," Leia said warily, visions of Ord Mantell running through her mind. No one should have been interested in them there, either, but Jabba's bounty hunter, Boba Fett, had almost succeeded in not only capturing Han, but killing her as well.

"Well, I don't know about you," Solo said, "but *I* need sustenance." Leia giggled and he added pointedly, "*Exactly!* And if you want me to have any sort of stamina-

Leia pushed herself up. "*Want* you to have stamina?" She laughed and straddled him. "I *expect* it, flyboy!"

Solo groaned and closed his eyes. "Leia, I swear..." He felt her go still and opened his eyes to find her smiling at him. "What?" he asked.

Leia ran her hand across his chest without taking her eyes off his, then leaned forward and touched his face. "Han..."

Solo's expression softened to one of total devotion. "What is it, Sweetheart?"

Leia opened her mouth to speak then closed it again and Solo smiled, his hands caressing her.

"I love you, too," he whispered back to her, the caresses from his hands becoming sensual and erotic. Leia closed her eyes, revelling in his touch, writhing in his lap, and Solo felt a stirring in his groin. It amazed him, yet how could he not? The visual stimuli she was providing alone was enough to send him rock hard, but the feel of her moist warmth rubbing against him...

Leia regarded him smugly and slid herself onto him.

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Vader was leaving the room when one of the officers gasped and drew their attention to the screen once more.

“Again?” the words were out of Rosonger’s mouth before he could stop them and he threw an apologetic glance in the direction of the Dark Lord. “Sorry, my lord.”

Vader stared at the screen for a long moment before growling to no one in particular, “She defiles herself.”

“Yes, my lord,” Rosonger agreed unquestioningly.

Vader swept from the room, followed by Calrissian, and the remaining officers immediately relaxed and clustered around the ‘active’ screen, redirecting two more to focus on the couple from different angles.

“All that bullshit about Corellians must be true...” one of the officers muttered.

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“Lando?”

Calrissian looked at the comm-unit he had just answered without even considering who might be on the other end, and the sight of his old friend’s face sent him into utter panic. Why the hell would Han be calling him? Had they seen something? Did they suspect?

“*Han?*”

“Yeah.” Solo frowned out at him from the small screen. His shoulders appeared bare and Lando suspected he was naked. Calling from the bedside comm. “Am I interrupting something?” he wanted to know, doubtless confused by Calrissian’s reaction.

“No,” Calrissian answered hastily and wondered if Solo could hear the lie. He couldn’t look his old friend in the eye, unable to see anything except Solo and his princess rolling and panting. “Am I?” he asked, then realised what a stupid question it was.

“What?” Solo’s frown deepened and Calrissian hurriedly tried to cover his indiscretion.

“Sorry, Han, I’m a little distracted. What did you want?”

“I wanted to take Leia out for dinner and thought maybe you could recommend somewhere nice?”

Calrissian smiled naturally and thought, *Solo must have it bad!* Then said, “Sure, buddy, I know just the place. But I think the lady will need a change of clothes.” From the look on Solo’s face that was not something he had even considered and Calrissian shook his head at him. *She’s a bloody princess, Han!* “What size is she, Han? I’ll have a selection sent to your room.”

Solo grinned at him. “How would I know, Lando? Little?”

“Leave it to me,” Calrissian sighed, wondering what in all the hells the princess of Alderaan saw in the uncultured Corellian.

“Thanks!”

“I’ve made a reservation for you at my favourite restaurant,” Calrissian said, accessing the database beside him, then looked at Solo and added, “My treat.” He hoped the thick-headed Corellian wouldn’t argue the point, but Solo beamed at him and Calrissian realised his friend was basically penniless. “I’ll download how to get there to your current screen.”

“Thanks Lando-”

“Forget it.” The guilt was coming back, hard and fast.

“No, I mean it, buddy.” Solo’s face was suddenly serious. “I know you’re not stupid, Lando; you probably realise how dangerous we are...”

Calrissian considered for a long moment before admitting, “I know who she is, Han.”

Solo smiled ruefully, “She said you did.”

Panic gripped him again and he thought, *She suspects!* “And you didn’t believe her?” Calrissian frowned at Solo. “What the hell does she see in you, Han?”



“Honestly, Lando?” A look of pure openness crossed the Corellian’s face and he looked at his old friend vaguely abashed. “I don’t know...” A grin started to break across his face and he added, “But she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Obviously.”

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Solo had to rouse himself from an impromptu doze when the clothes were delivered and was surprised to find that Lando had sent clothes for *him* as well. He lay Leia’s out on the bed in the other room for her. Leia was still in the shower *indulging* herself and he half contemplated joining her there, but the thought of having to ‘perform’ again so soon kept him where he was.

Instead, he checked out the clothes Lando had chosen for her... That thought irked him terribly and he was shocked to the core when he realised the Administrator had included *underwear* in his selection.

He heard the shower cease and called her into the room.

She padded in on bare feet, wearing nothing but a towel and, typically, regarded the clothes with utmost suspicion.

“What’s this?”

“I asked Lando to recommend a good place to eat and he booked us into somewhere flash. He didn’t think you’d feel right wearing your snowsuit there.”

“*Lando* sent these?”

Solo nodded, then held up a particularly brief set of underpants and bra and waggled his eyebrows suggestively at her.

Leia gawped. “Lando sent *those*??” She shook her head. “I’m not wearing those. I’d rather go to a place where my suit won’t be so noticeable-”

Solo held up a beaded, burgundy-coloured dress that had caught his eye and was reminded of another time he had chosen a dress for her. Only two years ago, but it seemed like a lifetime.

Leia had obviously been reminded of their time in Farrouq's mansion on Coruscant too, because she smiled and asked, "Mollema Silk?"

Solo smiled. "I don't think Lando's wealth stretches *that* far."

Leia took the dress from him and held it against herself. "You like it?"

"Either of the red ones are nice. That one's a little more *exotic*." Solo shrugged. "It's up to you." He smiled and added, "I'm having a shower."

Leia watched him go and perused the other dresses, swiftly deciding that Solo was right; the red ones were the best choice. She carried them both back to the other bedroom and found the clothes Lando had sent Solo. Automatically Leia sought out the items that would match her choice of gown and took the others to the second bedroom, leaving them on the bed with the dresses she had rejected.

She walked into the refresher room to return her towel, wondering what she would do with her hair, and was met with a veil of steam and the sight of Solo in the shower.

He looked at her and smiled and Leia felt her heart lodge in her throat. *I love him*, she thought. *I really do...* And, as she returned the smile, Leia realised, *I always have...*

He turned away to wash his hair and she was mesmerised by the play of muscles under his skin. The way they bunched and rippled across his shoulders and down his back as he rubbed the soap into his scalp. He stepped back under the flow of water to rinse it out and she watched it cascade down his body. The spray was bouncing off his body and hitting the soft force-shield between them. The shield was weak enough to walk through, yet strong enough to keep the water from splashing everywhere.

"Did you decide on a dress?" he asked, turning off the shower.

Leia nodded and realised she had lost the ability for speech. She watched him step away from the shower and reach for a towel, and found herself wanting to run her hands all over his body, to revel in its slick wetness. No, not just her hands, she realised, her whole body. She wanted to feel him against her, inside her. She wanted to run her tongue over his skin, to taste every inch of him. The depth of her desire shocked her.

"Keep looking at me like that, sweetheart, and we'll be late for dinner."

His voice, low and seductive, seemed to rumble around inside her chest, filling every nook and cranny. Filling her up with *him*. Leia met his eyes, golden in the soft bathroom lighting, and her entire being seemed to coalesce around the

thought, *I love you, Han.* And she could almost swear she felt his response, *I love you, too, Leia.*

He leaned in and brushed her lips with his, and Leia felt her body tremble.

A small smile touched his lips and he asked, "You okay?"

Leia managed a minuscule shake of her head and a whisper of concern flittered across his face.

He asked, "What's wrong? You don't want to do dinner?"

*Fuck dinner! Fuck the clothes! Just fuck me!* Leia licked her lips. "I want you."

Solo smiled and moved in closer. "I want you too," he murmured and Leia could feel the heat from the shower coming off his body in waves. He glanced down, as his arousal became apparent, then grinned at her as she followed the glance and moved a step closer to him. "And," he said, inhibiting her approach by gently gripping her shoulders, "I intend to spend dinner *wanting* you." He deliberately moved away from her, rubbing the towel over his skin.

Leia forced herself to look away. To hang up her towel and consider what she would do with her hair. The beaded dress required something elegant...

"What time is it?" Solo asked, combing his wet hair. The comb was charged to repulse water, thereby drying his hair with each stroke.

"Nearly 1700 standard," she replied, then frowned. "I think? I forgot to check the rotation here..." She leaned in towards the mirror to check her face for blemishes, then smiled at his reflection. "I'm still on Hoth time anyway."

Solo grinned and started running the shaver over his jaw. With their body clocks tuned to Hoth time, they hadn't bothered to switch to standard on the *Falcon*. By Hoth time it was just after midday, but on this part of Bespin it was evening. Which, in effect meant that they would be going to bed in the middle of the afternoon. "So we get to spend all 'afternoon' in bed," he said.

Leia smiled then glanced at his groin and sighed. "I'd better get dressed."

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When Solo joined her in the bedroom, Leia was dressed and going through his jacket.

“Where did you put my hair pins?” she wanted to know.

Amused, Solo retrieved his jacket and showed her which pocket he had put them in.

“Oh,” she said, pulling them out. “Thanks.”

She vanished into the ‘fresher and Solo set about getting dressed, and wondered how long she would take. Leia could fuss over her looks with the best of them but, compared to other women he’d known, she was too damn practical to spend hours at it.

Dressed in the black pants and high-neck pullover that Lando had sent, he waited for her on the balcony outside the bedroom. Three of Bespin’s moons were in view and he leaned on the safety rail, gazing at them and the Cloud City air traffic, enjoying the night air. The pants were loose enough to wear over the top of his boots, which helped to hide his spacer origins, and allowed him to carry his small hold-out blaster concealed in the leg of his right boot.

He heard Leia’s approach and turned to look at her. The dress seemed to fit her perfectly, conforming to and emphasising her figure, and the rustle of the beads mingled with the expensive sounding whisper of the fabric as she walked.

She had put her hair up in a soft arrangement that left tendrils curling around her face and down her neck, which she had left bare. The neckline of the dress drew his eyes to her cleavage and he had to force himself to look beyond it.

There was an arrangement of red, gold and black beads in her hair that matched her dress, and delicate drops from her ears. She must have found make-up in the ‘fresher somewhere because she had painted her lips red and done something to emphasise her eyes. She looked beautiful. Awe-inspiringly beautiful.

“How do I look?” she asked in that soft, low voice of hers that had him all but kneeling at her feet.

*Too good for me*, was the honest reply in his head, but he simply replied, “Stunning.” Then gingerly touched her cheek and added, “Like a Princess.”

She smiled and said, “You look pretty hot yourself, Captain.”

One side of his face slid into a grin and his eyes were drawn to the beads in her hair. "Did you rip these off the dress?" he asked, his smile broadening at the thought of her adjustments causing trouble for Lando.

"It's the necklace," Leia confessed. "I thought the dress looked more elegant without it."

Solo nodded, not really understanding but agreeing with her nonetheless. "Ready to go?" he asked. Leia nodded and he ushered her back into the bedroom where he donned a black, knee-length leather coat.

"You're not wearing the cape?"

She sounded disappointed. He'd found the black, burgundy-lined cape she had left with his clothes, and knew it was probably the height of fashion, but had chosen to wear the coat instead.

Solo shook his head. "Never was into cloaks," he told her. "Too much like a Jedi thing." Not to mention a style that Lando obviously found irresistible. And the last person he wanted to remind Leia of tonight was Lando.

Leia regarded him and for a moment he wondered whether she was going to make a big deal of it. But she seemed content to accept his reasoning and picked up a beaded, silk shawl from the bed as they walked through to the lounge area.

"Do you know where we're going?" she asked as Solo opened the door for her, then waited as he followed her through and secured the door.

"Lando gave me instructions," he said, then proffered his elbow and felt a flush of pride as she took it. Felt her hand snake through and grip his biceps. He smiled at her and they headed off.

\*\*\*\*\*

The restaurant was within walking distance, and a lot of the distance was on a large, wide balcony bordered by shops. They strolled it leisurely; enjoying the mild night air. The area was comfortably busy with an equally elegant clientele, several of whom nodded politely to Solo and the princess, assuring them that they considered them part of their elite club.

For Leia this was nothing unusual; it was the sort of society she had grown up in. But Solo was anything but impressed. It irked him to be judged on looks alone. He tried to feel smug about successfully fooling them all, but in fact it simply seemed to reinforce the fact that he didn't belong. He was starting to doubt his choice about the coat too. *All* the men seemed to be wearing capes.

Leia's hand tightened fractionally on his arm and he looked at her to find her smiling at him and suspected she had sensed his unease. Was this what he was in for if he settled into some sort of permanent relationship with her, he wondered. A life of unease and never feeling good enough? Of never really belonging? Solo took a deep breath and decided that Lando had done this deliberately. The clothes, the posh restaurant, even the underwear for sith's sake! All to show him up in front of the princess.



They were approaching the restaurant when Solo found himself needing to know which underwear Leia had chosen. Just the thought of Lando *picking* that stuff....

He put his mouth close to her ear and asked under his breath, "Which underwear did you wear?"

Leia regarded him with a mixture of shock and amusement then replied in a low voice, "None."

"None of the ones Lando sent?"

Leia's eyes met his. "No, none."

Solo stopped in his tracks and Leia's face broke into a wide grin.

"Are you serious?"

Leia nodded. "I told you I wasn't going to wear any of the ones Lando sent, and I wanted to wash mine..." Solo ran his hand over her buttocks, trying to feel through the dress, and she slapped his hand away. "Han!"

Solo made a show of rolling his eyes and putting his hands behind his back and hissed, "You tell me you're not wearing anything under the dress then expect me to keep my hands to myself?"

"Of course," she said primly. "Remember, Han; you're a gentleman tonight. Gentlemen *always* keep their hands to themselves." She threw him a sideways glance, then smirked and whispered, "*You* wanted to spend dinner *wanting* me."

He pulled her to a halt and whispered urgently, "You wanna go back to the apartment?"

"Of course I do," she admitted, turning to face him. "But this is fun too." She ran her hand across the smooth expanse of his chest, well defined by the figure-hugging, black pullover he was wearing.

"Oh, so 'gentlemen' can't touch but 'ladies' *can*?" he teased.

Solo filled his lungs, expanding his chest to its maximum and Leia smiled up at him, suspecting he'd done it deliberately. He started to smile and Leia slid her hands under the lapels of his coat jacket, under his arms to his back, pulling herself against his chest.

Solo's arms encircled her, drawing her into what became a deep, sentimental embrace. She felt him kiss the top of her head and closed her eyes to focus on the sensation of being loved, of being cherished. She held him a moment longer then disengaged gently and said in a low, affectionate voice, "Come on, Captain, lets go have dinner."

\*\*\*\*\*

The restaurant was the epitome of elegant dining. Warm lighting, soft music, human waiters, and the cream of Cloud City's inhabitants. Every one of them perfectly coiffed and dressed. Solo swallowed uncomfortably, feeling very out of place. He looked at Leia and was surprised to see his own discomfort mirrored on her face. But her demeanour changed as he watched. She held her head a little higher, back a little straighter, and was appraising the room with an air of arrogance that suggested she was deciding whether or not the establishment was good enough for her.

Solo smiled to himself. *She's a princess. This is what she was trained to do. If she can do it, so can I! And all of it on Lando's tab! What could be more perfect?*

An image of Leia, naked on his bunk on the *Falcon* and giggling at him over rations, leapt to mind. *Well... maybe that*, he conceded.

The head waiter approached them, followed by what Solo assumed was his attendant. Solo put on his best haughty expression to ask for the table Lando said he had booked, but the man bowed and said, "My Lord, My Lady. Baron Calrissian informed us that you would be attending this evening."

*Baron?* Solo thought with amusement. He watched as the attendant helped the princess remove her shawl, then the young man turned to him and Solo realised that he was waiting to take his coat. Shrugging it off, he watched young man catch it and drape it elegantly over one arm.

"I am Cerel Brusingemin," the head waiter continued. "I sincerely hope you enjoy your evening with us." He indicated the young man now holding the coats. "Ustryx here will see to your coats."

The young man moved away with the coats and Brusingemin indicated the main dining area.

"The Baron insisted you have his exclusive table," he said. "Please follow me."

He walked brusquely across the adjoining room and Leia followed, Solo close behind her. Feeling the other patrons' passing interest, Solo felt a moment of unbridled pride. *Yes, she's a princess... and she's mine.*

Brusingemin led them to a table in an alcove with a panoramic window that gave them a stunning view of the city. Solo couldn't help but be impressed by the night-lit city and the opulence of their dining surrounds, and wondered if Leia was likewise impressed. Lando had definitely outdone himself this time, he thought sourly. This was exactly the sort of luxury he imagined a princess would feel at home with and he wondered if Leia missed it.

Brusingemin and several other waiters fussed around them as they sat. Ordering drinks, rearranging glassware then, abruptly, they were all gone. Solo heaved a sigh of relief and Leia smiled. He knew she sensed his discomfort, he also knew she understood it.

"Well," he said, settling into his seat and making himself as comfortable as the situation would allow. "This is nice."

"Yes it is," Leia agreed, softly. "Very nice."

The drink waiter arrived at their table with the wine they had chosen and proceeded to fill their glasses. This was not Solo's first experience with human waiters and he found himself remembering all the reasons he hated them. You



could ignore a droid or tell it to piss off, but you couldn't do that to the 'live' ones. And they were so damned intrusive! As the drink waiter left, Ustryx brought a jug of water to their table, produced an electronic menu for each of them to peruse, then left again.

Solo met Leia's gaze across the table and found her regarding him fondly. He smiled. Lifting his wineglass he toasted softly, "To us."

Leia picked up her own glass and touched it to his. "To us," she agreed, and they each sipped from their respective glass.

The wine was too sweet for Solo's taste, but he had chosen it for Leia, not for himself, and he knew she preferred her wine sweet.

He smiled at her, suddenly awed by the situation and how beautiful she looked.

"If you'd told me 40 days ago we'd be here doing this, I'd never have believed you," he said.

Leia regarded him earnestly and said, "Neither would I..."

Solo took a fortifying swallow of his wine, then asked, "Are you sorry?"

Leia considered his question for, what seemed to Solo, a terrifyingly long time before looking at him and shaking her head.

"No," she said, then asked, "Are you?"

Solo gazed at her for a long moment, suddenly feeling very emotional. He managed a small smile and shook his head. "No."

They held each other's gaze, smiling softly, both aware of the giant leaps each had made in their small, intense time together.

"What are you thinking?" Solo asked, and was delighted to see her blush. As she lifted her wine glass to her lips, he grinned and admitted, "Me too." Deciding he needed to change the mood and topic, Solo leaned towards her across the table and whispered, "Think I should start a food fight?"

Leia, caught mid-swallow, choked on her drink and sputtered inelegantly. Once her coughing had subsided, Leia glanced at the nearby patrons who were now regarding her with distaste, then leaned towards him and whispered, "I don't think any of them would know how!"

Solo snickered and focussed his attention on the menu pad in his hand, flicking through the meal choices.

“What are you going to have?” he asked.

Leia replied, “The hot Corellian sausage looks good.”

Solo frowned, unable to remember seeing that in the choices, and was flicking back through the menu looking for it when he realised she was being suggestive. He looked up at her to find her smiling at him wickedly.

Deadpan, she said, “It comes with a cream sauce.” Then asked, “What are you going to have?”

Solo took a deep breath and ran his hand thoughtfully across his jaw. *Cream sauce...* Two could play at this game.

“The Alderaanian pie looks pretty good,” he said.

“I’ve heard that’s very good,” Leia agreed.

Solo waited for her to look up from her menu then said in a low seductive voice, “The *best*.”

To his delight, she blushed. Solo grinned and Leia went back to studying her menu. She constantly surprised him and he loved her for it. *Gods help me when she really loosens up*, he thought.

A waiter passed their table pushing a repulsored trolley that was laden with sizzling takersh meat and the smell made Solo’s mouth water. It had been a long time since he’d indulged in a meal of fresh takersh and he resolved to order it, but Leia’s reaction to it halted his hands on the menu pad. She covered her mouth and nose with one hand and had gone decidedly pale.

Frowning, Solo asked, “What’s wrong?”

She looked at him over her hand and seemed to need a moment to collect herself, then finally she lowered her hand and took a sip of her wine.

“Are you alright?” A minute ago she was being outrageously suggestive and now she looked... *sick*.

“It’s the smell,” she explained apologetically.

“The takersh?” Solo was surprised. He’d watched Leia eat foreign ‘delicacies’ that were downright revolting in the name of diplomacy and never bat an eyelid. And he knew she *liked* takersh...

“It’s okay; it’s passing,” she said.

“You feel sick?”

“For a moment.” She smiled, trying to quiet his alarm. “It was the smell. I’m fine now.”

“You’re sure?” It would be just his luck that she’d managed to catch some nasty bug in the five minutes they’d been on Bospin and he would have to deliver her back to the Rebellion ill.

Leia nodded. “I’m fine.”

Unconvinced, Solo muttered dryly, “Guess I won’t be ordering the takersh then.”

A flicker of worry flashed across Leia’s face then she admitted, “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Do you want to go back to the apartment?” he asked.

“And miss a meal of this calibre?” Leia shook her head emphatically. “Not a chance.”

Solo gave her a lopsided grin and they both went back to studying their menus.

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The meal was a gustatory delight. It had been a long time since Leia had eaten food of this standard and she suspected it would probably be a long time before she did so again. She savoured every bite, grinning at Solo’s ecstatic groans with his first few mouthfuls.

Han was on his best behaviour. His manners all evening had been impeccable, yet somehow he managed to remain relaxed. Natural. Unselfconscious about the high-society patrons nearby who eyed him with disdain whenever he laughed out loud at something she said. Disdain for such a blatant display of emotion.

Watching him, Leia felt an outpouring of love and affection for him. Found herself eager to get back to the apartment so she could give him a blatant display of that emotion.

For the hundredth time she started to wonder how she would cope after he left to pay off the Hutt, but stopped the thought before it could fully manifest. Thinking about after Bospin would simply depress her and she was not prepared to ruin

what little time she had left with him by sulking. So she savoured his company as much as the food. Memorised every unguarded expression on his face and revelled in the fact that he had let her in. Had allowed her to see and know the *real* Han Solo.

Uncertain who or what might be listening, they'd made a point of not discussing anyone or anything to do with the Rebellion. It was something they practiced on all missions and a routine they fell into without even thinking about it. Instead they played games between courses, surreptitiously studying the elegant couples at neighbouring tables and guessing what they might be. Whether they were married, what professions they were in. Then inventing backgrounds that were outrageously inappropriate. Han was a master at inventing dialogue for them, which would leave Leia all but doubled over in an attempt to contain her laughter. And when she and Han both came up with exactly the same line for one of them, it was all they could do *not* to fall out of their chairs.

It amazed Leia how alike their sense of humour was.

As the meal finished, Solo lounged back in his chair and gave his stomach a very satisfied pat.

"I could get used to this," he said.

Leia smiled and teased, "Getting a taste for the good life, Han?"

"I've always had a taste for the good life, Princess. Unfortunately, I seem to have spent most of my life *starving*."

Leia smiled. She knew he was speaking rhetorically but suspected there had been a few times in his life when the claim had been literal.

"But not tonight," she assured him, telling him with her eyes of further satiation to come and watched the flame of desire ignite in his.

He leaned across the table and touched her hand where it rested on the tablecloth. Leia watched, mesmerised by the electrical currents his touch generated through the back of her hand. Then she turned her hand over and entwined her fingers with his.

For a long time they said nothing, simply watched while their hands made love on the tabletop, then Solo finally said, "Ready to leave?"

Leia swallowed, clearing her throat to speak, but didn't trust her voice not to quaver. So she simply nodded.

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Retracing their steps, they walked casually back along the balcony promenade towards their apartment. It wasn't quite as crowded and Leia paused in a particularly deserted area to look out across the city. Solo stepped up behind her.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Leia leaned into him and he draped his arms loosely around her waist.

"Savouring the moment," she said.

The air had turned chill and there was a stiff breeze along the promenade that was swiftly making a mess of her intricate hairdo. Long strands of her hair reached out on the wind. Solo nuzzled her temple, enjoying the warmth and softness of her skin in the chill night air, then tried to hold down the hair that kept sweeping across his face but Leia smiled and removed the pins holding the rest in place. Loose, it enveloped his face and shifted around her head like a creature with a life of its own. Warm, soft and smelling faintly of flowers.

"Being here with you like this," she said. She turned her head towards him slightly and he dragged his lips across her cheek. Leia reached up to touch his face. "Knowing that soon we'll be back in the room. Making love..." She smiled softly. "It's the anticipation I guess."

Solo captured her lips and for a long moment nothing existed for him but feel of her lips against his and the sweet warmth of her in his arms. Then he paused to look at her.

"It all feels so *normal*," she murmured. "Like we're two normal people. I can almost pretend-"

Solo knew where this would lead and cut her off. "Come on," he said gently, "you're gonna get all morbid, I can tell."

Leia smiled and disengaged. Solo brushed her forehead with his lips again then once more they walked arm-in-arm towards the apartment.

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By the time they entered the apartment, the chill wind had turned into rain, the sound of it soft and rhythmic against the transparisteel skylight over the central lounge area. Solo shrugged off his coat and went straight to the comm to check the repair progress on the *Falcon* with Chewie while Leia moved through to the bedroom.

She slipped her shoes off and dropped the shawl she'd been wearing draped around her shoulders onto the bed, then walked into the 'fresher. Dropping the pins and beads she had been wearing in her hair on the bench, she took the opportunity to relieve herself then studied her reflection in the mirror for a moment. Combed her fingers through the mess her hair had become in a cursory attempt to pull it back into some sort of order. It was windswept and wild looking and Leia smiled. Doubtless Han would love it.

When she returned to the bedroom, she could hear the warm timbre of Han's voice from the lounge area while he talked to the Wookiee and smiled at the flutter it started in her chest. The sound of his voice had always elicited some sort of flutter in her chest.

She moved to stand in front of the large balcony door. The city had taken on a misty, ethereal glow in the rain. Like a watercolour painting. And for a moment she was reminded of Coruscant. But the lights of civilisation were not as prominent here, and the lines of the city itself much gentler.

She heard him finish his conversation with the Wookiee and enter the bedroom, and turned to face him.

"So far, so good," he reported, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull his boots off. "Chewie thinks they'll have the hyperdrive finished by the morning."

"Is Threepio with him?"

Solo frowned. "Don't know. I guess." He smiled sheepishly and added, "To tell you the truth, I hadn't even missed him." He placed the small hold-out blaster he'd had hidden in his boot on the bedside table and got to his feet. "I'll ask Chewie in the morning." He grinned lasciviously at her and said, "We certainly don't want him *here*."

Leia wasn't thrilled at not knowing for sure where Threepio was, but the thought of Threepio's incessant interruptions had her agreeing emphatically with Han. She did *not* want him here, and the chance that he would be anywhere other than the *Falcon* was very slim. She dismissed all thoughts of the droid from her head and allowed herself to wallow in thoughts about the nearby Corellian.

"I gotta use the other 'fresher," her Corellian said suddenly and smiled apologetically. "I'm sure you don't want me stinking up this one."

“Very considerate of you,” she agreed.

“Not used to all that rich food,” he muttered as he left the room.

*Neither am I*, Leia thought as she turned back to her contemplation of the cityscape outside the balcony door. She was feeling vaguely nauseous again and felt sure it had something to do with all the rich food she’d just eaten.

The cityscape was little more than a smudge through the increasing precipitation now making trails down the glass. She leaned her forehead against the glass, the cold of it a sharp contrast to the warmth in the room, and traced a droplet with one finger. It had been a long time since she’d been able to enjoy something as simple as rain. To be on the inside, looking out at it instead of traipsing through it while struggling to survive one rebel base or another. Or enduring it while on missions into enemy territory.

She had always loved the sound of it against transparisteel; so different from the sound it made against glass. Sharper. More defined. Not unlike the sound it made on metal which, she thought wryly, was to be expected.

She considered undressing and getting into bed, but wasn’t sure whether Han was planning to try out the spa first. For a moment she tried to remember the last time she’d had the luxury of a hot bath and couldn’t. Probably before she left Alderaan...

Leia decided to circumvent that train of thought before it took hold and went to get herself a drink from the food dispenser in the lounge. The highly polished floor felt icy against her bare feet and, drinks in hand, she hurried back to the comfort and warmth of the carpeted bedroom.

She had got a glass of water for Solo as well as herself and placed it on the bedside table, beside his blaster. The gesture stuck her as a very ‘wifely’ one and she smiled, amused with herself. Her own drink in hand, Leia took up position by the balcony door again, absently de-tangling her hair with her fingers while she watched the rain.

The movement mirrored in the glass distracted her and, for a moment, she focussed on the ghost-like reflection of herself in the glass. In it she could see the girl-princess she had once been, largely because of the dress. But her eyes and the way she held her body were rebel leader. She could hear Solo moving through the apartment as he returned to the bedroom, securing the front door, turning off the lights in the other rooms, and smiled at her reflection. Rebel leader and *lover*. And was pleased to find a peaceful coexistence of the different facets that made up Leia Organa. She saw him reflected in the glass as he entered and turned to face him.

“That feels much better!” Han announced cheerily as he walked in, shutting the door behind him. He stopped just inside the door and regarded her with an intensity that almost made her blush.

Leia smiled, moved across to put her drink on her bedside table and touched the small panel that turned the glass in the balcony window opaque. Han approached her slowly. Waited for her to face him before placing himself just within reach. Leia wondered whether he was deliberately teasing her, but suspected he had done it to further inflame the anticipation in himself.

She took a step towards him and it was all he could take. Solo pulled her into his arms and crushed her body against his, kissing her as though he would devour her whole. Leia could feel his desire through his pants and her dress, pressed hard against her stomach, and rubbed herself sensuously against it. His hands were releasing the fasteners at the back of her dress and Leia released her hold on him to let it slide down her arms and pool at her feet.

She was standing naked before him and, for a moment, Solo seemed to regard her with awe, his eyes drinking her in. Then he was yanking the pullover off over his head, swiftly followed by his undershirt. Leia undid the fasteners on his pants and almost laughed with embarrassment when she realised her fingers were trembling, but Solo seemed unaware. The pants fell from his hips and Leia was both shocked and delighted to discover he wasn't wearing any underpants.

Grinning, Solo kicked the pants aside and pulled her hard against him once more, kissing her lips, her cheek, her throat. His erection jabbed her in the bellybutton and Leia backed away a little to adjust it.

“Wrong hole,” she giggled.

Solo's lips and teeth were blazing a trail down her neck and he mumbled, “I'd better check it out.”

Leia trembled as he worked his tongue down over each of her breasts, knelt before her and paid her bellybutton serious attention. But when he stuck his tongue into it, she shrieked and tried to pull away. Solo, of course, tightened his grip and worked his tongue harder.

“Han!” she begged, struggling against him. “It *tickles!*”

Solo stopped for a moment and looked at her, grinning. “Tickles?” He attacked her bellybutton again and Leia shrieked and wriggled helplessly.

“*Han!*”



She grabbed his hair with the intention of hurting him to make him stop but he moved the attention of his tongue to her hip and the line that ran between her belly and her leg. That tickled too, but in a much more pleasant way.

She tensed as he licked his way back up to her bellybutton, watched as he circled it and warned, "Han..."

Solo looked up at her and grinned. "You're right," he said. "Doesn't taste right at all. Gotta be the wrong hole."

Leia smirked. "Maybe you'd better keep looking?" she suggested.

He nuzzled towards her groin again. "Will it be worth my while?" he wanted to know.

Leia opened her mouth to assure him it would, but he had worked his nose into the cleft between her legs and was rubbing it against her clitoris, his breath a warm caress across her genitals. Leia trembled and whimpered, clinging to his head. It was all she could do to remain on her feet. Words were out of the question.

"Mmm," he murmured, pressing his face even harder against her. "Now *this* smells right."

Leia closed her eyes. The sheer erotic nature of what Han was doing, of what she was *allowing* him to do, rendered her speechless. That and how good it felt.

He put one arm behind her knees and tipped her onto the bed. For a moment, Leia was dimly aware of the coolness of the bedclothes against her skin, then he opened her legs and started working seriously with his mouth and everything except the feelings he was creating in her faded into insignificance.

Her orgasm was deep and wonderfully satisfying, and left her lying like a blissed out lump as Solo shifted her more properly onto the bed, then hovered over her, grinning.

Leia grinned foolishly back.

"Nice?" he asked, and she nodded, still unable to speak.

Solo kissed her tenderly then looked at her and whispered, "I love you, Leia."

Abruptly Leia sought out and found the resources to speak. Caressed his face as she responded huskily, "I love you, too, Han."

He kissed her passionately then. Hungrily. As though seeking to devour her. Desperately seeking to make her a part of himself. Leia wrapped her legs around him and there was a moment of pause as he slid inside her, then the desperation returned. As though he just couldn't get close enough. Solo ground his hips against hers while his mouth voraciously explored her face and Leia angled her hips to take him as far inside her as she possibly could. To make him a part of her.

The low rumble of thunder rolled overhead and the rain outside became torrential.

"Mmm," Solo growled. "Mood music."

"Turn off the lights," Leia urged. "And clear the glass."

Knowing how she loved to watch thunder storms, Solo reached for the bedside table and touched the appropriate panels. The lights dimmed slowly and the glass became transparent, and soon they were lit by nothing but the eerie light of the electrical storm and the occasional flash of lightning. It reminded Leia of the mission they had taken together, just before Ord Mantell, to meet with the rebel cell on Nerysai Five. What should have been a milk run had turned into several days spent in a cave, hiding from xenophobic aborigines and a full-scale tropical cyclone. The sexual tension between them had been unbearable.

Solo was obviously thinking along the same lines because he murmured, "Reminds me of that night on Nerysai Five. In the cave."

Leia nodded and stroked the hair around his ear. "Me too," she whispered.

Solo kissed her cheek, her temple and groaned, "I wanted to make love to you so *badly...*"

"Me too," Leia agreed. A flash of lightning lit them briefly and she kissed him and added, "I wish we had."

Then none of the horribleness of Ord Mantell would have happened, apart from the bounty hunter. And maybe not even that. The bounty hunter would not have caught her alone if she hadn't stormed off after fighting with Han. And if she'd been sleeping with Han it was unlikely she'd have been so angry with him or he with her.

"Mmm," Solo mumbled against her breast. "All those nights on Hoth where we could have kept each other warm..."

"Mmm," Leia agreed whole-heartedly, stroking his shoulders and encouraging him to speed up. She had dreamt of having Han in her bunk on Hoth and for a

moment she let herself imagine they were there; secretly taking pleasure in each other while the wheels of the rebellion turned outside the tiny space that was her cabin. Imagined Rebel Alliance personnel walking past her door...

A loud clap of thunder sent a surge of adrenaline through her body and Leia imagined herself with Han in the cave on Nerysai Five. Warm, despite the storm, comfortable in the bed of furs they had found... A flash of lightning lit him and the helplessly erotic expression on his face sent her spiralling towards orgasm, her thoughts becoming momentarily incoherent as sensation overwhelmed them.

Then she sensed it. The start of the 'oneness' that seemed to happen whenever they orgasmed together. Felt Han's awareness of it grow as their consciousness seemed to meld. His thrusting became arrhythmic and desperate and, pressing his cheek against hers, he stammered helplessly, "Leia... Leia..."

Leia projected her love for him and felt herself enveloped in his. Felt his desperation to keep her safe forever and let him see the depth of her own fear of losing him. And, with the cataclysm of orgasm, felt his desire to be with her forever. To be formally bonded. And cherished it.

Han rested his forehead against her neck for a moment, panting from the exertion, then held himself up on his forearms and looked at her. In the light from the electrical storm outside, most of his face was in shadow but for a glimmer of reflection on his eyes. His hair was hanging limply from his forehead, damp with perspiration. But Leia didn't need to be able to see his face clearly to know what he was thinking. Echoes of his thoughts from their 'melding' were still at the forefront of her brain.

Solo dipped his head to kiss her softly on the lips and Leia tightened the hold her legs had on his pelvis, wishing they could somehow stay joined forever.

He lay with her like that a moment longer, then rolled off her and onto his back. He was still breathing heavily and seemed to focus on the ceiling.

Leia rolled onto her side to look at him and he sounded vaguely guilty as he murmured, "You felt that thought, didn't you?"

Leia smiled softly. "The 'marry me' one?" she asked and Solo nodded. "I won't hold you to it," she assured him, despite holding the memory of his unguarded wish close to her own heart.

Solo looked at her and whispered thickly, "I want you to."

Leia traced his brow with her forefinger. "We'll see. Maybe we'll discuss it when you get back from Jabba."

"I love you," Solo murmured.

"I know."

\*\*\*\*\*

Darth Vader stood by the panoramic window in his private apartment and stared out at the burgeoning electrical storm. He could feel them together. The princess and the smuggler. Could feel their joining. One of them was obviously a Force user and he suspected it was the princess. Had suspected her several years ago on the Death Star when she had managed to thwart his interrogation. It was a suspicion he had kept to himself, unwilling to share the possibilities she represented with his master.

His wife had held some small Force talent and, at the risk of outraging the Jedi Council, the young man he had been at that time had secretly instructed the woman he loved in some of the simpler skills of Force use. Skills that could well save her life one day. Skills she had used against him when she'd taken their son and abandoned her husband to the living hell he had chosen. And then she had abandoned their son as well. Had given him to the *Jedi*.

Vader had searched for the boy. To stand in view of his ex-wife and her new husband, Organa, with Luke at his side would have been, in his estimation, the sweetest form of revenge. But she'd had help from Kenobi and Yoda and they had vanished, taking the boy with them. Then she had died and vengeance hadn't seemed to matter any more. The boy had gone and Vader suspected that his master would have killed the child anyway.

And now, the daughter she had spawned with Bail Organa was disgracing herself with a common Corellian smuggler. Unconsciously using the Force to bond him to herself. Vader remembered that feeling. That feeling of total union with another being. The powerlessness of it sickened him now.

He would have to test her. If she was using the Force unconsciously like this, it would not be long before she discovered she could use it consciously. He was actually surprised that his son hadn't picked up on it. The princess and his son had reportedly become very close over the last three years. Plenty of time for someone with as much untrained Force sense, as his son appeared to have, to pick up on another using the Force. But the main reason he would have to test her was because soon his master would be aware of her too. And that would pose all sorts of dilemmas.

Luke's presence in the Force had sharpened dramatically since the attack on Hoth and Vader suspected his son had found someone to train him. Yoda perhaps. He was the only Jedi master unaccounted for.

It was a thought that set Vader pacing. That old fossil *should* have died years ago. He had already lived longer than was normal for his species when the boy Vader had once been had first met him. That was a memory that sent waves of anger through the Dark Lord. *If only Qui Gon had lived...*

The image of the little green vrelt *indoctrinating* his son infuriated Vader and he vowed that this time he would have the boy. With the princess and the Corellian as bait, the boy could not fail to come. And then he would have him. Would teach him the correct way of using the Force. The efficient way. Much as it would undoubtedly hurt the boy, he would break his ideals and teach him how things really were. And for Vader that would be the easy part. All he would have to do to shatter the boy's faith in Kenobi and Yoda would be to tell him the *truth*.

But if the boy *was* being trained he would be more difficult to contain. Capture was one thing, although the Jedi in the past had proven ludicrously suicidal. But, assuming that Luke had not yet been drilled with that form of escape, containment was a very real concern. Holding a trained Jedi was close to impossible. In Vader's experience, cryogenic suspension had been the only successful method in the past. Unconsciousness was fleeting, and drugs and poisons in a fully trained Jedi tended to be inconsequential. But a 'frozen' Jedi could be held for as long as was wanted. Long enough for a trip to Coruscant.

There were cryo facilities on board the *Executor*, but Vader's ship and the other Star Destroyers had jumped out-system to avoid detection by the *Millennium Falcon*, and had been ordered not to return until Skywalker was safely in custody. Having to depend on whatever cryo facilities were available in the city did not thrill the Dark Lord, and he decided that now was as good a time as any to bother the administrator about it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Leia had insisted on trying out the spa and, despite his post-coital desire to sleep, Solo had followed her in. She had then insisted on 'pleasuring' him and, despite his protests that she would not get a 'rise' out of him for at least half an hour, the minute her mouth had touched his manhood Solo's every sense had stood to attention.

Leia had admitted that her limited education about such things had come from a few pornographic holos but no holo, no matter how educative, could teach her the skills she seemed to have developed over the last few weeks. The things she did with her tongue... and the way she ran her hands all over him while she was doing it, involving his entire body in the experience, was almost too erotic to endure. The girl was a natural. A goddess.

Han Solo had experienced sex more times in his life and in more exotic ways than he could count, but none of it compared to sex with Leia. Sex with Leia was a mind, body and soul experience.

Holding her now, as he spiralled down from his climax, Solo couldn't bare the thought of leaving her. So, like he did with all painful emotions, he pushed it aside. Pretended it wasn't there. Focussed instead on the sweetness of the moment. On the girl sitting in his lap kissing and caressing him. And loved her with every fibre of his being.

He sighed contentedly, luxuriating in the deep, warm water while the electrical storm continued to rage outside, the intermittent flashes that heralded the loud crashes and rumbles lighting up the 'fresher through the overhead skylight.

"Feel good?" Leia wanted to know and Solo chuckled. As if there could be any doubt.

"Yeah," he said. "Feel very good."

"Good," she said, and smirked.

She started to shift off his lap and, sliding out of her, he suddenly felt bereft.

"You?" he asked, caressing her arm as she moved to sit beside him.

Leia submerged until only her head was above water, closed her eyes and sighed happily. "Oh, yes."

Her hair was a dark cloud in the bubbling water and Solo absently ran his hand through it. She was watching the storm through the skylight above them and Solo looked up as well. Overhead the clouds were roiling and, abruptly a great fork of lightning stabbed across the sky in full view.

Excited, Leia gripped his arm. "Did you see that?"

"Uh huh."

The crash of sound that accompanied the electrical discharge a moment later crackled and boomed over their heads.

Han Solo was in no way afraid of electrical storms, but the booming and crashing sometimes reminded him of less favourable times on Corellia. Of the months after his father had left and the ill fated 'student rebellion' that had gripped the entire city of Coronet. Watching the Empire callously mow down children his own age had affected him deeply. No matter how stupid he had thought the students and their ideals to be, none of them had deserved to be slaughtered like that.

He looked at Leia, seeking to block out the memories and found her regarding him. He got the feeling she sensed his disquiet and gave her a reassuring smile. Sitting up, she caressed his face. Comforting but not smothering. Then she snuggled into his side and he put an arm around her.

He thought about the revelation of his desire to bond with her. It had been as much of a surprise for him as it was for her, and he wondered where the desire had come from. He had never wanted to bond with anyone before, had always assumed he never would. It just wasn't in his nature to want to be so tied down, so *committed*.

And Leia was right. Things could well be different between them after he'd been to Jabba. She would still have her rebellion and he might well be dead.

A profound regret settled over Solo. He did not want to end the joy they had found in each other's arms. Did not want to leave her. Ever.

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Darth Vader's demand for a cryogenic facility had sent Lando Calrissian into something of a flat panic. There was nothing suitable in Cloud City. Nothing at all. They had one cryo bed in the largest Med Centre, but that was a slow process, designed for slowing the progress of bacteria and viruses until they could be analysed and treated. And it required the full cooperation of the patient. They certainly had nothing that could snap-freeze a Jedi. If they did have, Calrissian thought sourly, he'd have been the first in line to push Vader in.

Sighing he leaned back and rested his head on the back of his chair. He was tired beyond belief and beginning to feel like he had been wearing the same clothes for a month. He needed to sleep, if only for ten minutes. His aide, Lobot, was investigating their cryo alternatives and Calrissian decided he would risk napping until Lobot got back to him. Or Vader made some new demand...

\*\*\*\*\*

Watching the sleeping princess and her Corellian lover on the surveillance screen, Darth Vader was struck by how like her mother the young woman was. He had always seen the resemblance, especially when the young princess had joined the Imperial Senate. But, with her hair loose across her pillows and her body relaxed in the embrace of her lover, Vader couldn't help but be reminded of a time when his wife had looked just like that. When she had looked at him the way the Princess of Alderaan now looked at her Corellian pirate.

He reached out to touch her mind with the Force. Asleep and unguarded, her mind was far more likely to let him in but, as he fully expected, the barriers were still there. Barriers designed almost specifically against *him*. Barriers that could have only been put there by his *wife*. Angrily, Vader probed harder and, to his surprise, the princess jerked into wakefulness. She had *felt* him. Impressed and alarmed all at once, Vader withdrew. Whether or not she could put a label on what she had felt, the last thing he wanted to do was alert her to his presence.

His intrusion had disturbed her deeply, it seemed. Reduced her to tears in fact. Fascinated, Vader increased the zoom on the spy droid so he could see her face clearly. The girl was definitely weeping. For a moment she sought solace in the arms of her lover, but he slept on oblivious. Then she left the bed.

Vader switched screens, following her into the refresher. Why had his wife constructed a barrier in her daughter's mind specifically against *him*? It was a puzzle that intrigued him.

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Leia jerked awake and frowned at the dark, storm-laden sky outside the large bedroom window, wondering what had woken her. It was still raining heavily and the storm was still rumbling in the distance. She took a deep breath and looked across at Han, and felt something she could only describe as depression settle over her. He was snoring softly beside her and Leia shifted herself closer to him, snuggled into his chest as his arms automatically embraced her, and wondered how she would bear not waking up in his arms after he had left to deal with Jabba.

Deep desolation swept through her and she sobbed involuntarily. Rolling away from him, Leia struggled to still her tears and wondered what the hell was wrong



with her. Then it slammed into her, full force. The feeling she had dubbed 'the Death of Alderaan'. Like being swallowed up by a thick, cloying blackness. A feeling she hadn't felt with this intensity for months, maybe even years. Unable to contain her distress, Leia fled to the 'fresher.

Her sobs echoed loudly in the still room and she hurriedly shut the door, then wept like her heart was breaking. What the hell was wrong with her? Leia sat on the edge of the dimly glowing spa bath, hugging herself, rocking, and desperately trying to cry quietly.

What was *wrong* with her??

Leia just couldn't fathom where the feeling of desolation had come from. And why so suddenly? She and Han had just spent nearly four *weeks* making love; the evening just gone had been particularly good, so *why* was she feeling like this???

*Because he's leaving you*, a part of her said. *Leaving and may never come back. He said so himself.* The thought of living a day without him, let alone forever, paralysed her. And that dependency frightened her terribly.

The need to relieve herself broke through her misery long enough for her sit on the commode. That accomplished she remained where she was, aware only of her all-encompassing despair.

Leia had no idea how long she'd been sitting there weeping, didn't hear Solo call her from the other room, but looked up guiltily when he opened the door and hastily wiped her face with her hands.

"Leia?" Solo turned on the light, momentarily blinding them both, reset it for a more comfortable level and approached her, full of shocked concern. "Leia, what's wrong?"

She tried to smile, failed dismally, and sobbed, "I don't know!"

"Are you hurt?" She shook her head as she stood up and he gripped her shoulders. "Then why-?"

"I don't *know* why!" she sobbed. "I just woke up feeling..." *like my universe is falling apart* "...like this."

Solo pulled her into his arms and she clung to him. "Is it something *I've* done?" he asked with trepidation. *Or haven't done*, he thought. He felt her head shake against his chest but she remained silent which Han took as meaning that he was not guilt-free. He gently moved her to arms length and explained, "Hang on; I gotta pee."

He sighed as he watched his stream flow into the commode, his mind a turmoil of disconnected images, then frowned as he realised there was blood in the toilet.

“Leia, you’re bleeding.”

Leia looked at him then moved closer and looked in the toilet.

“Is that normal?” he asked tensely.

“Menses,” she murmured thickly and moved away. “It *is* due, I guess...” *One more thing to deal with!*

Solo looked at her reflection in the large mirror over the basins as he washed his hands and asked, “Could that have anything to do with this? Hormones, I mean?” He turned and smiled gently at her. “You were pretty scary last time.” He immediately regretted his words and almost cringed as the hurt in her eyes seemed to grow exponentially. “I’m sorry,” he said, reaching for her. “I didn’t mean that.”

“No, you’re right... Shooting Chewie has got to be one of the stupidest things I’ve ever done.”

“It was an honest mistake,” he assured her, drawing her towards him again.

Leia chuckled, despite her misery, and Han chuckled with her. Once again this amazing man had sought her out in her most desperate hour... and made her laugh. *I love you, nerfherder!*

“Come on, sweetheart,” he said, leading her back to the bedroom. “Come back to bed.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Solo woke with the dawn and looked at the girl beside him. She was on her side facing him and all he could see of her was her face and her hair, the rest of her snuggled deep in the bedclothes. Dawn light had painted the room pink and apricot, and Leia looked like a fine ceramic doll. The white of the bedclothes and darkness of her hair accentuated the paleness of her skin and the warm red of her slightly parted lips.

For a long time he lay, simply gazing at her, wallowing in her presence. Then, as he reached out and gingerly touched her face with his fingertips, Han Solo felt his

heart lodge in his throat. Never in his life had he felt such an outpouring of love for anyone; had not thought himself capable of it. He wanted to give this woman everything, to hold her and keep her safe forever. While Leia had claimed not to understand her tears of the night before, Solo felt sure they were because he was leaving. And all his sane and sensible reasoning for leaving her while he went to pay off the Hutt seemed to have evaporated with the sunrise. He loved her more than life itself and knew he could never leave her. How he would deal with Jabba, he wasn't sure, but he couldn't leave Leia. Not now. Not when they had just found each other. Presenting himself to the Hutt as a sacrificial offering suddenly seemed like the most ludicrous waste of his life imaginable, and Solo had found a very real reason to live.

Luke's words on the Death Star came back to him suddenly. The kid had assured him at the time that rescuing the princess would earn him more wealth than even a money hungry Corellian could imagine. And the knowledge that Leia loved him made him feel like the richest man in the galaxy. For a moment Solo wondered if the kid could have known, then smiled mentally to himself. Maybe it was a Jedi thing.

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek, enjoying its soft warmth against his lips, then he carefully slid out of the bed. The storm seemed to have blown itself out in the early hours of the morning leaving the sky clear and full of promise.

He left the room quietly and went to use the 'fresher on the other side of the lounge so he wouldn't wake her. Then he checked in with Chewie to see how the repairs were coming along.

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When Leia woke, the room was full of early morning sunlight. She looked for Han and found him lying beside her, studying her intently. She smiled sleepily and got a brilliant smile in return.

"Mornin', beautiful," he said.

He had thrown the covers off himself and was lying on his side, facing her, completely naked and gloriously visible in the bright sunlight. Leia took a moment to drink him in; like a treasured landscape or vista. Every curve, every muscle delineated.

He must have opened a section of the window because fresh, warm air was stirring through the room. Leia filled her lungs and pushed the bedcovers from her own body, stretching and luxuriating in the amount of space she had to play in and the feel of the air caressing her skin.

"It's stopped raining," she observed, then looked back at Han and found his eyes greedily traversing her body.

She smiled encouragingly and Solo propped his head up on one forearm, the look in his eyes swiftly becoming predatory. She matched his intensity, focussing deeply on the powder green depths of his eyes, then tried to stifle her smirk as he straddled her body with his arms.

"Do you have any idea what you *do* to me?" he growled.

Leia grinned and reached down, caressing his erection. "Some," she said.

Solo took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes, revelling in the exquisite touch, then opened them again as she directed him between her legs, following her lead as she guided him into her.

"Ahhh, Leia," he moaned, and abandoned himself to sensation.

"Han," she agreed breathlessly.

She seemed to want it as fast and hard as he did, and within minutes they had both climaxed and were gasping in the afterglow, Solo still above her and within her.

He lifted his head and focussed on her face, touched his nose to hers and whispered, "I love you."

Leia smiled softly, hugging him tighter, and whispered back, "I love you too."

Solo felt himself slide out of her and rolled to one side, keeping her in his embrace, her head pillowed on his shoulder.

"There's no blood," he observed quietly.

Leia shrugged. "Sometimes it takes a couple of days to start properly."

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked, still concerned about her tears during the previous night.

"I never want to get out of bed again," she replied sleepily. "In fact, I think I might stay here for the rest of my life."

“Mmm,” Solo agreed, wishing they could do just that. “Sounds good.”

“Except for the ‘fresher,” Leia said, suddenly sitting up and smiling apologetically. She leaned over and kissed him, promising, “Back in a second.” Then stood up and paused, grimacing.

“What is it?” Solo asked, frowning.

“I don’t know how *anyone* gets pregnant when it just runs down your legs,” she quipped and headed for the ‘fresher.

Solo chuckled after her, “What did you think happened?”

“I don’t know,” she said pausing at the door and looking back at him. “I guess I thought it stayed *in* there.”

*Well that **would** make sense,* Solo supposed. *I guess some of it must... Enough to-*

Leia shrieked as she opened the door, flinching from the brilliant sunshine filling the ‘fresher. Using the control by the door, she hurriedly increased the opacity of the large overhead skylight until the light diffused to a more tolerable level then looked sheepishly back at Han. He grinned.

“Have you spoken to Chewie?” she called from the ‘fresher.

“Yeah,” he replied.

“And?”

“He wants me at the *Falcon*,” he muttered to himself, knowing Leia wouldn’t be able to hear him.

He heard the toilet cycle and listened as she washed her hands.

“And?” she repeated as she hurried back to the warmth of the bed and his embrace.

“He needs me.”

“Did you ask him about Threepio?”

Solo winced. “Ah, I forgot. Sorry. I’m sure he’s there, but I promise I’ll check.”

Leia frowned but nodded. Solo held her a little tighter and came to the conclusion that they were both feeling reluctant about facing the day. Both sensing the end of their time together...

"You feel it too," Leia murmured.

He wanted to tell her he'd changed his mind. That he couldn't leave her. But he couldn't. Not yet. So he simply nodded against the top of her head and held her close.

\*\*\*\*\*

By the time he got back from his inspection of the *Falcon* to join her for breakfast, Leia was up and dressed. She was wearing the other red dress that Lando had sent, with a white lace cloak that fell all the way to the floor, and her hair was up in a flattering arrangement of plaits. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she looked, but she was pacing in front of the panoramic window as he entered the apartment, tension and irritation rampant in her body language.

"The ship is almost finished," he told her happily. "Two or three more things and we're in great shape."

"The sooner the better," Leia said, turning her unfocussed ire on him. "Something's wrong here. No one has seen or knows anything about Threepio, and he's been gone too long to have gotten lost!"

Solo rolled his eyes at her sudden attack. When he had got to the *Falcon* an hour ago and reported back to her that the droid wasn't there, he knew Leia would not take it well. Leia had obviously spent the last hour harassing the port master and local stewards about the missing protocol droid, and Solo felt a moment of pity for them. Nevertheless, he did not want to aggravate her and sought a more soothing approach.

"Relax," he said, holding her shoulders, then kissed her fondly on the forehead. "I'll talk to Lando and see what I can find out."

Leia pulled away from him, only slightly mollified by his affectionate gesture. "I don't *trust* Lando," she said, then tried to rein in her irritation by sitting on the couch nearby.

"Well, I don't trust him either," Solo said, sitting beside her. "But he *is* my friend. Besides, we'll soon be gone."

Leia's eyes were darkly serious as she said, "And then you're as good as gone, aren't you?"

*And so we come to the crux of the matter*, Solo thought, meeting her gaze but unable to think of anything he could say that would lessen her pain. Even if he told her he was seriously reconsidering his decision to leave immediately, her current mood would simply have set her arguing with him about it.

The main door opened suddenly and they both looked up to see Chewbacca walk in carrying a box full of droid parts. *Golden* droid parts.

Leia recognised her droid and got to her feet, dismayed. "What happened?"

Chewie set the box down on the table. [I don't know what the hell he did this time,] he growled irritably, [but, it looks like the stupid droid got himself blasted! I found him in the droid reclamation junk pile!]

"Where?" Solo said, then clarified for Leia in case she hadn't managed to translate, "Found him in a junk pile?"

Leia touched a piece of the droid and lamented, "What a mess!" She looked at the Wookiee and asked, "Chewie, do you think you can repair him?"

Chewbacca studied the mess of droid parts and looked anything but keen about the project. He gave the princess a non-committal shrug.

"Lando's got people who can fix him," Solo offered, hoping to get his friend off the hook.

Leia almost sneered as she said, "No thanks."

Solo sighed and wished she would let this irrational distrust of Lando go. A little was fine, sensible even. But Leia was taking it to a ridiculous level.

His train of thought was broken as the door chime sounded and Lando himself walked in.

Calrissian must have picked up the tension between them because he stopped just inside the door and apologised, "I'm sorry, am I interrupting something?"

Leia self-consciously straightened the cloak dress she was wearing and said unconvincingly, "Not really."

If he picked up her tone, Lando chose to ignore it because he turned his attention fully on her and gushed admiringly, "You look absolutely beautiful!"

Solo rolled his eyes and put a hand over his mouth to stop himself from groaning out loud when Lando added, "You truly belong here with us among the clouds."

"Thankyou," Leia said coolly.

"Would you care to join me for a little refreshment?" Lando asked her and proffered his arm. Solo felt his hackles rise and got to his feet. Calrissian *knew* he was in a relationship with Leia; was he deliberately trying to piss him off?

Leia glanced warily at Solo as she took Calrissian's arm, but Chewie barked enthusiastically at the mention of food.

"Everyone's invited, of course," Lando assured them and Chewie hastily put down the bits of Threepio he was holding and got to his feet. Lando frowned at the remains of the droid and asked, "Having trouble with your droid?"

"No," Solo said, sharing an awkward glance with Leia. "No problem." He held his arm out for her and she took it gratefully. Solo looked innocently at Lando and asked, "Why?"

They walked out, arm-in-arm and Chewie followed them.

Calrissian spared another puzzled glance for the box of droid parts then followed them out, the door closing behind him.

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