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Pursuit of the Heart Part Two

by [Mikell Johnson](#)

The high-domed ceiling glistened brightly, casting distorted images down at Commander Han Solo, who suddenly longed to be anywhere but standing in a palatial resort, witnessing the cruelty of the Imperial Navy he unquestioningly served. Han realized that the Emperor had suspected that the peace-loving Senator and King of Alderaan, Bail Organa was an instigator of Rebellion against him for some time. After months of work by Imperial spies, the subterfuge had finally paid off.

"Our orders, your Highness, " the officer exploded angrily, "are to secure you and your family for questioning about a Rebel base, irregardless of your claim of neutrality."

"You may take me, but you shall leave my family alone." The salt-and- pepper-gray hair gleamed in the artificial light as Bail tossed his head back proudly. His stance defied the General wordlessly, an imperious contrast to the uncouth officer before him.

General Heinrich Toff-- late forties, shorter than most of Han's squad, with an accusing paunch beginning around his middle, confirmed what Imperial officers should not be. Orders to immediately secure Organa and his family had come through the communication station of the orbiting star destroyer hours earlier, although sleeping late seemed to have been a much better use of Toff's time, apparently. Han fumed silently, thinking of the blatant disregard for orders his superior practiced. Nevertheless, Han had never called him on this. Toff watched Han like a hawk most of the time, waiting for one little slip-up. Commander Solo never made a mistake that he could not easily cover up or rectify while he

redirected attention elsewhere. Without his quick mind and ability to take command, the squad would have fallen apart long ago. Though he despised Toff, he cared more about the spotless reputation of those under his command. Until the next dry-dock where he could request transfer upon his review and rumored promotion, he must follow Toff's orders without question.

Han disagreed with his current superior officer's methodology, however. Toff seemed to take a peculiar delight in torturing those who defied the Empire. The glee in his face was terrible to behold combined with the choking sobs, terror filled screams, and pain-filled gasps of his victims. Even worse, females were sometimes given a special brand of attention. Although Han never participated-- clan codes were stronger than even Imperial brainwashing-- he felt just as guilty of the heinous crimes.

"This is getting you nowhere, Organa!" Toff shouted and Han winced as the General's open palm connected loudly with the aging monarch's face.

" You're mad! I have nothing at all to do with a Rebellion!" Bail Organa spat the word distastefully before continuing. "Alderaan has always been peaceful. We have no weapons." Despite his pain, green eyes flashed with royal fury as he met the general's hard gaze.

Toff pulled his hand back and swung forward in a powerful blow that drove Organa to his knees, momentarily dazed. Recovering quickly, the monarch's eyes narrowed as he tossed his head back with imperious disdain and he met the hard gaze of General Toff.

"Your claims, once again, are duly noted Your Highness; however, I don't think the Emperor really cares about your planet's supposed neutrality." Toff fired back. "He has suspected that you were conducting Rebel activities in the palace for months. His spies reported your activities days ago. We received orders to secure you and your family on this resort moon immediately."

Han clenched his fists. A bad taste lingered in the back of his throat as he silently watched the older ruler's face lose some color, but never his composure.

Toff grinned down evilly at the beaten man before turning to a nearby squad. "Bring the remaining members of the royal family to me." He placed his hands on his ample hips. " Let's see your Highness, if memory serves me correctly your wife is dead." He brought a gloved hand to his double chins. "Though I seem to recall three sisters and -- oh yes, you have one quite beautiful, young daughter just out of the Academy and back from Coruscant, correct?" Organa remained silent. "Perhaps she knows the location."

Bail's face became a sickly shade of white. "Don't touch my daughter! Leave my family out of this you sick animal. Your quarrel is with me, not them!"

Toff raised a bushy brow insolently. "Bring his daughter directly to me. Perhaps his Highness would respond to a less direct method of persuasion. One involving a third party, an innocent third party."

Han's stomach churned violently, knowing that the inquisition of Bail's family members would be carried out one-by-one until he admitted to his covert Rebel activities. Most likely, Toff would take his family members as leverage to keep him under control, if they survived. Unfortunately, Han Solo had witnessed this same scenario more times than he cared to remember. He refused to condone strong-arm terrorism tactics. In this respect, the Empire was no better than a school yard bully. Han Solo, brutalized by bullies all of his younger days, had learned to defend himself against much bigger and stronger men, not those weaker. A pity that the Empire had never learned that lesson.

After witnessing executions, each haunted expression plagued Han, mocking him for what he stood for, accusing him with soulful, deadened expressions every time he closed his eyes. Fortunately, Toff had been ordered to bring the Organa family in alive.

Bail Organa had too much political influence for a quick neat execution. Nothing would succeed more in drawing other worlds to rebel against the Emperor than murdering the royal family of Alderaan. It would be political suicide. Toff was an idiot, but he was no fool.

A commotion to his left and outraged female voices drew his attention soon after. A portly trio of women stumbled into the throne room. A woman around forty standard years-- at one time a beauty-- stood angrily defiant. Her blonde hair was pulled back tightly in a severe knot, her blue eyes fiery and daring the trooper to touch her again. A second woman, dark hair graying, stood stark-eyed, her face pale and breathing labored, a glazed expression on her passable face. The third woman, pitifully plain with bright red hair, moaned pitifully about her salts. Han rolled his eyes at their histrionics.

Moments later, a smell of sweet musky perfume with a hint of roses wafted into his nostrils-- somehow familiar. A screech of outrage reached his ears. Standing at attention with his hat lowered, Han could not see clearly. He heard the distinctive sound of flesh meeting flesh, and winced sympathetically.

"Is this what you want, Organa?" The general demanded and pulled his hand back after striking the girl hard enough to make her teeth rattle. "Such a pretty girl and so young."

"Keep your hands off of her! " The anguished voice of the ruler growled.

"Then give us the names of the others. Tell us where the base is--"

"I don't know what you are talking about! Alderaan is neutral--" Bail whispered painfully, torn between his duty and his daughter's safety.

"I grow tired of these games Organa. Where is the rebel base?" His cruel questioning met with total silence. "No answer? Beta Squad, I want you to introduce yourself to the Princess of Alderaan."

Han 's fists clenched angrily, his face reddening as he held his breath in horrific anticipation.. Those men, more unscrupulous than Toff, would have no problem raping the girl before the eyes of her family. She sounded very young as she cried out. Han remained motionless, torn between doing nothing and making a move.

Suddenly, there was a rush of movement and the distinctive crunch of metal meeting bone.

"Father!" the girl screamed, her composure crumbling as a cruel blaster butt felled Bail to the marble floor after he had attacked the soldier holding his daughter. The man towering over him grinned expectantly down at the bloodied man, blaster poised for another blow.

Toff's maniacal face loomed hazily before the battered ruler. "Time to decide which is more important your Highness-- your precious rebellion or-- your only daughter."

From the pain of multicolored lacerations, bruises, and swollen eyes Bail sought out his daughter "Leia---Run! Get to the other-" He slumped unconsciously to the hard marble floor at the ominous crack of a rifle butt. A pool of red slowly stained the unmarred, white marble floor as the howling cries of the women drowned out all noise, drawing the attention of the participants for one critical moment.

The hours of training with Giles Durane returned to Leia in a rush. The movements of her arm blurred as bone met bone and a soldier flew up and back with a surprised squawk. His hands fumbled for his dislodged weapon as a set of short manicured nails dug into the sensitive bulb of his eye. With a screech of pain, the weapon flew from his grasp and landed with a thud at the feet of the princess. To his astonishment, her small arm locked firmly around his bicep, another pressed up into his underarm and his feet left the ground. His body went flying, head over heels, until the floor rushed up at him with dizzying speed. With a sickening snap, his neck broke like a brittle twig.

Gasping and trembling, her heart in her throat as she scooped up the weapon mid-flight, Leia half stumbled, half raced to the winding stairwell. She forced her legs to obey her brain's command --place one foot in front of the other, and climb.

All hell broke loose.

Han's keen eyes pinpointed the girl, already narrowing in on her flight like a homing beacon, predicting her next move, before the General had even registered the events transpiring around him

The General's eyes widened, his face red, sputtering. "Solo! Take your squad and bring me that girl!"

"Yes sir!" Han snapped a quick salute, racing after the runaway princess before she'd made it halfway up the staircase winding high above them.

Han's hat flew from his head, floating to the marble floor slowly behind him. The princess whirled unsteadily, her huge brown eyes widening in astonishment before lifting the gun and firing aimlessly. The unexpected jerk of the Imperial weapon nearly toppled her over the side of the rail. The shot glanced off a metal balustrade, veered upward striking the high vaulted ceiling, and rebounded off a metal wall, missing any target she had hoped to strike.

Han locked gazes with her and his jaw dropped in disbelief as he recognized her as the woman from the club on Alderaan, days earlier. "Halt! Or we will shoot!" He ducked as another blaster bolt raced across his vision to strike the wooden stairs above him, nearly singeing his hair. The smell of burnt ozone made his eyes water.

The princess' frantic eyes caught sight of a picture window across the room and rose slightly higher.

The chandelier--

Han realized belatedly that the princess had nothing to lose.

Glancing behind her, she slung the blaster across her shoulder. Taking a deep breath, she backed up and charged full speed ahead, jumping atop the metal grating. Then, she leaped.

Dumbfounded, Han made a desperate grab for her before a nearby soldier saved him from toppling headfirst onto the marble floor meters below. "Don't shoot!" Han bellowed as he stumbled backward knocking the discharging blaster from Lieutenant Siva's grip. "We-we want to take her alive if at all possible!" He stared incredulously at her flight through the air, holding his breath as she floated in midair for an eternity.

There's no possible way for her to make it! Han thought, but his mouth fell open in amazement, as the chain seemed to move toward her with a will of its own.

For a moment she fell. Leia wordlessly willed the chain closer to her and then felt the heavy links cutting into her soft skin as she caught it with a grunt of effort and a stab of pain as her arms wrenched agonizingly.

She bowed her head reverently and then lifted it to grin over her shoulder at the now distant squad. She leapt easily from the chain onto the ledge just in time for Han to see her head disappear below the window.

With a rush, Han exhaled the breath he had not realized he was holding.

Not possible! She made it.

"Stang! Crazy girl jumped!" He gasped, the dubiousness still plastered on his face as he turned to Siva. "Take the men ahead to the gates. If she gets a head start we can at least go the right direction. I'm going after her!"

If that crazy girl could do it then so could a Corellian! He took a blind leap for the chain to follow her but the chain hung just out of his reach.

Beneath his dangling feet where it had once hung majestically, the ruined chandelier made an ominous crashing sound as it shattered into a million pieces on the marble floor below. The individuals beneath him scattered in slow motion, their cries muted and distorted to his magnified hearing. His flesh throbbed, bloody and torn from where he had barely snagged the chain and halted his descent with his bare hands, twisting midair and impossibly diving at the last millisecond. He hung by his arms in mild shock.

Once safely across, he stood with his head bent over his knees, gasping as he caught his breath unsteadily in the narrow window ledge. From the corner of his eye he saw the princess land none too gracefully on the hay below and roll to her feet. "Kest!" He spat invectives that would have made his drunken father blush, his arms raised in supplication to whatever humor-loving beings controlled his destiny. His anger grew slowly into a half-smile of disbelief, then changed into an approving grin. The girl had spunk. He looked forward to this pursuit.

Leia whistled, and a flash of tan moved toward her. The steed came immediately at his mistress' call. Just as she started to leap onto the stallion's strong back, she spotted movement from the corner of her eye. Before she could turn, a blurred shape loomed larger and larger. The Commander rushed at her headfirst from the hay he had just tumbled onto and sideswiped her. His arms locked vice-like around her tiny waist his shoulder digging into her hip while his face wedged between her breasts. Leia's ribs protested when his full weight struck her, taking her breath away as they both fell to the hard ground with a resounding crash.

It took her a moment to catch her breath painfully as he raised his head from her chest. Beneath two hundred pounds of muscled Corellian, her wide eyes glared up into his familiar hazel eyes. She angrily twisted first one way and then turned sharply in the opposite direction, feet solidly planted on the grass beneath her. "Let me go!" She demanded imperiously.

Han trapped her arms above her head, the insides of his thighs mockingly caressed her hips as she twisted and turned. "You never- told me your- name, sweetheart!" he spat out with great effort as he tried to contain her wriggling form.

"Leia!" She screeched.

Han's hips shifted minutely and one of Leia's knees broke free moving quickly upward. Although it took him a moment to realize the impact site, his eyes widened in horrified expectancy.

Oh kest!

His tender unprotected groin made a distinctive squishing sound upon impact, seconds before the pain registered in his brain.

"Princess to you!" She crowed as she leapt to her feet.

Doubled over with a falsetto scream, Han could only throw one arm up feebly as she clasped her fists and brought them down ferociously toward his skull.

C-R-A-C-K!!!

Stars appeared as a throbbing headache added to the insults against him while he stumbled drunkenly backwards.

"Owwww!" Unseeing, he lunged at her with another high-pitched scream. "You little..." He never completed the curse as a small booted foot rushed toward his face in a blurry haze and solidly struck his temple. Staggering, Han went down in a stupefied fog of pain.

"Hyah Starfire!" Leia cried and hauled herself easily onto the chestnut stallion.

Han clambered dizzily to his feet, sensing the near brush of hooves as he instinctively flattened himself to the ground with a curse of outrage, gasping again in pain.

Lieutenant Siva and the rest of the squad hurried up minutes later. Siva stood before him. "Sir?"

"What?" Snapped Han. He groaned , again climbing unsteadily to his feet grasping his aching head between his hands with a string of mumbled curses.

Siva actually blushed.

"General Toff has called for pursuit, sir. The girl is of less concern since we have the King, but she may have contacts. He set up a security check at all ports, so she will not make it off this moon undetected. We are to wait here for him before beginning the search, sir." Siva informed him with a slight smirk, as he handed Han back his cap.

Han frowned as he slapped it back onto his head. He had never let any woman get the better of him and he didn't intend to start now. "No, we've underestimated her too many times. Tell him you didn't reach me in time. You can follow when he arrives. She might get further than we think. Besides, this chase is personal!" Han knew that his squad would never report this slight disobedience of orders to Toff. Their loyalties lay with the man before them-- their only hope out of this assignment.

Solo's maniacal smile gave Dylan cause to step back slightly. The always-cool face before him transformed into that of a man set on revenge. "Umm-- yes sir! Understood sir."

Han spied a second steed grazing in a nearby field. The bay mare appeared restless as Han cleared the low fence in a bound and hauled himself onto the skittish animal by its mane. He tossed back his head and gave a Corellian war cry. Digging his booted heels into the mare's flanks, they sailed over the low fence, hot in pursuit.

The heaving flanks of the animal beneath her did not concern Leia as she drove it relentlessly onward. How far away is enough? Her breath came in labored gasps, head aching, face and eyes stinging as tree branches slapped against the delicate skin of her face, ripping with a vengeance. Blood dripped from the wounds, falling into her eyes, mingling with the sweat that had already burned its way from her forehead. Bent over her mount, her back protested, but she pressed on. The dark gray shirt clung to the skin of her drenched back. She could smell her fear-- sharp, acrid stinging her nostrils as much as the sweat burned her eyes.

He was near. She could almost feel his breath on her neck. He would smell her fear, taste her blood, and hear her heartbeat.

She tossed a frantic glance over her shoulder. Trees whizzed by at lightspeed, nauseating her.

Just a little further.

Leia staggered from the back of her trembling mount with a groan of protesting muscles and joints. She was a caricature of a doddering old woman-- stooped, weak, tired. Hearing her aunt's admonition to stand straighter and not slouch, she stood fully and cried out as a stab of pain shot down her spine nearly immobilizing her. "I've got to rest girl." She admitted to her steed. Hobbling over to a protruding stump, she plopped down heavily. With a sigh, she spoke aloud to her horse for lack of a better companion. "I sure hope father's okay-- they hit him pretty hard you know-- blasted Imps!"

She sniffed angrily. Bail Organa's daughter did not cry. She was a princess, and royalty was above such petty things as emotional outbursts. Taking an angry swipe at her eyes, she chuckled aloud. The stallion's ears perked up at this foreign sound. "I hope Commander Solo's in pain. He deserved it! Stupid Son of a Sithspawn!"

She halted her tirade to peruse her surroundings. Her untrained eyes swept the area helplessly. Where was she going to go from here?

The royal resort peaceful and civilized, resided on the outskirts of the Unknown Plains, a region of brutal wildlife and hostile, savage tribes that time had forgotten. The trees whispered in hushed tones, spinning tales of never-returning adventurers, the same tales told years before to keep young princesses from wandering off.

Childhood fears crept uninvited into her psyche as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth, eyes darting from side to side, pulse racing uncontrollably. She'd never been this far from the resort before. A shrill howl assaulted her ears. Shuddering, her heart skipped a beat, her dry mouth unable to find moisture as the sound grew louder and moved closer. She pressed her slight body deeper into the stump.

This region was infamous for horrific creatures out of her worst nightmares. Another bloodcurdling cry set her steed to pawing the desiccated ground nervously as Leia rubbed the heaving flank in a feeble attempt to calm the skittish animal that had sought her comforting touch. "Easy Starfire-- this blaster is fully charged-- Nothing is getting by me!" She only hoped that by assuring the animal, she could reassure herself.

Commander Han Solo had always been an expert tracker, thanks to his uncanny sense of direction. If legend held true, a Corellian could not get lost and could track a spice flea in a Kessel mine with their eyes shut. Han's natural ability for

tracking had allowed him to climb quickly to an officer's commission right out of the training academy.

Han leapt from his mount, landing lightly on the balls of his feet to examine a fresh track in the grassy expanse. Crouching on booted heels, he held his palm to the ground. He breathed in and out slowly, completely in tune with nature. His quarry had come this way and left in an opposite direction. Her animal was moving at least a good ten meters per hour faster than his due to the lighter load it carried.

Han thought of the petite princess with a slight grin. Bringing a hand to his chin, he pictured the young princess, dark hair flying behind her, eyes flashing like the twin fires of Otoona. After he had pinned her on the ground beneath him, her face had revealed childlike vulnerability just before she had brought her knee up, effectively lessening his chances of someday being a father. He winced as he brought one hand down to adjust the fabric again.

Stang, no woman had ever done that!

To be honest, no woman had ever considered that. They usually succumbed to his devastating Corellian charm. His face might often throb from angry slaps.

This girl was no different from any other, right?

He considered the princess for a moment. No-- this girl definitely stood apart from the other girls he had known. The scene of his cadet's death earlier came to mind. Escaping against insurmountable odds and defying death, she had gained freedom. In a different time or place, it could be an enjoyable pursuit of a different kind.

Scowling at his straying thoughts, he set his weapon to stun. He was an Imperial Commander-- she was a fugitive from the Empire-- Justice must be served.

No exceptions!

Standing up slowly, he surveyed the area with a practiced eye. Broken tree limbs and disturbed shrubbery indicated his prey's intentions. Either the girl was trained well enough to survive the dangers beyond or she was just plain desperate. Climbing back on his steed, Han swiped his gray cap across a sweat-stained brow and returned it in disgust. Pulling out the comlink on his belt, he pressed the send button. "Command squad, this is Solo-- Come in, over."

"Commander, this is General Toff, over." The comlink snarled.

Han winced. "Yes sir! Awaiting further instructions sir. I'm in pursuit of the Princess and should be overtaking her momentarily. Do you copy?"

For a long moment, the only reply was static.

"Commander Solo, you disobeyed a direct order from your superior!" General Toff roared from the static. "I commanded you to not give chase until my arrival."

"Excuse me, sir?" Han played innocent.

Another silent pause.

"Lieutenant Siva claims you had begun pursuit before my orders reached you. Is this accurate?"

There was a longer ominous pause as Han swallowed nervously. Toff was a first class idiot, true, but he was a superior idiot. Even slight disobedience of a superior, idiot or not, did not bode well for an Imperial soldier.

He lied smoothly. "Correct sir. "

"Standard Imperial procedure is to wait for backup, explain yourself Solo."

Han thought about why he had taken off after her. Revenge? Embarrassment at being bested by a mere girl? He bit back a description of what she had done.

"She umm-- put up a struggle and was armed and dangerous. She's obviously survival trained. If she escapes, she may have Rebel accomplices ready to act. I thought it best to begin immediate pursuit of fugitive rather than risk her escape. If she reaches Alderaan with news of the capture of her family, there could be an uprising." Both men knew that uprisings were frowned upon. "I thought it best to have one man in direct pursuit quickly."

Han could hear the rusty gears turning in his superior's mind--slow on the uptake from years of underuse.

"Ahh-- yes-- I see your point Solo--"

Han could just imagine the face of the General.

"Keep in direct contact. Lieutenant Siva is bringing a small squad up behind you. Excellent work, Solo. Carry on!" Insincere praise flew from Toff's lips as a thousand curses filled the recesses of Han's mind.

"Thank you sir. Solo out." He reattached his communicator. "Nisave!" He insulted in his native tongue.

His commanding officer was an obese moron. The man only reached Han's chin, but outweighed Han by a good thirty pounds. His muddy brown hair was a bit too long for an officer. Another fine example of what power could do to an individual

who had lost sight of the objective. "If I were General, this would not have been necessary." Han spat angrily, knowing he would soon have his commander's position if he could avoid any more incidents such as the one he was now trying to rectify. For the most part he had an exemplary military service record, for which he'd always assumed that Toff had hated him. "Don't get too comfortable Toffy, I'll have your job soon enough." He grumbled to the trees.

This was the true nature of service to the Empire-- the cutthroat competition for rank and power. If necessary, Han Solo would stab his most admired superior in the back to advance to a higher station in the ranks, so he would have no hesitation when it came to his dear General. A literal backstabbing would be the highlight of an already bad day. Han pictured himself as Admiral someday, possibly on Lord Vader's flagship.

He sobered for a moment. Admirals under Vader had to be replaced as often as alluvial dampers in a hyperdrive. They usually lived about as long as a Mon Calamarian out of water.

Han shoved a tree branch aside, taking a deep cleansing breath of sweet pine-scented air. His fingertips tingled with electric current. Squaring his shoulders, he led the tired horse into the dark tangle of forests, gently stroking the animal's silk-like mane. "You know girl-- I've got a bad feeling about this." The branches snapped back in place behind them with an ominous crack and the black abyss of the forest soon swallowed them.

The eerie sounds of the forest blared around the tiny princess who sat wide-eyed and silent on a decaying log. She cradled the heavy carbine rifle in her arms like a beloved stuffed piffin from her bed, fingers near the trigger at all times--safety off.

Funny, she had defied an entire squad of Imperial soldiers, fled recklessly into the wild Unknown Plains alone, and pursued relentlessly. She could sense the Commander behind her but had no idea of his distance...and she was afraid of a few little noises in the dark

An ear-shattering shriek brought her out of her reverie. Leia screamed and dropped her rifle, which misfired into the canopy of trees beyond her as she toppled backwards off the log. Her head and shoulders peeked carefully over the log, looking for the source of that inhuman cry. She opened her mouth to scream, just before her world became a red-colored haze.

Han Solo lay sprawled upon the cold hard ground. From his facedown position in the mulch, he cautiously raised his head and looked around a bit incredulously. He could smell the burnt ozone above him where his hat had just gained a telltale hole.

How had she even known he was there?

Han levered himself to a crouching position using one arm, the blaster firmly ensconced in the opposite hand. Closing one eye, he positioned his blaster at eye-level and took careful aim sighting the buttons of her shirt between the tiny hairlines as she climbed cautiously to her knees behind the log. His fingers clenched around the cold metal handle, index finger stroking the protruding trigger lovingly as if the body of a beautiful woman.

For one moment, he had the terrified young woman in his sights, and then with a blur of motion, she disappeared. Han heard her horrific screaming and leapt from his cover of shrubbery without thought.

This is not fair!

The princess screamed for all she was worth, howling like a banshee as she attempted to ward off her attacker...a meter and a half long, ruby-colored, hungry Bloodsniffer. Razor sharp nine-inch claws imbedded themselves in the delicate skin of her shoulders where a barbed tongue quickly attached to the oozing wound. The feline eyes closed in ecstasy as woman and beast continued their terrible dance of death while her blood soaked the dirt-covered ground.

"Stang!" Han cursed and fumbled desperately to set his blaster on full power, knowing her life depended upon his skill and speed with a blaster. Solo practically famous for his quickness and accuracy with a blaster, felt as slow and clumsy as a Gungan out of water as he called upon that skill. His motions seemed as unpracticed as a child's.

A familiar hum reached his ears. Impossibly, a vibroblade appeared in a delicate hand and slashed viciously down. The beast's tongue ripped away violently as it loosed an anguished howl of pain. Leia heaved the dying animal from her chest with a shattered cry as she stood unsteadily to her feet, blood dripping profusely down her shirtfront, vibroblade held defensively before her. The spasmodically twitching corpse beside her testified her will to live, to escape, and to kill if necessary.

"Come one step closer and you die! Drop the blaster, now!" she threatened and Han could see her eyes beginning to glaze over with shock from the blood loss. The pain and childlike terror beneath the threat tore at Han's heart for a moment. Her hair fell intermittently from the plait she wore, while her own blood and that of the now motionless Bloodsniffer beside her stained her pale face bright red.

Han fought the urge to wipe those smears of dirt, blood and tears from her and comfort her like a child. He tossed the blaster to the ground beside him. "You're hurt-- I can help!" he insisted as he approached her cautiously. He held one hand before him, showing her he was unarmed, his other reaching for the flap of his chest pocket, his eyes never leaving hers. "It's okay--trust me--"

The princess took a faltering step, inevitably moving further back.

"Wait...stop moving!" Han's cry reached her ears as she lost her precarious footing and toppled from the dirt edge with a scream. Frantically, Han dove forward and seized her wrist with his injured hand. He grunted in pain as the flesh tore even more. "Give me your other hand sweetheart-- I can't hold you!" Han called as he dug his booted toes into the soft dirt behind him to halt his uncontrolled slide. His face was a picture of desperation--mouth tightly drawn, face red from exertion, nostrils flaring wildly. Leia did not respond, but her already listless grip slackened. Startled Han looked down to see angry defiance on her half-conscious face.

Her fingers pulled away one-by-one. Evidently, she preferred death to his assistance . The last finger released his and she pushed from him with her remaining strength. Han's eyes widened and then narrowed to tiny pinpoints. Cursing loudly while clambering to his feet and snagging his dropped blaster, he heaved himself down the hill after her. "Kesssst!" Han howled as he tumbled head over heels down the cliff side.

The ground suddenly disappeared. Han lost his orientation as the world spiraled before him like some insane amusement park ride. He flailed his arms and legs crazily trying to gain purchase on anything. With a whoosh he struck solid rock at an impossible angle and continued to somersault the remaining fifty feet. His world went black as he bounced once and went crashing down, the ground rushing up to meet him.

Silence permeated the solid dirt walls until Han and Leia slowly regained their senses. Leia staggered to her feet fearfully at the sight of Han in his Imperial uniform and attempted to run, only to collapse from loss of blood after only a few feet. She scooted far away and was nursing her now severely damaged shoulder, trying to halt the flow of blood unsuccessfully. Her face grew paler with each passing moment.

"Owww! My head!" Han groaned as he rubbed yet another lump forming behind his ear and gazed apathetically the way they had fallen. On top of everything else, his body was beginning to resemble a battlefield. Standing slowly to his feet, he shook his head grumbling at the pain it caused. "Can't get up that way."

"Looks like you've managed to cut off our only escape with that rockslide, Commander!" A weak but venomous female voice informed him sarcastically.

Han turned slowly to see dark eyes filling with angry fire. He tilted his head in stunned disbelief, anger tinting his handsome features darkly. "Sorry Sweetheart- - I could have always left you down here to bleed to death and rot. Or maybe you'd have preferred that I tossed down a couple of those Bloodsniffers to keep you company," he retorted ripping open his pocket to pull free a small medikit. Mumbling a curse underneath his breath, he brought it over and squatted down on his haunches to inspect Leia's wound.

Leia scrambled backwards with a cry of anguish, her eyes fearful, distrusting. Han lunged forward and caught her by the ankle, before she could dart away. He fought to avoid her kicking feet..

"Whoa, sweetheart, if you fight me, you'll just lose more blood and pass out." Han said calmly, moving closer when she stopped trying to twist out of his grasp. He reached toward her.

Leia pushed him aside with a strength that belied her fragile appearance as he stared at her open mouthed-- an exasperated, comical expression on his dirt-smudged face. "Hold still woman, I'm only trying to help!" Han snarled.

"I don't need any of your help, Commander!" She hissed, spitting at him. Her spittle settled on his cheek until he wiped it away with a snort of distaste flicking it back onto her with a long finger.

"Too bad, Your Worship, but I don't intend to let even you bleed to death to get out of being put into Imperial custody. K'alla you Rebels will do anything to avoid interrogation won't you?"

"You will address me as Your Highness or Princess and curb that crude language around me!" she demanded imperiously, but her voice trembled weakly.

"Sorry Sweetheart, but I don't like you enough to do that," he informed her matter-of-factly. " 'Sides, I got the feeling that you can dish out the crude language when the proper situation presents itself."

Leia stared in outraged disgust as Han pulled out a couple of emergency flexclamps from the medikit. For a moment, she looked as if she would faint, but covered quickly with a sniff of disdain.

"If we don't stop the bleeding, Highnessness, you won't be around to present your case anyway. Now hold still and please don't scream. I've got sensitive ears." Han watched as the flexclamp attached and began tying off the severed

blood vessels exposed in her shoulder wound. He had to admire her control, for she merely moaned beneath her breath.

Flexclamping was no day in the park-- it hurt like hell!

In the battlefield, he'd seen grown men crying like babies from the pain.

However, this slip of a girl sat like stone and hardly flinched from what he knew was an agonizing procedure without anesthesia--it was uncomfortable enough when tranquilized to the gills. Reluctantly, he admitted she was not like most other women he had chanced to meet.

He chuckled, trying to keep her mind occupied during the worst of the procedure. "You know Sweetheart, you are pretty damned lucky to even be alive. Those bloodsuckers can drain an average-sized person of blood in less than two minutes.,should have only taken a few seconds in your case. Must be somebody upstairs likes you 'cause he only tore up your shoulder and missed your throat. Missed the main artery by only centimeters, too. " He whistled in appreciation. "Lucky you--"

At the beeping signal, Han removed the clamp and moved to wipe her now closing wound with a strong disinfectant before applying bacta-spray.

Leia clamped her lips shut and gritted her teeth, as the bacta-spray semi-sealed over her wounded shoulder. Tears slipped reluctantly down her cheeks but she did not cry out.

Han's heart melted. "Umm-- this isn't working -- We're gonna have to take off your shirt to get a good seal." He reached out without another thought.

"What?" Leia squeaked, indignantly.

"I said we'll have to remove your shirt to get a good seal. Otherwise I can't clean the rest of it thoroughly and infection will set in. I don't want to have risked this gorgeous body for nothing." Upon her cautious but annoyed look, he threw his hands up in mock defense. "I'm talking about mine. Cool your jets Sweetheart! I do know what I'm doing-- Look, I've treated wounds like this before in the field, trust me." He reached out and began unbuttoning her blood-soaked shirt.

It took Leia's brain a moment to register the proceedings. His strong tanned fingers brushed against the bare skin of her exposed throat, tantalizing and terrifying at once. Her breath caught painfully in her chest.

"Don't touch me!" She shrieked, grasping her shirt protectively as she shoved him backward from her, his booted feet flying straight up while his head smacked the ground yet again.

Han wiggled a finger around in his ear to halt the ringing vibration now accompanying the throbbing. He rolled aside and stood to his full height, and Leia was momentarily speechless. Against the backdrop of the black forest encroaching above and the beginnings of nightfall, he looked menacing and very handsome. She held her breath. "I- I'm not taking my shirt off and show m-m-my royal attributes to anybody, let alone you!"

Han, exasperated by this time, groaned. "Look Your Holiness, this has nothing to do with seeing your lacy undies again; it has to do with saving your miserable life-- So just shut up and let me do this!"

Leia's eyes widened impossibly and she struggled to move as he approached her again. Growling at her in frustration, Han snatched her good arm away from her shirt and forced it behind her back with one hand, using the other to free the tiny buttons on her shirt.

"I'm sorry-- I have to do this. There's no other way." He apologized even as he quickly divested her of her shirt.

Han's lips drew closely together as he made short work of her dark gray shirt.

She ought to be thanking him for giving her an excuse to take off the dark shirt. The Alderaanian heat was stifling.

At least she was a fashionable Rebel.

Han held his breath as he revealed her creamy skin encased in black lace instead of the utilitarian white cotton he'd expected. A new surprise every minute. Dismissing the sight from his mind, he tried unsuccessfully to focus only on her torn shoulder, but his eyes kept returning to that slip of black against flawless skin.

Tears threatened to fall from Leia's eyes as she wondered how much more humiliation she would suffer at the hands of her handsome captor. He had deftly removed her ruined blouse and now slid the strap of her lacy black bra even lower to move it away from the wound. Occasionally his warm fingers brushed against her exposed flesh as he concentrated on patching up her wound. Her emotions were as raw and exposed as her skin. She repressed a shudder each time their skin touched.

"There now, all finished--You'll be as good as new Sweetheart." He sounded overly proud of his accomplishment and presented her with a smug smirk. "What can I say--sometimes I amaze even myself."

Leia really wanted to slug him, but her strength had left her.

He made crude dressing with the remainder of her bloodied shirt to protect her injured arm so that she now sat in only her bra for covering, feeling more vulnerable as time passed slowly. A feeling she was unaccustomed to, as she refused to meet his eyes.

Han stood and looked down at her slumped defeated shoulders. "Here-- put this on and I'll get down to resuing you." He handed her the jacket he had removed when he'd begun to work on her injury.

"Thanks--" Leia muttered and grabbed the jacket. Gingerly placing her good arm in one side, she noticed the warmth radiating through the material. Han reached over and pulled it up around her injured shoulder, inwardly mourning the loss of the sight of her naked skin. The black material swallowed her whole, being at least four sizes larger than she was. Warily Leia took a deep whiff of the collar as the sleeve fell down.

"What now?" Han did not attempt to hide the exasperation in his voice.

Leia half-smiled. "It doesn't smell like what I expected--It smells nice--"

"Well what in the Seven Hells of Corel did you expect Your High and Mightiness?" His tone angry, his eyes hard Leia shrank back a moment before her hackles rose.

"I-I just thought it would smell like an Imperial--You know-- sweat, blood, alcohol-- like the current filth it covers, Commander Solo." She defended with an upward tilt of her chin, ineffective with her being half-naked.

"Oh no-- you're thinking about Trooper armor. It does stink." He deflected her insult smoothly with a teasing lopsided grin, causing her to catch her breath.

"I make it a point to bathe daily, twice if I can. What you smell is a man." He paused and leaned in toward Leia, mischievous eyes on her wide ones. "I am most assuredly a man, princess-- remember our dance." She gasped as he took hold of her chin and slid a hand to her knee, winking as he squeezed her knee. "But, I'm a gentleman first and foremost so don't worry your pretty little head off. Your virtue's safe with me." He gave her chin a gentle chuck and ignored her resentful visage as he pushed back from her.

Without another word, he took a running jump at the hill from where they had fallen. Using his sinewy arms, Leia watched disinterestedly as he lugged himself halfway up the slope before it angled impossibly. No rocks remained stable enough for footholds thanks to his earlier rock surfing. "Great!" He spat, dangling by one arm from a strong branch. It was another fifty feet to the top of the ledge. The one thing he did not want to do was call for his Troop's assistance, but-- He flipped out his comlink. Or rather flipped out was left of it. "Chu' ell, this just isn't

my day!" Han complained as the crushed parts fell from his hand. He lowered himself to the lesser slope then slid the rest of the way rather than waste his energy climbing back down.

Leia looked up expectantly at Han with a touch of regal disapproval as he surfed toward her on a tidal wave of dirt. He stopped and clambered to his feet, spitting on his hands with a grimace and rubbing them vigorously together before swiping them on his trousers as he moved to stand before the fuming princess.

"Well we won't be climbing out that way anytime soon and -- " He stopped as he heard a sound atop the slope. "Yesss! My squad-- knew they'd come through. Hey guys down..."

Han never finished his sentence as Leia tackled him bodily writhing atop him as she slid her small hand over his mouth. He halted his protest at the naked fear emanating from her brown eyes.

Within moments, Han heard the sound of the horses tearing through the foliage, just before a whoosh of arrows. The death cries of the animals echoed above..

"Stang, they got the horses!" Leia whispered harshly above him.

Her long hair had escaped its confinement and fell over her shoulder to brush across his face. "Princess..." Han tried to speak to the vision before him but had his mouth clamped shut once again. He doubted her sanity for a minute.

Leia looked around as the voices appeared to move away. "Don't you ever yell out like that in this forest!" She reprimanded, still whispering.

Han shoved her hand away. "Why not?" He demanded harshly his voice rough with unexpected arousal. Her scent affected him; she still smelled like wild roses and musk beneath the metallic smell of drying blood. His body responded instinctively to her exotic scent and her weight pressing down on him . ' Get a grip Solo!' His mind screamed as he felt himself losing the battle for control. "Would you mind getting off of me now?" Han said between clenched teeth, pushing at her uninjured shoulder, halfheartedly.

Leia blushed as she realized with panic that she was sprawled half-dressed atop the handsome Commander. The jacket had fallen as she'd rushed to shove him down. Their eyes met, but she averted her gaze hurriedly as she moved from him.

"Sorry--" Leia mumbled, confused. Her body was warm and tingly where it had been in contact with his hard body. "There- there are hostile tribes in his forest.

Cannibals, headhunters that will--" She hesitated and shuddered recalling stories from her childhood. "If we stay put until you are able to contact your troop we won't have anything to worry about. So just call them and get it over with, Commander."

Han sighed. "No can do Sweetheart. After my first spectacular high-dive the comlink got busted." He frowned at her downcast expression. "Is that the only way out?"

Leia nodded sadly. "There's a small lake over there. And beyond that, more drops like that one, maybe worse. We fell into a big hole, Commander. You blasted Imperials can't do anything right. No wonder we're going to win this stupid war. You're all a bunch of morons. The only thing you seem to get right is interrogation and I hear you have that perfected." She planted her hands on slender hips and glared at him icily.

Han folded his arms across his chest and stared right back. After a minute, he gave up and looked away disgusted, unable to face the accusation in her eyes a moment longer. "Do you think there's any place that we can get out of the open? I don't like sitting around in plain view when it's my gorgeous head on the line." He smiled at her huff of frustration. "Besides if we're stuck together we might as well become friendly enemies." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively and grinned at her.

"Come on, but I warn you. Behave or I'll leave you for the cannibals and there won't be a finger left on your gorgeous body, Commander."

Han grinned behind her as she stormed off muttering under her breath. This could be interesting.

Inside the damp cave they had discovered, Han looked around distastefully as he tended to his own injuries. He hissed as the bacta sealed over the gaping wounds on his hand. "Well the royal suite it ain't, but I've been in worse."

The cave was small, but sufficient. Moist stone walls surrounded every side, reminding Han of a mausoleum. A clean but dusty floor of sand spread from the back to the front of the cave. Shadows danced eerily on the grainy floor.

Han looked up to see a large spider crawling along one wall to its intricately-made webbing in the cave entranceway, where an unfortunate insect had become entrapped. He watched in fascination as the arachnid sunk its fangs into the hapless insect. Once the insect stilled, the spider began spinning a delicate cocoon around its mesmerized victim. The cave suddenly felt very small. Han

swallowed and tried to find a good reason to look toward his alluring captive, wondering who exactly played the hapless victim in this web.

A smacking sound caused him to turn his head and he fought a snicker as he spied the princess swatting fearfully at a big black bug inching up her arm. "Well that doesn't surprise me, but unfortunately I haven't." She squeaked. With a whimper, she began rubbing at the itching synthflesh covering her wound, pulled slightly with her frantic movements.

Han moved over to his pack and removed something. "That'll probably itch another hour or so. Sorry--" he apologized and moved beside her to rub some salve on the angry red flesh. His fingers were warm and disturbingly gentle as they stroked her injured flesh.

Leia startled at his tender touch and jerked away with suspicious eyes boring into him.

"Relax Sweetheart," he snickered. " I don't bite too hard. Sit down and talk to me. I promise I'll behave." He held his arms open wide. " You have my word. Trust me." He plopped onto the ground heavily with a moan, fatigue finally catching up to him.

Leia tilted her head. "The word of an Imperial? Somehow that doesn't make me feel any safer." She remained glued to the spot, eyes wary.

"Look Your Whininess, you don't like me and I sure as hell don't like you! But, we could try to be civil to each other. It might be a long time before we get out of this gods forsaken hole. And, I really don't want to have to kill you just yet." He patted the ground beside him, invitingly. "Sit and talk, you might find I'm not so bad after all."

Leia 's skeptical eyebrow rose to her hairline. "Yeah sure and I might meet a real Jedi Knight someday." She paused dramatically and gave him an accusing look. "Oh wait, that won't happen because your revered Emperor had them exterminated. I don't see either situation coming to fruition anytime soon. I think I will stay right here, thank you very much, Commander. And you keep your distance! Imperial swine!"

Han tossed his hands up. "Fine! Suit yourself your Stubbornness! They were right you know-- all of you Rebels are pathetic scum!" He rolled to his feet in a graceful motion. "I'm outta here!" There was no way that he was about to stay in the vehement little spitfire's presence. He wouldn't think about how she looked in the black lacy bra with her hair falling over her bare shoulder, how her warm soft body had felt pressed to him, and how she smelled. He had to remember she was the enemy, as if she had not reminded him continuously since their first encounter.

Leia flew to her feet before he could leave. Her voice trembled with fear but she recovered quickly. "Wait!" She grabbed his arm roughly. "I'm--I'm--" Her mouth would not form the words of apology.

"I shouldn't stereotype you along with every other Imperial. It's just a habit I've picked up from first-hand experience." She grinned weakly as the anger melted from his stony features. "It- it could be interesting talking to bloodthirsty Imperial slime face to face without worrying about being shot in the back--" She paused, a thoughtful look crossing her features. "You did leave your blaster up there didn't you?"

Han flashed her a disarming smile. "Yeah-- well it might be interesting getting to know pathetic Rebel scum as well." He stuck out a hand. "Truce?"

Leia considered the proffered hand suspiciously but stuck out her own to have it engulfed in the warm large one before her. The fine hair on the back of his hand tickled the delicate pads of her fingertips, a strange but pleasant sensation. "I concur." She smiled up at him reluctantly.

He couldn't watch her all the time, Leia realized. She would find a way to escape. Let him believe that she was compromising, as her brilliant smile indicated. Leia Organa was a patient woman.

Han had just finished building a small fire from some wood gathered from outside. From his pack, he pulled out a small warming unit. "Hungry, Your Worship?" He retrieved some food packs from his gear and tore them open with his teeth. Leia fought back a reprimand for using his teeth as a tool as her aunts had done to her many times. "It's not the royal cuisine you are accustomed to, but it'll keep you from starving to death." A grumble from Leia's stomach answered for her. She blushed brightly as he laughed. "I take that as a yes."

After a filling if dissatisfying meal of dehydrated foodstuff, Han stretched mightily. Leia shivered from the cold night air. She had refused his jacket and sat stubbornly in her bra and trousers. No Imperial Insignia would cross her shoulders; she would freeze first, or so she had claimed. Now she regretted it, but was too proud to ask him for covering.

Rolling his eyes, Han ripped the insignia from his sleeve with a curse and tossed his plain gray shirt at her. He replaced his jacket onto his bare chest and Leia fought the urge to stare outright. His chest was muscular and well defined through all of his battle conditioning. A light spattering of golden brown hair ran down his chest and narrowed into a vee as he stretched again. His narrow hips and firm stomach were visible above his low-riding trousers.



Leia squelched the desire to run her fingers down his chest to test the tautness of that flesh. Reprimanding herself silently, his scent assaulted her. If having his jacket about her shoulders smelled of him, she now felt as if he wrapped his body tightly around hers. The scent of his masculinity overwhelmed her. She fidgeted, trying her best to find a comfortable groove in the hard earth below her and put the disturbing scent from her mind which had betrayed her with every breath she took since meeting Commander Handsome. And he knew it, the cocky arrogant swine.

Why else would he sprawl out in that sensual pose that seemed to show off his every attribute so well?

She huffed angrily and folded her arms, squeaking as a jolt of pain raced through her injured shoulder. Han glanced her way, and she turned her body from him, more to hide her expression of pain than anything. She'd learned to never let the enemy see her weaknesses.

Leia felt the warmth beside her before she ever acknowledged the disturbing presence. Groaning, she turned and faced him without a blink, head tilted saucily.

"What?" The exasperation in her voice brought a look of amusement to Han's face.

"Here--" He tossed the tube of anesthetizing ointment into her lap. "Don't say I never did anything for you, your Worship." He smirked and cautiously lowered himself beside her.

"Stop calling me that!"

"Calling you what?" Han played dumb but his innocent expression did not fool her.

Leia frowned. "Stop calling me Your Worship! It's insulting--"

"And that should stop me because--" Han interrupted, with a grin.

He had a wonderful smile. Straight white teeth, wide full lips that only lifted on one side, took her breath and made her momentarily forget what they had been discussing. She stared at him questioningly. "Umm--please call me something else."

Han took great delight in this obviously. "Let me get this straight--" Moving closer he watched as her eyes widened and her body leaned farther back at his invasion of her personal space. "I can't call you Your Worship, that's insulting-- I can't call you Your Highness, you are not my ruler-- I can't call you Your Whininess, at least to your face because you get this look--"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Yeah that's the one-- that makes me fear for my manhood--" He stroked his chin thoughtfully as he locked onto her eyes. "I could call you Your Gorgeousness," he teased with a slight lift of his eyebrow at the stain of red gracing her lovely smudged cheeks. "But then that would be untruthful." He lied smoothly as her eyes slitted, just catching onto the insult. "I could--"

"Oh for Sith's sake!" She spat out. "Just call me Leia you idiot!"

"Leia--" The way he dragged out those two syllables as if savoring them heated her face even more. "I like the sound of that." He whispered.

Both stared intensely, silence invading their sanctuary.

Leia looked away first and when she turned back, Han had sprawled out again and placed his arms behind his head, lacing his hands behind his neck. He cocked his head toward her studying her with an intensity that made her squirm.

He lowered his arms and propped one forearm on the top of his knee, his other long leg stretched before him. "So-- Leia--" He shifted and leaned over his lips almost touching her ear. "Have you ever--" he winked at her as he continued, "played Sabaac?"

Han sighed to himself. What had ever possessed the gods to create such an enigma as Leia Organa? She looked as fragile as a teacup rose, but was as strong and stubborn as many of his men. Her intelligent mind more than challenged his own. Her full sweet mouth held the tongue of a serpent, biting and hissing angrily at most times, refreshing and innocent at others. Her beautiful eyes could harden in anger or widen in surprise at a moment's notice. She'd wound her luscious hair into the simple but now falling bun while they spoke of safe subjects. Politics were out, as they were of opposing views. The weather never changed so that topic exhausted itself quickly. Speaking of her family had reminded her he was one of the evil Imperials who had accosted her family and forced her into her present dilemma. He settled for sharing school experiences and teaching her to play the hand sized electronic Sabaac game that he never left home without.

Leia bit her lip in concentration, contemplating what to discard as Han told her tales of his pranks at the Imperial Academy. During his turns, she spoke of her antics with Winter at the Coruscant academy. Leia wasn't as sheltered and naïve as he'd suspected. Some of her stories made him cough in embarrassment. Perhaps there was more to her than spoiled Princess? He watched her secretively when her eyes sparkled upon recalling a particularly compromising incident involving the two friends. Noticing her mirth, she quickly covered with a scathing remark about how they would have never been in that position if not for the Imperial sentries that night. Han sighed in resignation.

She'd also brought him to his knees in full deep-bodied laughter many times tonight from her outlandish tales to her very unladylike whoop of triumph as she bested him at Sabaac a couple of times. Han watched as Leia yawned. Her eyes fought to stay open and she shook her head trying to stay awake and focus on the game. In the end, she lost the battle as her head nodded and drooped on her chest, the game slipping from her hand and landing with a thud as it struck the dirt beneath her.

Han stood up and moved over to spread aside the blankets that would serve as her bedroll across the cave. Quietly, he moved over to wake her and hesitated, just watching her.

Her head had fallen across her arms, propped upon a rock beside her. The light of the fire played across her lovely face, the soft glow highlighting her natural beauty.

Leia didn't protest as Han bent to scoop her into his arms. She sighed and snuggled closer as he walked across the cave to deposit her gently onto the thermal blanket.

He stepped back silently observing her in repose. She was beautiful he reluctantly admitted to himself. The ire erased in slumber. Her glorious dark hair now spread around her like a halo. Her full lips parted and long lashes brushed her delicate cheekbones. Han watched the soft rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. A tomboy she might be, but she was every inch a woman.

He shivered as much from his appreciative male contemplation as from the cold breeze that swept through the dark cave lit only by the waning firelight. Despite the moderate climate, the nights on Alderaan turned almost frigid. Han sighed and moved back to pick up the game where it had fallen. As he played another hand, he tried to ignore the shivering form across the cave from him.

Unable to block out the quiet whimper that floated across the emptiness to him, he stood up and grabbed the other thermal blanket before walking quietly over to her. Han looked down at Leia's shivering half-dressed form, crushed the blanket in his fingers and decided to berate himself tomorrow for his next actions. Making sure to be extra quiet, he lay down carefully beside the sleeping princess and moved as far from her, at first, as the covering would allow. He'd keep his distance. They'd both benefit from the extra warmth sharing allowed. Holding his breath as she rolled against him wrapping her arms about his leather covered bicep, Han soon joined her in a deep sleep, unconsciously cradling her against him.

The encroaching darkness suffocated her. What she ran from, she was uncertain. If she stopped, all was lost. She willed her body to keep moving. Branches tore through her gossamer gown, into the delicate flesh of her arms and legs, tangling in her unbound hair ripping painfully. Still, she ran. Her feet pounded upon the freshly fallen leaves, stirring then into a whirling frenzy behind her. Still she ran. A breath fell upon the back of her neck-- harsh, ragged, hot. He was so close that she could feel his touch--terrifying and arousing simultaneously. Something forced her to stop, to turn, her arms reaching to embrace the darkness before her. She was engulfed in a warmth unlike she had

ever known--suffocating from pleasure as well as pain, detest tinged with a frightening desire--

Leia gasped and awoke with a start. Where was she? A brush of roughened silk swept across her face, teasing her cheeks and ear. She brought a limp hand upward to push at the annoying tickling she felt. Her questing fingers brushed through a patch of coarse but pleasing hair meshed with her own, brought up short by the wall of unyielding muscle and sinew beneath her. Her eyes flew open. Panic rose like bile to her throat, but she suppressed her cry of surprise when she saw that her pillow was the bare chest of her captor. His strong arms wrapped tightly about her waist, and he was not letting her go.

She started to pull away, fight for her escape, when her gaze fell upon his face. Unconsciously, the hardness faded from her eyes. His facial features were like sculpted marble, softened a tiny bit by sleep so that he almost looked like a young boy, but for the stubble covering his chin and cheeks. His once-broken nose somehow complimented his strong jaw and cheekbones. Those full lips parted slightly with a lazy half-smile. Barley colored hair lay in disarray about his forehead and full lashes of a similar color brushed his cheekbones. An unexpected feeling of tenderness rushed through her. She felt safe within his arms-- as if--as if she belonged there. Belonged? This Imperial had captured her. No-- her conscience rebelled. This man had saved her life, literally given her the shirt from his back, given her half of his rations, and laid beside her to keep the chill from her body

She lay her head back down on his chest listening to the steady beating of his heart with a reluctant sigh, the steady in and out of his breathing beneath her. Her half-mast eyes searched the vicinity illuminated by the small fire. There was his blaster just a few feet beyond her grasp. So the lying scum had not left it above on the forest floor. The more she strained toward it, the tighter he held her. If she could wake before him she could slip from his arms as he woke, reach the weapon and either blast him or tie him up. At the least she would stun blast him. But, the siren call of his body heat pulled her back down into the haven of his embrace. The night was too cold to resist that temptation. He was so warm--

Han felt cold. cold.

A wave of terror washed over him as the room grew into focus. He was home-- His father stood far from him some ancient sword of light drawn as he warned Han and his mother to stay down behind the crates. Han was unable to determine his age, he could not have been more than five when this had happened.

A flash of light blinded him, and above the eerie cacophony of battle, a groan of death rushed to his ears as the smoke cleared and he watched his beloved Da fall slowly to the ground, blood spilling around him. Small booted feet tore away

from his mother's loving arms and ran screaming to the still warm body. He screamed in agony as his chubby arms wrapped around the still form of his father drowning him in the blood that covered the corpse.

Han gazed down at his dead face, which now transmuted into that of his mother, battered and bleeding, but alive. He sensed the advance of his "father" and whirled to face him. He was older now, maybe twelve years old. His eyes were much older holding a pain and bitterness that they should never have shown. At a string of Corellian curses, Han's stepfather wrenched his arm violently as Han heard an audible snap and felt a wave of excruciating pain race down his arm. Again Fa warned him to stop speaking in that cursed tongue. Han spit out a fresh strain and felt his face connect with a solid fist, the blow fracturing his nose. With blood pouring down, Han staggered to his mother's side. "It's okay Ma, I'm okay. I'm tough like Da was."

"Don't mention that bastard's name again!" His stepfather roared and Han's hold on consciousness slipped away as his head repeatedly struck against the wall. "I won't let you hurt her!" Han screamed through the haze of pain.

Several more slams and Han slipped to the floor.

Leia Organa's eyes widened with terror as she listened to Han's rantings, half in Corellian, half in basic. She suddenly wished she didn't understand any of it. A sickening feeling of bile rising in her throat nearly made her gag. His voice had sounded so young, as if the terror he described had happened to a child, which she realized with a start, it had.

It was not so much his scream that had awakened her, but the visions in which she was somehow intruding. She could not get the horrible sights out of her mind. She saw the youth-- Han-- battered and bloody, crumpled on the dirty floor as his mother screamed before her neck was broken with a resonating snap. The boy had dragged himself, half dead to the body of his mother, howling in anguish.

Still trapped in his nightmare, Han reached for the nearest warmth to drive back the threatening cold--Leia's body poised to make a dash for the blaster. His arms wrapped tightly about her waist and he buried his tear-streaked face in the soft skin of her belly.

Leia stiffened visibly, but found herself compelled to wrap her arms about his head and whisper soothing words. An unexpected feeling of tenderness passed through her as she stroked the heaving back and shoulders.

What's going on here? She thought that Imperials were brainwashed drones, not this broken man against her.

The ice surrounding her heart melted just a fraction. Her body seemed to have a mind of its own as she felt her head lowering to rub her cheek tenderly against his sweat stroked crown. He was still asleep, caught in that vicious land of unreality.

Somehow, she dragged him back to the warm mat without dislodging herself from him.

As she brought the covering over their bodies, Han's eyes snapped open, glazed and confused.

"Ma?" he croaked.

"Yes, Han love--" Leia said, pretending to be a loving mother with a frightened child.

"I had a bad dream Ma-- just a dream. You're safe with me. I won't let the bad guys get you." He snuggled deeper into her embrace. "I love you."

Leia's mouth opened and closed wordlessly. He sounded so helpless. "I know Han love, go back to sleep-- I won't let anything hurt you either-- I promise." She knew in that moment that he was safe tonight.

Leia awoke later to discover she was alone. Had the bastard left her alone and helpless? Found a way out and for spite left her to rot? Her eyes scanned the cave frantically. The blaster was nowhere to be found. Although, thank the stars, his jacket still hung over a rock.

So where was he?

She threw back the blanket covering her and rose to her feet unsteadily. A sudden bout of vertigo forced her to balance herself on a large rock in front of her until the room stopped whirling around. The blood loss had sapped her strength and was affecting her sense of balance. Sluggishly tugging on her brown boots, she headed out the cave entrance.

Once outside Leia stretched her arms above her head and took in the fresh untainted air. The airflow of Aldera and the other civilized cities of Alderaan was crisp and clean thanks to filter systems, but there was something wonderful and new about pure untreated air that thrilled her in some primitive way.

Something below caught her eyes and she bent down to inspect it. Sets of fresh footprints were visible in the red mud. They were too large for her feet, so she decided they were Han's. She snickered at her brilliant leap of logic and stood again.

Her stomach protested its emptiness with a grumble. Maybe Han was off catching something for their breakfast. She stopped. Since when did Leia Organa depend on anyone other than herself to take care of her needs? Least of all upon an Imperial. Angry at her helplessness, she decided to catch her own food and let Solo eat his field rations alone. She would rather starve than take food from an Imperial. Even if she had held him helpless in her arms the previous night, reliving the horrors of his childhood, she could not admit the same weakness.

Moving toward the nearby river, Leia began calling for Han. "Solo? Commander, are you here? Where are you Solo?" From some bushes to her right she heard a splashing sound. Perhaps he was making himself useful by washing up the night's dishes to reuse. As she began to move forward, she stopped breathlessly in her tracks.

Naked, his golden skin glistened in the morning light. Water trickled down his chest and abdomen, sparkling like tiny diamonds. He pulled a fluffy towel through his damp hair then ran his fingers through his spiked locks. Twisting his towel repeatedly, he soon had a whip that he smacked playfully at a small prickly plant. "Gotcha!" He snarled then let out a full-bodied laugh as a small creature scuttled away in fright.

Han had just emerged from bathing in the cold river water. To Leia's horror and delight, his garments lay less than a meter from her sanctuary. She pressed her hands to her mouth to keep silent as she fully appreciated the sight of a well-formed naked man. His body glistened in the early light as he finished drying himself. Leia followed the path of the towel with her eyes. The blood in her veins grew hot, her palms moist, and she felt her pulse beat through her entire body. She had never felt this way before.

Han hummed a tune, moving his body to some beat almost comically, then froze.

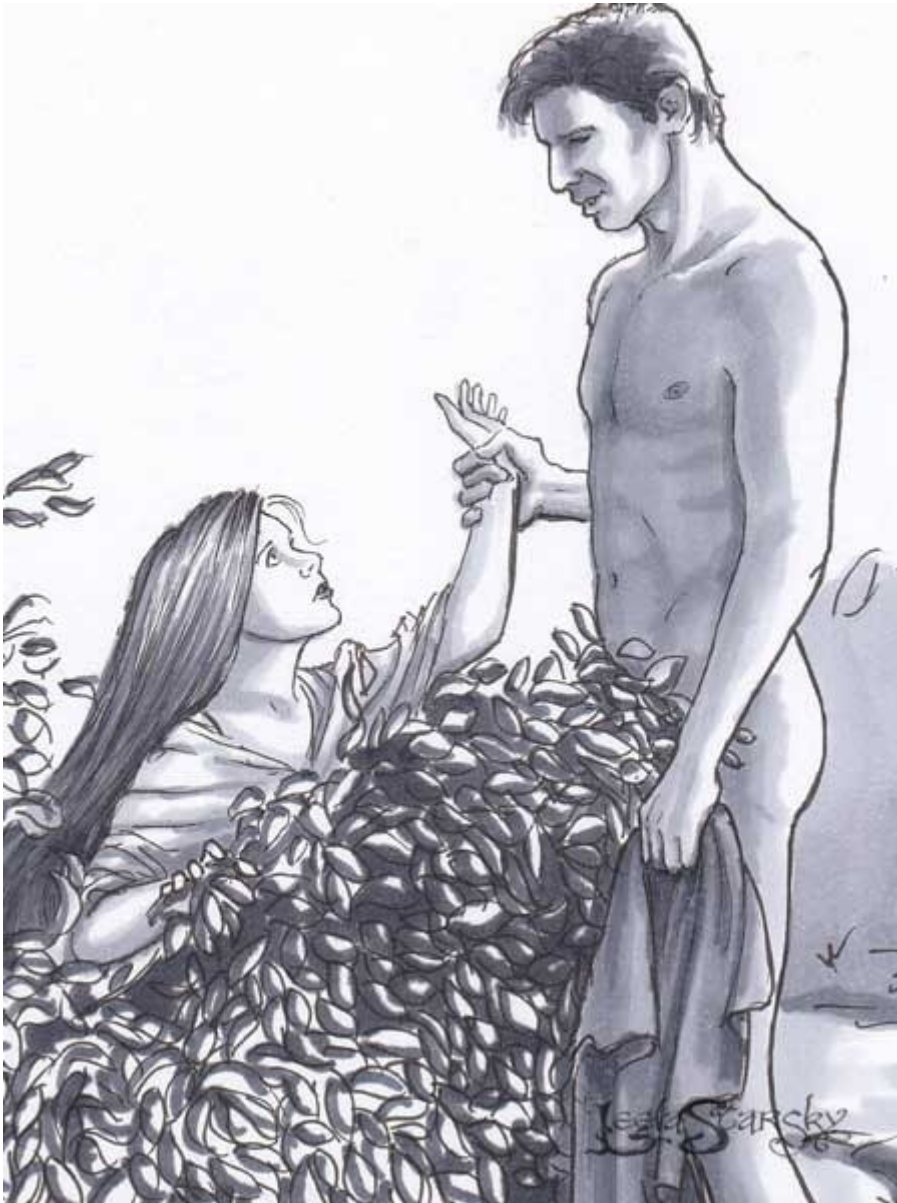
"I must be hearing things-- weird--" he grumbled wrapping the towel loosely about his midline and moving closer. He drew nearer to Leia's hiding place, the ground crunching beneath his large bare feet as he walked. An unseen flick of his fingers sent cloth falling like a feather to the ground before him.

An unexpected sight burned itself into Leia's shocked eyes.

A long arm flashed into her view and there was only enough time to gasp as his fingers trapped her wrists, hauling her violently to her feet. Her tiny frame slammed into his bare skin with a strangled cry like that of a trapped animal-- panicked, desperate.

Han's feral grimace melted into startled shock as his assailant turned out to be his reluctant cave mate. "P-Princess?" he sputtered out in a half-gasp. As an

afterthought his shock turned into a slow seductive smile. "So sweetheart, see anything you like?"



Sweet, sweltering, and seductive. She was in big trouble

Leia pulled back, building up a furious verbal assault as Han focused his gaze on her trembling lips. He stopped smiling and moved closer, his full attention on her mouth. His hand came up to hold her face steady, one thumb brushing her cheek, then her quivering lip, testing the waters ever so gently.

As their eyes met, her struggling ceased.

A force stronger than either of them seemed to draw them closer like a moth to a flame, until their lips touched. For a small forever Han kissed her, exploring tentatively at first, then increasing the intensity when Leia responded. Her arms slipped up to hold him, cling to him desperately in a maelstrom of sensation beyond her control. Her body pressed into his, moving against him in instinctive rhythm.

Han was lost.

Though he'd only meant to teach her a lesson, Han could feel this situation rapidly going beyond his control. He belatedly realized that Fate controlled him and she was a demanding mistress.

This can't happen-- lips, so warm, gentle like a whisper...

Han's mind tempted even as common sense told him to stop. Leia struggled against his chest fearfully and reality hit him like a cold bucket of water.

He released her.

A trickle of angry tears fell from wide eyes as she stumbled from his embrace, her face a mask of confusion. Her body poised on the edge of flight, although her eyes spoke differently.

With a grimace of disappointment, Han grabbed his towel and quickly covered himself, moving toward Leia hesitantly. He watched a bevy of emotions pass over her face-- curiosity, anger and finally fear. "Look, Leia, I'm-I'm sorry. I was just ... That should never--" he trailed off as he averted his eyes, chagrin plastered across his face. He had more control than this-- Some gentleman you're proving to be, Solo-- he silently rebuked himself.

Rather than face a disquieting situation, Leia whirled around and flew back through the bushes. Her dark hair streamed behind her like a demon in pursuit.

Han listened to the crunch of her footfalls receding and the snap of the branches as they were shoved away. He cursed aloud at the fear he'd brought to her soft eyes. He'd seen desire for one fleeting moment and something even beyond that. Something that she was unprepared to deal with. She was naïve in matters of the heart.. He cursed aloud and flopped down onto a rock. Running his hands through his wet hair he lowered his elbows to his knees and groaned, as he looked sideways in the direction she had fled.

Suddenly, waiting for a rescue promised to be the hardest challenge he had ever faced.

Leia ventured back toward the water days later. She stared at the rippling pool silently as she sat down on the rock where Han's clothes had lain. She recalled the moments before, during, and after their kiss, and recalled the terror she had shared with him last night. Reluctantly she had to admit that maybe he wasn't like the other Imperials that she had already had the displeasure of becoming acquainted with. Had she ended up stranded with any other Imperial, then she would probably have been abused, and discarded, or dead that first day. Strangely enough, she had no fear of that with Commander Solo.

That kiss, days before had probably started as some sick joke, to teach her to keep her nose out of his business. However, when she had pulled away in fear, he had let her go. His kiss had been demanding, but gentle as if she were a delicate piece of crystal that would shatter if not handled with the utmost care. She marveled that hands as rough and hardened as his could brush against her like fine silk.

His hands-- They were as much an enigma as their owner. Finely boned, strong, with prominent veins branching into long fingers, which had field dressed her wound with a military detachment, yet caressed her face with such tenderness.

He had an annoying habit of using his index finger to emphasize his statements. She found that both amusing and ire inspiring. No other man would dare thrust their finger in her face and accuse her or reprimand her like a child! She'd considered biting it off.

Leia possessed a legendary temper, though her real mother had been the most kind and genteel woman. She must get it from her biological father, who was as great a mystery to her as the universe was to most.

Her stomach growled. She should have grabbed a ration bar--no matter the cardboard taste--before she had left the cave. Spying a bush with some berries that she knew were non-poisonous, she plopped them into her mouth with a distasteful grimace. Filling but hardly satisfying, cardboard would have tasted better.

Her senses prickled before she heard an outraged male curse from across the lake. A blaster shot followed and then several more.

Leia smirked. If he'd bothered to ask her advice, she'd have gladly shared that blasters were no match for the quick-footed wild game.

When he'd been blasting for what seemed hours, Leia sighed. It really was detrimental to her own nutritional needs to let him stumble around wasting firepower on something he would never hit. Besides, ration bars were beginning to bore her.

"Hey Solo" she yelled out, "You can't hit them with a blaster. They're extremely fast. You need bait!"

Han poked his head through the green shrubbery intending to give her his opinion on bait, when he witnessed a most comical sight.

A small creature had climbed atop the rock to sun itself lazily. After Leia had roused it with her loud voice, it prepared to attack. Han held back a peal of laughter as he watched the creature leap from the rock to the top of her head in a fluid motion.

Never had Han heard a more undignified howl fly from a lady's lips. She jumped around, her hands struggling to gain hold of the invader.

She could put those moves to music and make a fortune. He thought to himself wryly.

At last her hands grasped the creature and she flung it from her with all of her might. The crack it made as its body struck the rock before her, echoed through the trees.

And Han thought that he possessed luck in abundance.

Leia slowed her breathing and calmed her racing pulse as she moved over to inspect the animal now lying motionless upon the ground. It was a rhunskye, one of the more rare game animals on the moon, but one of the most tasty. Dining on them had always been a rare treat at the palace.

Leia looked around cautiously, missing Han as he ducked behind the shrubs. A grin lit up her entire face and she proceeded to find a rock. Within minutes, she had found one sharp enough to tear into the hide of the animal.

As the day progressed, Leia decided that the best way to deal with her confused feelings about the Han situation was to ignore them. She'd pretend the whole incident had been a dream, despite the rush of excitement which flooded her veins each time she closed her eyes and pictured Han against the background of dawn sunrise.

Her eyes flew open and she cursed under her breath. Ridiculous! What was wrong with her? She was an Organa, not some hormone-driven teenager. So she had seen a naked man, it was not the first time-- she had taken the required interspecies sexuality at the academy-- and it would probably not be the last; she was young after all. There were many more men out in the galaxy, men who would show her the respect to which her breeding entitled her and not shove

their tongue down her throat the first opportunity that arose. Although, respect had never burned her in the way his kiss had.

She swallowed a groan, remembering. It had to be a cruel joke of the gods! Stranded with a man whom she could not tolerate because of his affiliation with the Empire and she could hardly resist him. Her heart beat out of her chest when he touched her, had stopped altogether when he had touched his lips to hers, and reached out to comfort him as she had held him trembling and asleep after his nightmare. One look into those golden hazel eyes, and she was speechless--no small feat for she was a born orator. One look into his heart and she was hopelessly affected. One look into his eyes on the dance floor that fateful night and she had known she'd never be the same woman who had reluctantly entered that club. She must work twice as hard at keeping both an emotional and physical distance between them.

Witnessing the expression on Han's face as she tossed the animal skinned and bloodied at him was priceless. She dismissed him with an insult. "Didn't they teach you basic survival in all of that Imperial training? Go make yourself useful and find a stick for a spit, since I had to catch our supper. "

The incredulity imprinted on his features made the little lie worthwhile and served its purpose. Han's face hardened into a scowl. "Certainly your holiness. Anything else you need oh majestic one? Prop your pillows, fan you, hand feed you berries, my pet?" He asked sarcastically, despite the innocent look plastered all over his face. "Your wish is my command." He placed one hand to his heart and bowed irreverently.

"Then I wish you would just shut up and leave."

"I am your willing slave, Your Worshipfulness--" He shot her with his best brand of sarcasm before stalking out to obey.

"Well that's gratitude. I work my..."

Han didn't stick around to let her finish. Although he knew a freak event had helped her "catch" their supper, his male pride bristled that a woman had been able to outdo him. His clan members would never have let him live that one down. A man was supposed to provide for his woman.

His woman--? When had she become his woman?

Leia missed the knowing grin on his face as he left.

The small animal Leia had miraculously "caught" roasted on the spit Han had made for her. He watched her with an odd detachment borne of years of mistrust and watching his back. He still felt uncomfortable that he could recall her holding

him after his nightmare. He'd not experienced those nightmares in years. What had brought up his past? Why now? Why Leia? He kept awaiting some snide comment, but it never came.

Even now, Leia smirked at him from behind the roasting spit. "You really should be used to it by now. You Imperials can't do anything right. You had your powerful blaster, you're bigger than me, and you're more experienced in field survival." She turned the meat slowly, taking in the aroma of the tender meat before stopping and prodding it with a sharpened stick. Perfectly aware that Han's pack contained civilized utensils, she was determined to ask for nothing else from him.

Han's mouth watered as he watched the juices dribble down the side of the meat to the cave floor. Leia sneered at him and pulled the piece she had skewered from her stick and bit into it with a moan of pleasure. Her eyes opened and pierced Han's where he sat.

"Bet you want some, don't you? All you have to do is beg."

Han was hungry and his stomach more powerful than his pride at that moment. "Leia, may I have a piece of that meat?"

Leia smiled taking a perverse pleasure at being in control. "No Han, I said beg." She lifted a brow.

Han muttered a curse under his breath that she could not understand. "May I please have a piece of meat, Leia, please?"

"Not good enough--" she said matter-of-factly.

"Kest, woman I said please!" he snarled at her.

Leia sat back, a smug look lighting her features. "Begging Han, even better, on your hands and knees or you can starve."

Han refused to degrade himself for a meal. His jaw stopped twitching when he ground his teeth together in frustration. He scowled at her superior expression. Regardless, he didn't inform her that he knew the truth about her successful dinner "catch" as he stalked over to his pack and pulled out yet another ration bar.

I have control over this situation, he thought to himself, ignoring the roasted meat smell assaulting his nostrils. He decided to tease her instead. One thing he had discovered about Leia Organa was that she was notoriously easy to tease into a fury. He preferred fuming Leia to flaunting Leia any day. He took a few steps toward her and stopped just behind her.

Leia sucked in an uncertain breath.

"Yeah, well there is one thing I was able to do right Sweetheart. Oh no, have you forgotten about your adventures in voyeurism?" He whispered into her ear, lightly lifting the hair at her nape with his softly accusing words.

Leia froze, her expression betraying nothing as he pulled back and moved around the spit to stand before her, arms folded in satisfaction.

Ahhh-- This was going to be fun--.

"You have to admit that was one hell of a kiss. If you hadn't run away like a scared tauntaun who knows what we'd be doing right about now? Or where we'd be doing it?" He sank down to the bedroll beside her with his best come-hither look as he patted the blanket.

Leia inhaled sharply as her face paled before growing redder than the meat she was turning slowly. Her eyes quickly lowered, but not fast enough for him miss the longing in her gaze as she remembered all too vividly.

An uncomfortable silence permeated the cave. Han closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, there was a new determination in his eyes. "What's the matter Your High and Mightiness? Can't stomach the truth." He ventured closer on his hands and knees, a predatory mask on his face.

Leia wanted to run far and fast away, but was held mesmerized by this side of Han. She was unsure if he were still teasing or if this had suddenly turned serious. Shoving her fear to the recess of her brain, she lifted her head in her own silent challenge.

"You wanted me--you still do. Come on Miss Priss, admit it." He was poised face to face with her, inches from her lips. "Sometimes you think I'm all right."

Her eyes flew wide as he pinched her nose lightly, grinned and then chuckled.

"You-you stupid scruffy looking, egotistical-- son of a Womprat!" Leia rose to her feet and stomped around the spit to confront him face to face as he shot to his feet in a hurry. Her nose bumped against his chest.

Han took a surprised step back.

"Who's scruffy looking?" He recovered nicely, his gaze hard as it fused with hers.

Her voice rose slightly in volume as she continued. "I'll admit that it was hard to resist you, but only due to the fact that you were forcing yourself on me at the

time." Her hands made their way to her hips, her stance widening. "You had your tongue halfway down my throat before I could protest!"

"Forcing myself on you?" He stared at her incredulously, his own voice raising in pitch. His palms faced inward and touched his chest, his face a perfect example of how to look guilty. "Look, Sweetheart, you were the one crawling up me like-- Stang, it's just like you Rebels to twist the truth around to suit your causes!"

Leia paused and took a step back, winding up for a verbal battle.

"That all depends on whose truth we are talking about, Commander! Your truth is so twisted, that I don't need any help distorting it!"

"At least I call them like I see them! That was a kiss Princess, and you were enjoying it as much as I was-- maybe even more! And that is the truth, you little vrelt."

Leia was sure that she had just been insulted. She stomped a booted foot like a spoiled child. "I was not enjoying it-- y-you took me by surprise-- that's all!"

Han shook his head. He dropped it into his hands wearily, scrubbing violently at his eyes, before suddenly snapping his head up, then waving a forefinger under her chin insolently. "You know exactly what you are getting with me sister, just like with the Empire. Our methods may not be perfect but at least it gets the job done! You Rebels are too busy trying to win over the universe to think of what you'd do with it if you ever got it." His hands flew wide in emphasis. "It's a wasted cause Your Worship--Just -like- you--"

He gazed at her flush irate face, her long graceful neck, her heaving half-bared breasts and tensed visibly. Han threw his hands up, turned away with a huff and planted his hands on his hips, taking deep controlled breaths. The veins in his neck and temples popped out angrily.

"At least my cause is worthwhile to me." Leia continued with renewed vigor, her hands on her hips, feet planted immovably on the ground and arms waving wildly to punctuate her statement. "Your blasted Empire does nothing but oppress the entire universe and you don't care. All my father wanted to do was keep Alderaan out of it, stay neutral, but no--" One tiny finger poked dagger-like into his chest. "It's your way or else you force everyone to do it your way!"

Her cause-- It always came back to her and that godforsaken cause! She was as cold as a night on Hoth, never thinking of anything but that blasted Rebel cause of hers. It was just a job like his. Just once, he wanted to see fire and not ice when she looked at him. Like at the lakeside that morning--

Han grasped her arm. His eyes narrowed, fingers biting into the muscle of her forearm as his mouth became a thin angry line and he cocked his head threateningly at her. He had tolerated just about enough of her holier-than-thou attitude. "You think I care about your father's political views Princess?" He wrenched her arm painfully behind her back. "You think I give a damn about you?" His face was inches from hers. Heat radiated off of him like a sun.

She looked faint

Her body pressed against his intimately. Waves broke, rumbling through his bare chest, and racing through her entire body.

"Get your filthy hands off of me!" She snarled up at him.

Anger, desire, murder and about a hundred other emotions were blasting through Han's body at breakneck speed. He leaned close to her, his face dangerous.

"Make me," he challenged with a mocking lift of his eyebrows.

For a moment, he had her immobilized.

Freeing one arm, she pulled it back behind her shoulder, smiled sweetly at him, and made a fist. It flew toward his face with a whoosh of wind until it made contact.

Han felt each individual knuckle as they met his face with a loud crack. The blow jerked his head back, rattling his teeth.

With a loud yelp, he let go more from shock than actual pain.

She'd actually hit him!

The momentum of her blow carried Leia forward with unexpected speed. Her body completed a half-turn before coming to rest against the rock wall near Han. She alternately shook her hand and nursed her throbbing knuckles between her lips, hopping from foot to foot, breath hissing between her teeth. Her defiant eyes locked onto his, issuing a challenge she was unaware of. Flipping her fallen hair behind her shoulder, she dismissed him like a servant with cold eyes and a haughty tilt to her chin.

Recovering, Han came at her, eyes hate-filled and face dark with rage. "You crazy little sika!" He roared and even the cavern seemed to tremble with fear.

Leia stood-- her head proudly flung to the sky-- and did not flinch as he advanced.

Han lowered his raised hands helplessly and just looked at her, disbelief etched in his furious features.

The crazy woman was actually preparing to fight him. Her hands raised before her face, her stance a classic fight position, and her eyes narrowed in determination-- not fear. Han calmed some and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Leia gazed at him with a quizzical expression over her still protectively raised fists.

"You need to work on your right." He spit blood onto the ground beside her, rubbing his jaw, testing his teeth with his tongue. "Next guy you try that with may not let you get away with it-- untouched." His voice was low, dangerously controlled, far more frightening than his furious charge.

Scowling, Han turned, not sparing her another glance, and stomped from the cave. His footsteps were ponderously loud, then faded like a dream as his image dissolved into the blackness beyond the cave.

Leia suddenly felt very alone.

It was a beautiful morning. Animal cries filled the air, low and shrill. The soft whisper of a gentle breeze rustled the leaves on the towering trees. A steady gentle splash chased away the silent aquatic life below the surface of the crystal blue water. Within this gorge, reality did not intrude. All was perfection.

Leia had seen no sign of Han that morning. She'd not made contact with him since last night when he'd stormed from her presence.

Good riddance, I was beginning to think that I might have a problem there. Guess I injured more than his ego. Deep down she admitted that it had been a very undignified way of dealing with his teasing. That's all it was, she assured herself, teasing-- It didn't mean a thing.

Now that the incident was over, she admitted, although reluctantly, that she had been terrified of what he would do after she had hit him. Her mind had drummed up visions of a beating, being restrained, or even raped. But, again he had proven that more lay beneath his exterior than a brainwashed Imperial. She knew few men of decorum who would have responded with such dignity. A small smile crept onto her face.

Okay, so he may be more than just a bloodthirsty Imperial slimeball. Leia thought. But, not by much.

He had been absent the entire night, but she refused to admit she had craved his familiar warmth or that she worried about him.

He's a big boy, she grinned.

Leia Organa you ought to be ashamed.

But, what had Winter said ? Live a little?

Her steps were loud and crackling as she made her way toward the small lake beyond the shrubline. Leia felt just plain nasty, tainted by the foul stench of Imperial swine, obviously. Deciding that Han was going to avoid her until their rescue, she felt safe bathing in the clear blue water she now tested with her fingers as she bent over.

Concealed just beyond the shrubs, Han kept Leia in his sight. He still fumed some from their confrontation the night before, but even now felt an overwhelming need to protect her. *But who's going to keep her safe from you? *

He closed his eyes for a moment, warring with his intentions to keep her modesty intact and his desire to join her in the pool of blue. He inhaled and compressed his lips into two thin tight lines after he opened his eyes and gazed upon her.

K'alla-- She's -- Han lost his train of coherent thought.

Han Solo was no stranger to women and females of humanoid species. He had seen all types of beauty. However, none had ever affected him like this, until her.

Leia's back faced him as she unfastened her thin pants and carefully drew them down her hips to pool at her feet. She bent over and picked them up, carefully folding them and placing them on a rock. Her hand reached in front and the black lace bra soon joined the pile.

Han closed his eyes. Don't Solo--don't start something you can't finish here! Remember she's practically a kid! His curiosity won out and he opened his eyes to gaze at her.

Kid huh?

He licked suddenly dry lips as he watched her wade into the cool water and heard her shriek as the coolness caressed her bare upper body.

She carefully kept her bandaged arm aloft, giving him a brief tantalizing glance of her royal attributes.

Han groaned loud enough that he feared discovery, before lowering his gaze to the greenery before him. With this violation of her privacy, he had just added Peeping Hutt to the growing list of his undesirable attributes. She resembled a water nymph, frolicking nude in the cool morning mists like some mythical creature. An inner voice reminded him of her violation of his privacy days before and he opened his eyes with a justified leer. Turnabout was fair play after all.

Looking wouldn't hurt anything.

Leia backed toward the shoreline, refreshed and invigorated. Her long dark hair hung to below her waist, nearly black against her ivory back and shoulders. Water dripped down her spine as she turned and began the climb to shore. She hesitated, cocked her head to listen, before moving onto the dry ground to the rock where her clothing lay, and wringing water from her hair.

Her face a mixture of uncertainty, she looked at the concealing shrubbery and swallowed nervously. She stood perfectly still.

What would she do if he went to her?

The sight of her nubile young flesh transfixed Han. Although not perfect, he doubted few would rival her. Holding his breath, he watched her dress and move off in the direction of the cave. Had he imagined the sound of her voice calling to him? He swallowed convulsively and couldn't move, as if his feet were glued to the ground.

Groaning aloud, he slid down behind the shrubs. What was wrong with him? Such a blatant invasion was not the act of a sane man. He fought hard to control his breathing and racing heart as he banished the lust from his mind. She's a kid. He thought angrily as he shoved the heels of his hands into his tired eyes and rubbed vigorously. No, she remained there in the glorious Technicolor of the rising sun, even with his eyes shut.

It wasn't his fault she didn't look around more carefully. A chuckle of appreciation escaped his lips as he slowly opened his eyes. With a wicked grin, Han rose and moved off toward the cave as well.

THE END

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