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Pursuit of the Heart Conclusion

by [Mikell Johnson](#)

The man could eat anything.

In the solitude of their makeshift retreat, Leia sat quietly watching Han devour the ration bar he had procured from his pack. Her own lay at her feet untouched, appreciation for cardboard never an acquired skill. Han ate with a relish that suggested he was dining on the finest cuisine from an upscale Imperial restaurant. She watched his full lips close on the brown bar and stared as his tongue swept out to take a crumb from his lip. His face was sporting stubble, but it only made him even more ruggedly handsome. Uncivilized. Menacing. Extremely dangerous for her.

"You gonna eat that or let it rot, your Highnessness?" He questioned as she was brought out of her silent thoughts. His hazel eyes were fixed with interest on her.

Leia suspected that Han had not been looking at her face a moment ago. She covered her chest with her bare arms. The shirt she wore was now sleeveless and opened. Modesty was a moot point by this time. Besides, it was just plain hot.

Han glanced at the tantalizing strip of bare midriff revealed beneath her folded arms. He had to appreciate what her newest hacking job revealed. Wincing, he contemplated the rebuke that he would receive for desecrating his uniform when they were found. Providing they were found. Spending a few more days in the presence of the woman who contradicted everything he had learned was both his worst nightmares come to life and a possibility that intrigued him.

Leia shot him a look of disgust, picked up the bar and tossed it at him. He caught it with a startled movement as she spoke. "Take it, I wouldn't dare touch it." She leaned back on her arms with a grunt of pain. Her wound healing for the most part, caused little discomfort and she pulled one knee closer to her body.

Han watched her bare knee moving side to side, nearly hypnotized by the rhythmic movement.

Leia frowned at his intense study of her knee. She had not apologized for punching him yesterday and she had no intentions of doing so. It was his fault. No man had ever wound her up like this. It took one simple gaze at her with those liquid green-gold eyes and she grew angry for no reason or forgot what she was angry about. He was so much more than just another Imperial lackey. His actions resembled those of an Imperial even less. She looked out of the corner of her eye at the handful of wildflowers he had brought in apology for his crude actions after she had struck him. He had taken the top of his water canteen and turned it into a makeshift vase quietly saying that he had no right to act the way he had. A man simply did not do that to his lady.

His lady...?

After the shock had faded from her eyes she realized he had not noticed his slip of that phrase. Leia was not sure how that made her feel.

Han had given her his survival knife, long and deadly, to make her trousers into shorts. For a moment she had considered turning the knife on him-- commit cold-blooded murder-- keep her impending capture from becoming a reality. With confusion, she had watched his bare back as he cleaned up the remains of their meal, appreciating the muscles that shifted gracefully beneath golden skin.

She rushed him, embedding the knife deep into his lower back where she punctured a kidney immobilizing him with the pain, pulling it back to slash down again and puncture a lung... It was so simple to plunge it yet again into his heart and watch as he bled slowly to death on the sandy ground, his life-force pooling before her, his essence dripping from her clothing as he struggled for his final breath. Feeling his dying eyes on her, knowing that she had taken his life and felt no remorse. She had never killed a being in cold blood, but Giles Durane had ensured that she would have that skill when called upon.

At that moment, Han had turned and looked deeply into her eyes bringing her out of her daydream. His eyes were naked and honest for a moment, then he half-smiled quickly and turned from her again. She felt the weight of the knife in her palm, gripped it tightly getting a feel for it and moved toward him quietly, indecision coloring her every step.

Han sensed Leia behind him. The look in her eyes had been unmistakable. She wanted to kill him. He waited curiously to see exactly what she would do.

She moved closer to him.

The knife flashed into his sight a micron before he prepared to spin away at the last moment and restrain her. He had sealed his own death warrant with that misjudgment, he realized. How had she surprised him?

The knife completed its downward arc embedding in its target.

Leia stood to her feet and smiled with reluctance. "Thanks for the knife, Solo. These pants were getting too hot for my tastes." Han stared at the sway of her hips and the expanse of her strong thighs and calves as she moved to clean up the bedroll. She looked good in those shorts. They were a bit too revealing, since she had been unable to judge the length well. A glint of metal glared at him from below as he stared at the knife embedded to the hilt into the hard ground beside his feet

Blue crystal skimmed along the shore, interrupted by the occasional ripples from a leaping fish farther away. The curious water dwellers moved closer to the slender form invading their sanctuary. Strong limbs cut through the water like streamlined arrows. Dividing and conquering the depths beneath her.

Now that her bandage was removed, Leia had been enjoying the total exhilaration of her long soak in the river. She pulled herself through the gentle waves roused by the breeze on the water. This adventure had spoiled her. The feel of the water caressing her bare skin was becoming as addictive as the touch of a lover. The face of a certain Imperial invaded her thoughts. It became more and more difficult to resist the attraction pulsating between them like an exotic dance-- the oldest dance in the universe-- one which sparked her curious nature.

She floated lazily on her back unafraid. Han had planned to once again spend the day combing their immense sanctuary for an escape route. Now that her wound was healed, he had informed her, he was more than anxious to return, thereby ending this strange alliance. Fine by her. Never in her life had she encountered a man more rude or egotistical than Han Solo. Granted her life did not include a great number of years, but she was a member of the most influential and high profile royal families in the known universe. Suffice it to say she knew a lot of people. He was crude, impulsive, reckless and a hundred other things that leapt to her mind-- none of them complimentary-- yet she could not dismiss him.

Her contemplative state was abruptly interrupted by a sudden cry of elation and a face full of water as she sunk below the slight tidal wave then came up sputtering and coughing. When she opened her eyes, she was face to face with Han, grinning for all he was worth like a mischievous Gran.

"Gotcha, Sweetheart!" He boasted, seemingly oblivious to her state of undress.

"What do you think you're doing, Solo?" Leia's arms went to automatically cover her bare but hidden breasts. "Get out!"

Han simply smiled even wider at the discomfit he caused her. "Why?" He teased moving even closer.

"I-I-I'm naked for one thing!" Her gaze dropped, her face brighter than the blazing sun setting beyond the ridge above them.

Han ducked under the water and came up wiping the hair from his forehead with a knowing grin before Leia could even squeak in protest. "So you are... I gotta tell you, Your Worship, you've got a great set of-

"Don't look at me!" she screeched. "You-you are such a- a- a man!"

His hands were up before him in mock defense. "I promise, Sweetheart, I didn't really look. It's too murky to see anything." She knew he lied.

Leia's mouth slammed down into a thin anger-filled slash.

"I think I'm in trouble..." Han finished, laughing. "Don't feel too bad, Your Worship."

Han leaned too close for comfort. His nearness reminded her that she was unclothed and she was in the same pool as a man-- a man whom she hated but could barely resist. And, she had to depend on some to survive. The heat radiating off of his body as he stood inches from her in waist deep water nearly suffocated her.

"I'm as bare as the day I was born," he confessed quietly.

The water sloshed around his hips as Leia nearly leapt from it. Her eyes tripled in size as she moved back, terror, rage, and a terrible curiosity warring for dominance on her face.

"Y-You-You're what?" She screamed. Some nearby avians took flight with a fearful squawk, shadowing the figures in the water momentarily. She stared unblinking at his devilish smile.

"I said I'm naked too, doll." He started to back slowly, his eyes never wavering from hers. "Come here and I'll show you." A quirk of his eyebrows dared her.

"Nooo!" She pleaded. "That's far enough Han."

"Aww... come on Your Holiness, where's your sense of adventure?" He slowly moved further back and put a suggestive little sway to his nearly unsubmerged hips. "It's not like you haven't seen it all before now."

A small gasp at his audacity was quickly covered by a distinctively rude snort. "Once was quite enough, Commander Solo." Leia mustered all the regality and disinterest that she could into her voice, while her body trembled in nervous anticipation. "I wasn't impressed then and I certainly won't be a second time, believe me...The thrill is gone."

Han 's face flashed from disbelief to determination. "Fine, your Worshipfulness. Then I guess a little reminder won't do a thing for you." He lunged for her, capturing her wrist, but her wet skin slipped away too easily. His prize eluded him as she screamed and whirled from his grasp. The water sloshed into Han's face as she both ran and swam for the opposite shore.

Han smacked the water open-palmed with an audible curse. "Leia! Look I'm sorry... Oh come on, Princess, I was only teasing you." His body splashed through the water determined to make amends. "Come on Leia, its okay. I promise I won't bite." His touch was gentle now. "I've seen you naked, you might as well enjoy yourself now." His lips twitched with the hint of a smile as she looked suspiciously at him.

Come on Leia, live a little... Winter's voice rushed into her brain to taunt her.

Skinny-dipping with a man? It had been different sneaking off with a group of girls during a sleepover. Who would ever know, but Han and her?

"Well," she began hesitantly. "I guess there's no harm in it. After all I saw you naked and I wasn't impressed."

Han's mouth flew open insulted by her insinuations.

She fought back a giggle.

Han stiffened visibly as she moved closer. He seemed on the verge of an insult, but decided against it. Instead, he sighed and dared ask, "Do you want to be impressed?"

Her eyebrows lifted and her head tilted curiously, considering.

"Interested?" He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

Leia bit her lip softly. They were playing with fire.

"It might be interesting to give you a second chance..."

If the ground opened up and swallowed them whole, Han would not have been more shocked. He threw his head back in hearty laugh, then dove for her. Leia twisted to the side and easily evaded his attack.

"Missed. I always knew you Imperials couldn't aim." Her eyes were alight with a mischievous gleam, her laughter infectious.

Han admired the playfulness of the girl she had once been. He dove after her and she squealed.

"Counterattack!" Han screamed as he caught her by the leg and pulled her beneath the surface. She coughed and gasped as Han pulled her back up, pausing in mid tirade to laugh.

"Pig!"

"Ain't I though, woman?" His insolent wink sparked her angry temper.

"Solo, you are one egotistical, insincere--" She hushed at the look of panic that flitted across his tanned face.

"Leia honey... don't move..." He moved quietly toward her, his fear keeping her still.

Unbeknownst to her a meter long water ghost floated curiously about her body, circling indecisively. Its rounded head raising from the water, forked tongue moving in an out. Fangs glistened below the clear deadened eyes. Its webbed feet pulled its diaphanous body along until it brushed Leia's leg, feeling so much like wet sandpaper scraping across her.

Unprepared but warned by Han's panicked actions, Leia stood statue still and lowered only her eyes. She fought back a cry of terror at what waited below and willed herself not to even breathe. Han was within touching distance now.

He moved no closer to her, stopping at the hiss that issued from the mouth of the deadly creature below her. It seemed to lose interest in her and moved toward Han stealthily.

Han patted the water behind him softly, enticing its curiosity for waves of movement and sound.

He stopped as soon as the creature was an inch from him. "Leia when I say go you take off for shore and do not stop. No matter what do not come back. You know how serious this is right?"

Leia nodded wordlessly, her eyes glued to the poisonous, aquatic version of a bloodsniffer.

"Now, slowly ease your way back."

She forced her steps to be slow and undetectable. She had never dealt with a water ghost.

With a hiss the creature whirled around and started toward the newer disturbance.

Leia's eyes widened in horror as time stilled. She was aware of Han's distorted cry, the blurred sight of his hands waving at her, his face a mask of terror as his body flew from the water and landed with a splash nearly atop the monstrosity.

Leia whirled and ran, water slowing her, making her strides short and choppy, but soon she pulled herself from the water and quickly moved toward her clothing.

Behind her a battle raged.

Han leapt from the water toward Leia, his one thought on her safety, landing nearly atop a hissing bundle of leathery flesh and sinew. Webbed talons sought to tear the skin from his back as he held the creature away with an adrenaline-enhanced strength. With a twist and mighty heave of its tail the water ghost freed itself to make a final attack.

Han screamed as the sharp teeth tore into his leg. Fire lanced through his limb, and he could feel the poison rapidly moving through his veins, the barbed tongue slipping easily into the wound. With the last of his strength he flung the hissing creature far into the air and turned to head to the shore. Shapes became shadows and finally faded as he fought to pull himself to shore. His breathing slowed and he had no breath to call for her help. He focused through the pain on her essence, gaining power and direction.

Leia.

He was almost to her.

Help me...

He could sense her near though his sight was fading.

Leia--

She jumped as a trembling hand fell against her and slid heavily away.

"L-L-Leia..." The strangled rasp of his voice was the first indicator that all was not right although he was still alive. A small miracle that.

Leia gasped loudly as she took in Han's appearance. There was an unhealthy pallor on his tanned face. The hazel eyes seemed sunken as he gasped for breath painfully. His entire body shook as if in subzero weather. She had seen him this way in her murderous vision the previous afternoon, but was fairly certain she had no knife.

"Han?"

His eyes rolled back in his head and he slid with a thud to the sandy ground.

"Han--what's wrong--Han?" Her hands were shaking like a leaf as she dropped to the ground beside him and rolled him to his side to get a better look. He was beginning to convulse gently, building into a full-blown seizure as she scanned his body frantically for signs of trauma. "Han--"

"B-b-bit..." he struggled, barely audible although she was only inches from his lips.

She smothered a cry.

Water ghosts were the bloodsniffers of the aquatic world. She had thought them nearly extinct. Their bite was deadly, usually killing the victim within thirty minutes. Leia realized what a strong spirit he must possess to still be cognizant. Already that poison would be taking effect on his senses... sight first then hearing, until he could neither move nor breathe.

Tears slipped down her face. Well she had wanted an escape and here it was. She started to rise to her feet, pulling away from the man with whom she had lived the last few days of her life. Han's terrified cry caused her to pause in mid-step.

"Leia, don't leave me!" His fingers dug into the graininess beneath him and pulled with all the strength remaining in his convulsing body. He was coming closer, searching for her presence even in the throes of his death. "Antidote... pocket kit..."

Leia hesitated. Antidotes could be nearly as traumatic as the bite itself in most cases, giving the victim a slow agonizing death if the poison had already advanced too far into the system instead of a painful but quick demise provided by the poison taking its natural course. Even with an antidote, the bite of a water ghost was usually fatal. She at least owed him the chance to survive; Han had basically done the same for her. Or she could watch as he faded into unconsciousness and finally died wordlessly beside her.

Han cried out once again and she was spurred into action. Heading into the shrubbery, she tore through the trees and rocks bare-footed, heedless of the stones cutting into the tender flesh of her feet. Her hair slapped around her face, mingling with the tears she now let fall freely as she at last reached the cave. Sobs broke as she desperately searched the cave.

"Where is it?" She screamed, looking toward the heavens, silently begging for intervention. At last she spotted his jacket --behind the rock where an interrupted game of Sabaac still flashed with a neon glow, then fizzled and died with a whine.

Han lay as still as death when she stumbled gasping from the trees. She ripped open the bag containing the poison bite kit and spilled the contents beside him.

"Where did it bite you?" Her voice broke as she desperately looked his face over, his neck, his shoulders.

Han raised one hand feebly and pointed down. "There..." he mumbled incoherently as he lay his hand on his thigh with the remaining strength he possessed. It slipped heavily to the ground.

"Figures..." Leia grumbled as she reached the rubber tourniquet down and slipped it around his bare thigh, and tried her best to not look as she tied the strip as tightly as she could. Averting her eyes, she reached down to retrieve a bottle of medication.

"This should keep the poison from entering your brain, though I don't think there would be much danger of that since you don't possess one." She forced the purple tablet between his closed lips with a grunt. The man was stubborn, even in the shadow of death. Belatedly she realized that there was no air escaping between those lips, blue as the water before her. She placed her ear to his lips.

Nothing...

"Han!" She screamed.

He was still, no air escaping his full lips, no pulse at his throat.

With a cry of anguish, Leia tilted his head, pinched his nostrils tightly and lowered her mouth over his, forcing her life into him. "Stang! Come on Solo, don't you check out on me like this!" She screeched as she placed her palms over his heart and pushed with all of her strength. On the last thrust, she moved back to his lips, cold beneath her, lifeless, unmoving. An Organa never gave up that easily. She repeated the process mechanically, knowing in her heart that it was all in vain. In that moment, she realized how she had come to care for this intriguing man. He'd made an unbearable situation nearly tolerable with his boyish charm and never-ending wittiness. Suddenly she could not bear the thought of being alone in the wilderness without him. Her quick thrusts against his chest became rapid blows raining down from both of her fists shaking his entire body until in desperation she doubled her fist and struck him with all the force she could muster. Again. Again. Harder.

"Nooo!!!" With one strangled cry Leia lay her head over his dead heart, her arms clutching his once powerful chest. A power she had never felt before rolled through her body. *Live...live...live... Come back to me... I love you...* She demanded silently, confessed reluctantly, and prayed desperately. An invisible power coursed through her veins like lightning, igniting her blood and shooting from her body into the motionless body beneath her.

It had to be a dream...

Han floated above, and could see Leia frantically working over him. He had never seen her cry. She was just as beautiful in her anguish as in her joy, so vulnerable and scared, folded over him, her skin a perfect creamy contrast to his own. Tears slipped down her soft cheeks, sparkling like precious diamonds as they slid between her lips or farther onto his own bare chest, pooling and casting a light more brilliant than a billion stars.

One...two...three...four...five... He watched as she thrust against his chest with enough force to break ribs, but he felt nothing. Those perfect lips touched his and he lamented the fact that he felt nothing. There was a brilliant white light just beyond his vision, demanding his attention. He turned toward it. With a great ache at leaving her alone, he stood and began moving toward that beautiful brightness... so warm... so enticing... so perfect.

His head whipped around, Leia's anguished cry more than he could stand. A powerful voice came from behind him. "We are waiting son, come into the light.."
Faces he had never known yet were disturbingly familiar appeared in the mists surrounding him. Wizened creatures, humanoids, aliens all with brown robes light

swords raised in salute to welcome to him. He was tortured and tantalized in the same moment.

Live...

Han could not ignore that gentle call.

Live...

The tender plea pulled at him more than the loud cries of the figures surrounding him. He was engulfed in a blue light-- comforting and healing at once-- as he turned from the figures and moved in obedience to that gentle plea.

Live...

Han felt himself falling, gently at first gaining speed as he lost consciousness.

Come back to me...

He had to obey.

I love you...

He was engulfed in a wave of love and pain as he returned to his body with a jolt.

The small movement turned into a full-blown spasm as one long gasp escaped from the depths of Han's soul, and he began coughing uncontrollably.

Leia pushed back in shock. He had been dead... his body lifeless and cold. Deciding to ponder this later, she shoved the antidote pill into his mouth and pushed it down his throat with one trembling finger as he inhaled sharply and nearly gagged from her intrusion. The vial with the bloodstream antidote bumped against her bare thigh, so she grasped it tightly. As the injection gun forced the liquid through his skin and into his compromised blood vessels, he groaned loudly.

Now the waiting could begin.

The sounds of the forest assaulted Han first. Chirping avians, chattering insects, hissing snakes and creatures, the breaking of gentle waves upon the shore screamed painfully into his sensitized ears. The rich smell of earth and animal matter nearly suffocated him. The cool night air razed his upper body as the sandy ground beneath scraped painfully at his backside. A cacophony of sensations, but beneath all of the chaos, Leia quietly inhaled and exhaled

beneath his head and chest. Her enticing scent filled his nostrils as he breathed in. The skin of her chest and abdomen rubbed as softly as silk against his back, even the scrape of lace felt as comforting as the warm woolen blanket engulfing them both. Her firm muscular thighs slid alongside his as he moved, anchoring them to the solid earth.

Without warning came the pain, a dull ache, beginning in his legs then radiating out into an uncomfortable pulsation all over his body. His veins suddenly caught fire, every sinew registering the slow agonizing reversal of the poison invading his system. He cried out in panic as the process began in earnest.

The battle for his life waged on.

Beneath the unbearable torment, sat Leia, her slender arms wrapped tightly about his shoulders and chest, taking his great heaving breaths into her body wordlessly. Han calmed at the comforting touch of her soft hands simultaneously stroking his arms and dragging a cold wet cloth across the inferno of his face. He couldn't understand her murmuring, only knew that she was here, he was not alone. He reached for her essence in the raging storm entrapping his body, and clung to her in desperation.

Leia brushed a lock of hair from Han's eyes, as he thrashed wildly against her. Inside her heart a similar battle waged. Love and hate tread a fine line. On the one hand stood Commander Solo, the Imperial, and all the universal evil that he represented. On the other hand stood Han, the way his eyes lit up when he was amused and his smile melted the ice surrounding her heart. The way he treated her in those unguarded moments, bringing her flowers, risking his life to save hers, clinging to her in slumber... the trust he had demonstrated...all contradicted the Imperial she had despised in the beginning. How perfectly unsuited for each other they seemed one moment and so perfectly matched the next! The sparks between them had evolved into something so much more than a mere girlish infatuation and she found that knowledge disturbing. Whenever Han dared to look into her eyes, she could see that he shared her confusion, and it terrified her.

She snapped out of her reverie as a pain-wracked moan escaped from his pale lips, lips that had pressed against hers and wiped every last thought of escapement from her mind. His gasping breaths of pain, increased in volume before he tossed his head uncontrollably from side to side. The grip on her arms tightened, bringing tears of pain to her half-closed eyes as Han clenched and unclenched his hands. Those same dexterous hands had divested her of her shirt in complete frustration, had doctored her wound, and had most lovingly caressed her face before he had kissed her. His eyes, tightly shut against the pain wracking his body, provided an endless source of fascination. With no truly definitive color, the hazel orbs wavered between moss green and gold with his changing moods. Silently she urged him to open them.

Seemingly, he obeyed as his eyes shot wide open and he gasped out a strangled sobbing cough. His eyes darted around their surroundings in confusion, a frown etched upon his rugged features as he tried to move. A heavy descent back onto her small frame followed his grunt of pain. He lived.

"C-c-c-cold--" Han rasped, as his body shook violently against her. She could hear his teeth chattering beneath her.

"That's just the after effects of the antidote... Hush... Just lie still..." Leia softly whispered into his ear, her lips brushing across the sensitive skin as she spoke, comforting him.

His body melted into her welcoming warmth, his mind inscribing the softness of her cheek against his as she tightened her arms about him. The pleasing sensation of gossamer-soft lips brushed his cheek.

Leia... His Leia...

His pain-filled gasps soon quieted to harsh wheezing and an occasional cough. "W-w-what happened?" His shivering lessened and she hesitantly loosened her death grip, although Han kept her arms trapped against his chest. His fingers clasped her tiny hands beneath his chin.

Leia trembled as his lips pressed onto her captured hands, but she recovered her demeanor quickly.

"Oh nothing much..." She could not hide the relief in her voice. "You just stumbled across the rarest most deadly serpent on this moon. We were beginning to think that the water ghost had gone extinct on us. The society for rare marine life will thank you, I'm sure. That was quite an accomplishment."

His eyes widened and he strained to turn and face her, but was too weak. With a gasp his eyes unexpectedly rolled back and he threw himself forward rolling to his back, breathing erratically.

"Han?" Leia struggled to regain her hold on him, being pulled down atop him, despite her efforts. "Han-- what is it? Can you breathe? Does it hurt? What's wrong?"

Beneath her face, a low rumble began and grew in volume.

"Gotcha Sweetheart!" He choked out weakly. Even incapacitated he teased her relentlessly.

Leia pushed back from him venom in her eyes as she pierced him with a cold accusative stare. "You slimy piece of worm-ridden -- " She hauled him toward her

with both of her hands trapping the blanket about his neck like a noose, ignoring his labored breathing. "You swine! I thought you were-- How dare you do that to me?" Han's face was a breath away from hers. "Why I should just--"

Han opened his mouth to protest his innocence, but her eyes spoke volumes-- confusion, pain, and a desperate longing she had no control over. He was unprepared, yelping as her head swiftly lowered toward him, taking his mouth with hers, hungry and desperate.

His kiss had been impulsive and tender, seduction his goal. Hers was uncontrollable fire. She bruised his mouth as her teeth rammed his lips forcing a response from him. It was all he could do to cling to her weakly in the ensuing punishment.

*This is wrong. *

A voice in the back of his mind intruded and he forced his arms to shove her away. Lowering his forehead to rest against hers, he tried to catch his breath without much success. In time he lifted his eyes to hers, his forehead still linked to her.

She looked nothing so much as a lioness, readying herself for the kill. Han gasped loudly and held her at arms' length, his torturous breathing even more compromised from their exertions.

"Stop this Leia, now!" His eyes held hers for a long intense minute until she looked away, both shame-faced and wild-eyed.

Her voice was barely a whisper as she spoke. "Don't ever frighten me like that again! I thought... I thought I had lost you..." There was a definite crack in her voice as she spoke. "Would you even care?" He accused her coldly as she rose and stood to her feet. Both had forgotten their current state of undress. Han sucked in his breath at the sight of her, creamy skin surrounded by the black lace of her undergarments.

Her eyes lowered to stare at her feet, before she answered him. "Unfortunately Han, I do care..." Her long hair glistened in the moonlight, as she wrapped her arms around her slight waist, raising her face to the heavens as if searching for something elusive. Moving to sit on the rock just above his view she brought her legs up against her chest and wrapped her arms about them, a pain-filled sigh escaping from her lips. "But, that is the one thing I should never do... that I will not do...I'm sorry..."

Han pulled himself painfully to rest his back against the solid rock on which she perched, her back to him. He inhaled deeply, exhaling painfully as he pulled the blanket to his shoulders. "I'm sorry too..." He whispered.

Silence permeated the night sky above. Not another word was spoken, but two tormented souls railed and raged long into the night.

There was an uncomfortable dissonance between Han and Leia that had not been there before. And, it was tearing Han apart.

He lay beside Leia this night, after much protest, under the pretense of conserving their body heat-- but he did not sleep. Han fought a constant battle to not pull her into his arms with every small wiggle and turn she made pressing her soft body against his. He was slowly being driven insane, but by what he refused to acknowledge fully. With a sigh of exasperation, he disengaged her arms from him and hurried out the cave to the river.

Scanning the inky surface for any unwelcome visitors, he began stripping off his clothes diving quickly into the freezing black waters before he could change his mind.

His body numbed the moment it sliced through the icy surface. Han stayed beneath the water, becoming one with the waves that rippled above his head. Still not quite whole after his battle with death, he was forced to dash to the surface sooner than he hoped. With a loud shout he submerged and began swimming with powerful lazy strokes toward the opposite side. The moonlight shone brightly, highlighting his aquatic activity. A tightly muscled limb swung around and plunged back through the glassy surface of the water, followed by another, pulling his well-defined shoulders, back and hips through the water gracefully. Methodically, long muscular legs moved in time with his strokes. He resembled a streamlined machine in the water. Breathing deeply and orderly as he reached the opposite shore, he maneuvered his body through an underwater turn before breaking the surface and repeating his routine. Adrenaline pushed him beyond exertion.

In the water, he could think clearly or not think at all. If only he could think of something besides her, dismiss the way her eyes sparkled when she laughed or flashed like lightning when she was irate. He refused to see her hair spread about her as she slept there beside him fitting to him perfectly when he did not keep himself at arms' length. His mind went once again to her hungry conquest of his lips after he had tried to lighten her mood following his brush with death. Her quiet admittance that she cared still sent his senses reeling.

Her haughty demeanor no longer fooled him. Passion lurked beneath her hardened shell-- passion that he could sense not only when he had kissed her, but also when she talked of someday defeating the Empire, or even when she had desperately tried to bring him back to the world of the living. Although they argued inevitably on the subject of their opposing philosophies, Han could feel

his arguments weakening-- no longer sure of exactly what he wanted. He argued less vehemently on the rightness of the Empire and began to listen to her persuasive arguments for rebellion. In his own heart, he realized that where he had once turned a blind eye or deaf ear to methods used by his superiors, he was beginning to look at them with doubts clouding his mind.

He wondered in confused silence if he ever had believed in what he was fighting for. Had he ever believed in anything but his own brand of luck, simple but effective Corellian tricks and the nonsense that shaped his life? Had he ever believed in anything as whole-heartedly as Leia Organa believed in the rightness of the Rebellion? He would give his life for the Empire, but only because it had been indoctrinated into his mind since the academy. Leia would die for a cause that she logically had no reason to believe in, that had done nothing for her.

Before pursuing this disturbing woman-child, Han's mission in life had been to serve the Empire in all of its glory, to make his dead, drunken stepfather eat his words. Prove Garris Shrike wrong in all of his predictions. Now, he feared what would happen to her if his squad, surely in pursuit by this point, found them. His thoughts turned reluctantly to keeping Leia safe. Her injury and his attack had kept them from actively trying to escape their prison. Perhaps they should try to get themselves out of this jam, before he began to actively pursue her-- or she let herself be caught once again.

Leia almost felt comfortable around Han Solo, to her utmost confusion, despite the fact that he was an Imperial. Han was recounting for a second time a specifically amusing tale of his involvement in blowing up the Mascot Moon of the Imperial Training Academy as she again took her turn in electronic Sabaac. Leia laughed in disbelief as he spun his tale.

"Like I said we were drunk." He scratched his head. "I never was a good drunk, but I had a good example. "

Leia wondered at his cryptic words.

"We built this huge bonfire and sat around getting wasted. Mako hit the switch and POW! No , more Mascot Moon." He shook his head as she listened. " We roasted marshmallows as the damned thing burned to a husk."

Leia grinned back and laughed until Han grew more serious.

"The next day, our instructors hit us for information. All us guys who had been out there were questioned. Mako gave in under the pressure. " He bowed his head. "There was a big trial. We were all scared to death. Mako wanted to take the

blame all alone. He said it was a way to get out without having to go against his pop's wishes."

She leaned closer to hear him, as his words were a mere whisper.

"Mako was dishonorably discharged from the academy. On the way home he crashed his ship." His voice trembled. "If he had just let me admit I helped make the bomb, you know. I would have been able to fly with him. We could have gone off somewhere else. Or I would have flown--I always was a better pilot than him. Damn fool, never did care enough about himself."

She pulled his warm shirt closer, the soft fabric sliding over her like the finest silk as she sat beside him. Nearby, the fire blazed weakly as a breeze once again threatened to extinguish it. Shadows danced upon the stone walls, larger than life in one minute and shrinking to nothingness the next.

Leia pulled her bare legs up against her chest, regretting her rash decision days before to rip the legs of her pants to make-- as her aunts would say-- indecently short shorts. Han had given her his knife without hesitation. The thought of her turning it on him had seemingly never entered his mind.

Leia shivered and cocked her head, reaching the black plasticene rectangle toward him. "I've heard of that little prank, Han." She attempted to loosen his mood after he had shared his guilt. She stroked her chin thoughtfully wrinkling her brow in a mockery of concentration before continuing. "I wonder what the reward for turning you in would be?"

Han lifted his eyes from the game as their fingers brushed against each other. Her eyes shot up quickly and did not lower as they once had. Encouraged, Han leaned closer his eyes flashing at her with a mischievous light. "You rat on me and I'm taking you in, Your Worshipfulness, " he said in mock seriousness but frowned as her face fell and the laughter faded from her eyes. Her hand dropped from his immediately.

"But, you are going to turn me in, Han. As soon as we're found , they'll send me to an Imperial prison camp... If they even bother. More than likely, they'll execute me as an example to other potential Rebels." She covered her fear with bravado and nonchalance as usual. " It doesn't matter to me, but that's what will happen." The tears swam in her eyes as she turned from him.

Han sobered quickly and turned off the game. Laying it aside, he looked up at her through hooded eyes as she turned back to face him. "Uh... yeah I guess that kind of puts a damper on our non-relationship, huh?" He reached for her hand slowly once again. When he touched her trembling fingers, he squeezed gently and slid his fingers between hers without another word.

Leia stared down at their entwined fingers for a long moment then spoke almost too softly for him to hear. "How can you--" she spit out unable to finish as she clamped her teeth down painfully on the inside of her lip. She'd be damned if he'd see her cry.

"If I could get you out of here by myself, Sweetheart, then I would," he spoke with an emotion she did not expect. Her heart broke painfully, as she stood silently to her feet and wrapped her arms tightly around her sides. "Oh Kest Leia, please don't ... I can't stand it. It's tearing me apart just thinking about it. Please don't cry, Sweetheart..."

Suddenly his arms were around her, pulling her to him possessively, trying to protect her from the inevitable. Deep shuddering breaths rushed from his mouth as he indulged his desire to hold her as he had longed to do those nights she slept beside him.

Her own trembling arms clung tightly to him then loosened. " Han...?" Her voice was barely audible as she breathed him in. "I feel safe with you. I can't explain it... Have you ever heard a more absurd statement? It's not like I don't know it's a contradiction to everything you represent in my life, but whether I like it or not, I do." Her arms tightened around his waist, and she continued. "I guess it has to do with you saving my life--some kind of doctor-patient thing. How else can you explain it? I owe you one." She raised her head and looked at his lopsided grin. "Don't get cocky, you nerf-herder." Without another word, she lowered her head back to his bare chest.

Han smiled into her hair and inhaled the earthy scent, closing his eyes a whisper of a sigh escaping from his lips. What was it about this woman--this girl that stirred his heart in this way? It was as if nothing existed except a man and a woman. No Empire No Rebellion. He suddenly wished that they could stay lost indefinitely.

The tendrils of her hair gently caressed his lips as he spoke softly, his tone heartfelt, frightening. " Well then princess we're about even, 'cause you literally pulled me back from beyond... I owe you my life too."

You already have my heart...

It took him a second to realize that her small hands were caressing his back. He traversed the length of her spine, encouraging her to press more fully against him. "You are safe Leia... I do care about what happens to you, despite all that I've done to convince you--" 'And myself--' he inserted silently. "-- to convince you otherwise. You've got to know by now that I don't want to take you back... I know what they do to female prisoners all too well."

He squeezed her more tightly, the horrors he'd seen surfacing reluctantly behind his eyes. Guilty by association, he had chosen to stand by and do nothing.

"I don't think I could stand it knowing that was happening to you. That I couldn't get to you..." His large hands took her by the face, his thumbs gently sliding across her half-parted lips, his eyes darkening as he demanded her full attention. "I promise you that I will find a way. I swear by all my clan name stands for." It took him a moment to gather his senses as she looked into his soul.

Their eyes met and locked speaking volumes. Then Leia broke the silent conversation's spell. " Han...?"

Though they spoke no words, Han knew. He felt this same overwhelming desire to throw aside their adversarial battle gear and engage each other on a much sweeter battlefield. It was her heart he could hear demanding to know if he was willing to sacrifice what he admitted to himself that he no longer believed in to be with her.

He nodded slowly in response to her wordless question, and reached out to brush the hair gently from her face, his fingertips lightly stroking, rough against smooth, wiping away a salty tear she had been unable to hold back as he moved his face closer to hers.

*This is wrong... *

A mere centim from her he exhaled softly... defeated. The breath whispered over her trembling mouth as her eyes lost some of their hardness and her lips parted in frightened anticipation. Han closed his eyes, trapped her face between his finely trembling hands and after a moment of indecisiveness touched his lips to hers. Nothing more.

Tempting. Forbidden. She was defenseless.

Leia's hands flew up to his and he feared she might pull away as before. He kept his lips upon hers, still and waiting, watching her beneath half-shut eyes. Tentatively, her small shaking fingers caressed his before interlacing and squeezing tightly in acquiescence. Her mouth moved against his nearly imperceptibly as she gave her silent permission to continue.

It felt so right. His lips stroked the corner of her mouth, still uncertain. Her cheek. Her jaw.

He placed tiny nibbling kisses around her lips, his tongue and lips sweeping fleetingly over her soothing the sensitized skin as he murmured unintelligible words against her heated flesh. Giving in, Han slid one hand behind her neck

and the other down to pull her waist tightly into him. She struggled for a moment then moaned as he deepened the kiss.

She was so tired of fighting.

Leia's pulse spiraled out of control. Never had she been kissed as this. It felt as if her body was no longer under her control. Her arms laced around his neck of their own volition, more a desperate clinging than a gesture of passion. Those lips were slowly divesting her of any resistance, any coherence, as she swooned against him trusting him to guide her through the amorous journey on which they'd embarked. She moved backward, yet her feet barely touched the ground, as she was lost to his ministrations. The cold damp cave faded away and the only thing she could feel or hear was the erratic beating of his heart against hers. She melted into him, suppressing a gasp as she felt them sinking to the blankets of the bedroll. Leia focused on her rapid breathing, feeling his shuddering breaths against her mouth. His hand moving slowly down her shoulder stole her last shred of opposition.

Han raised his head; eyes half shut against the inevitable reality of the moment. From above her, he dared to look into Leia's flush face. She was beautiful--her long hair mussed from his hands brushing through the soft locks, lips swollen and slick from his passionate kiss, eyes gazing hungrily at him behind the innocent surprise on her face. He knew in that moment that he could easily fall in love with this woman. His heart told him that he'd already fallen. Leia's own gaze declared her mutual, if unwelcome, feelings for him. He stared at his hand, clasped tightly around the strap of black lace that had fallen to his ministrations. Her creamy skin. Her young innocent eyes. Her face was a mask of trust, which he did not deserve.

Han swallowed visibly and pushed back from her. "No--I can't do this... This isn't right. " He stumbled to his feet though every nerve in his body cried out to be with her, become one, relieve the ache.

Leia stared in outright disbelief as she slowly climbed to her knees, pulling the strap back up her arm. "What?" She reached out and took hold of his arm, her nails digging in painfully as he tried to move farther from her. "Why-- why did you stop?" She demanded her passion-laden voice husky and --

Han forcibly removed her hand from him and turned halfway from her. His face turned toward her, allowing her a glimpse of his eyes dark with need, betraying his intent. "Sith's sake Leia--I'm an Imperial officer--you're a Rebel... I can't forget that we're enemies. I didn't think you could either."

Her head dropped toward her chest, the realization of what she had nearly allowed him to do hitting home with the force of a laser bolt set for kill. She glared at him, all semblance of passion erased and replaced with suspicion. "So all that

talk of not fully agreeing with what the Empire stands for, about caring for me was just a bunch of lies for my benefit?" She paled before continuing. "All that to get me to sleep with you?" Her chest rose and fell erratically as she stood as still as stone, her narrowed eyes on fire.

Han cringed at the poison in her voice. "No Leia not that. Never that..." He reached out and took her chin in his large hand, his gentle touch belying his strength. "I don't know how I feel about anything right now... I hate feeling this out of control!" He could not think clearly-- he had to get away.

Leia slapped his hand from her face like an unwelcome pest. "So if I sleep with you will you let me go?" Her shoulders shook with anger like he had never seen before.

"No- Leia-- don't!" He was nearly shouting in his frustration. " You don't know what you are saying! You're seventeen for Star's sake!" He grasped her slight shoulders so tightly that she thought he might break the bones there. "Don't degrade this into something that doesn't mean anything to either of us." He was shaking her violently threatening to lose control of his emotions, so unlike himself. "You are still practically a child. I couldn't debase you like that, and I won't let you do it for me!" Frustration radiated off his body in great waves. "Leia, look at me!"

Han forced her face to look into his. There she saw his dilemma. In the same instant his entire soul was laid bare to her, naked and vulnerable, and painfully human. "I know its wrong to feel this way about you!" He was shaking her now, seemed unable to stop even when tears slid stubbornly down her pale cheeks.

Leia, still an Organa, could not let him get in the last word. "I don't know Commander, you've aroused my... curiosity. I find myself wanting to know if you are as good as you seem to insinuate you are!" She brazenly trailed her finger down his bare chest.

Han sucked in a harsh breath as her touch inflamed him, leaving a burning trail all down his body.

" I am far from a child! I am in the running for a Senate position, no child would even be considered for that." Her breaths were strained, as she fought to gain control of the situation and her own traitorous body through vindictive words. Her brown eyes had gone black with a mixture of hatred and desire, her face flushed, her nostrils flaring like those of a proud mare. "I turned eighteen two days ago. Do I understand you correctly Commander? Is that how this game is played? Does my age change any of this!"

"You don't know what you want..." Han finished weakly.

"But I know what you want."

"Look, sweetheart, this ain't some dreamy fairy tale where you wake up and live happily ever after." Han raged. "If you sleep with the enemy. You'll wake up with the enemy. When I kiss you I ain't turning into some prince."

"No when you kiss me I feel like I'm already dead." She shot back angrily.

The poison ravaging his body days ago had not caused the pain that her words now did. He held up a warning finger. "Leia... don't! I'm warning you..." His voice was husky and dangerous unbeknownst to the infuriated Princess before him.

"I wish you were dead!"

The shadow of Han's towering form fell over her. His face was shrouded in the darkness of the cave, and she could not distinguish his features. She swallowed the lump of fear nervously.

"Shut your lying little mouth!" Fury rolled off his dark frame like a force storm as he hissed. "You are the most vindictive, uncaring, spoiled rotten little... Rebel I've ever had the displeasure of capturing! And believe me my squad has captured our fair share of lovely Rebels!" He tossed his hands into the air angrily, snorting in frustration. "How did I ever fall in love with you? Believe me you didn't make it easy."

Her eyes had grown wide and she held her breath, at once speechless.

"So that's all it takes to shut you up, huh"

Her mouth opened and closed without a sound.

"Well say something, Princess." His voice dripped with sarcasm as he cocked his head, his hands going to his hips, and looked at her expectantly, eyes flaring. The muscles in his strong jaw twitched from where he clenched his teeth tightly together, the only outward sign of his precarious control.

"W- why didn't you tell me?" She spoke softly, in shock.

"Would it have mattered?" Accusation lay beneath his question.

"It might have!" Leia shot back, her fury building once again.

"Well it doesn't to me!" His fingers bit into her shoulder as his voice rose in volume. "Don't you understand, Princess? I can't feel anything for you! I won't..." He shoved her frame aside roughly and moved toward the cave entrance.

Turning slightly toward her-- his face in profile, half softly aglow from the dying firelight half in shadowy darkness--he spoke. "I don't want to love you!"

Leia stared incredulously as Han fled into the night. The adrenaline drained from her. Suddenly her legs would no longer support her and she slid with a thump to the earthen floor. She gazed questioningly upward at the darkening cave. Almost reverently she touched her fingers to kiss swollen lips, a small grin of triumph appearing beneath her confusion. "Feeling's mutual, Flyboy."

Han Solo sat upon a large rock by the water's edge in silent contemplation. He tugged off his boots and socks and rolled up the legs of his pants before shedding his heavy jacket. Wading out into the cold water, he stopped before the knees of his trousers were completely covered and scouted the lakebed for a moment while he bent over to select a few smooth round stones. He brought up his hand, dripping with water that resembled tiny jewels in the twilight. The weight of the stones in his palm was comfortingly familiar to him. He moved his fingers slowly letting the stones move against each other, testing their weight for the perfect one. Color. Texture. Circumference.

Splash...skid... skid...skid...plop.

The rhythmic sound soothed him much as it had when he was a lad. He recalled his childhood and skipping many a stone after his "father" had severely punished him. Garris Shrike had been no improvement, so the tradition had continued as Han went back and forth between his two tormentors. Han Solo did not have the happy, carefree upbringing that the young princess back in the cave obviously had. His had been a series of severe beatings and torturous words. The only respite coming when his "father" had lain on the couch drunk, oblivious to him and his mother. Han had overcome the bitterness caused by living with a drunken, sick old man, but he had never forgotten the feelings of worthlessness and shame. Could Leia not see that he was unworthy? If he were not an Imperial...

Well then what would you be?

His only feelings of pride or accomplishment were the stripes he wore upon his shoulder and chest. Not bad for this little Corellian bastard, huh pop? He had done far better than predicted by his "father", who had expected Han to venture no farther than the nearest penitentiary, as he claimed the Little Bastard's real father had. He wished yet again that he had known his real father. He had died when Han was very young; all he remembered was images. Kindness. Love.

After the death of his mother, Han had run away to join his friends at Shrike's permanently. His many years with Garris Shrike after the timely death of his

stepfather had almost ensured that he fulfilled their prophecy. It had been a hard life. Picking pockets. Running scams. More shady activities than he cared to recall.

He had been on both sides of the law during those years with Shrike, always fearing Shrike would turn him over to the authorities for the self-defense murder of his stepfather. His fortunate escape had not done a great deal to improve his chances of getting out of the hard life.

With remorse he recalled meeting Bria Tharen. She had been another rich girl bored with her socialite life in truth, as he had discovered upon returning her to her family. Hanging with the wrong crowd had gotten her enslaved as much as the drug addiction itself. Han had really thought that he would love her forever, but his last words to her had been hateful and bitter, filled with a poison that still ate at his soul. An undercover Rebel spy.

You sure know how to pick them, Slick...

He had encased his heart in stone after Bria had left him, looking out for only himself after that experience. A stone that he refused to crack open.

Could he open his heart again after so many years? Carve it out of the unbreakable shell around it? Become vulnerable again? Would this tiny woman-child be the one to mend his shattered heart? Or would she rip it to shreds and then stomp on it to ensure its demise? Like Bria had? That Leia had little experience with men, was painfully obvious to him. But, her innocence was refreshing and unexpected. He could not forget the trust she had shown him. Few women would trust him enough to lie beside him every night without fearing he would take advantage of the situation. Most people trusted no person that implicitly, yet Leia Organa trusted him completely whether she realized it or not. Her eyes were not only a window to her soul, but a brightly shining beacon drawing him ever closer to the shelter within her arms. He was finding it hard to resist her siren song of a peaceful government as well. Leia Organa would someday be an incredible leader in the Rebellion. Bria and Leia... boy were the Imperials in for it.

To hell with the Empire-- it had never cared for him! If only he could get Leia to safety then he might consider exploring this feeling of love. Thinking of her in the tender mercies of General Toff turned his stomach.

Memories... unwanted. Unwelcome.

He scrubbed his hands over his eyes. Would the horror ever go away?

Thinking of himself tried as an Imperial deserter turned his stomach even more, although he despised the Empire more each passing day. But, there was no

escaping the long arm of Palpatine's law. If he were caught trying to defect from Imperial service, he would be allowed to go all right. He would go straight into the six-foot plus body bag that held his scattered remains. An officer did not leave Imperial service of his own free will. Traitors were swiftly and painfully executed.

Han reared back and let his last imperfect stone fly high into the trees. He listened for the thud of the stone striking a rock face but never heard it. He was puzzled for a moment and then grinned widely. Moving across the shallow lake, oblivious to the water rising over his waist, he clambered ashore and headed into the dense canopy of trees.

Leia refused to awaken, lest her dream turned out to be another concoction of her overactive imagination. She felt a gentle touch on the soft skin of her cheek. Sighing with contentment, she rolled to her side and forced her eyes to open, smiling sleepily as her eyes fell upon the handsome face highlighted in the glow of the firelight. The beautiful smile was quickly replaced with an icy frown.

"Hey sleepyhead, we need to talk. " Han whispered resisting the urge to crawl in beside her and lose himself. "How would you feel about getting out of here? "

"How? I thought--" Leia blurted fully alert now.

"Well give me a minute and I'll tell you." He pressed his fingers against her lips. "And no interruptions until I'm finished. We don't need to discuss this in committee."

"I am not a committee, and I don't like what you are implying by that." Leia snapped folding her arms.

Han chose to ignore her. "In my deep soul searching, I somehow stumbled across a way out of this hole." He scratched his head. "I still don't know how we missed it, I mean we searched high and low for a way outta here. "

"A way out...? Right..." Leia was at her dubious best, but he ignored that as well.

"Yeah, a way out. A tunnel of sorts. It was completely covered by tree branches." He chuckled still not believing his dumb luck. "If I hadn't been skipping rocks, I would have never found it."

"Skipping rocks?" Leia lifted an eyebrow. "Should have known you'd be doing something unproductive."

"It's what I do when I have something to think really hard about or a big decision to make." He admitted quietly bringing his eyes to hers.

She met his gaze steadily. "So... did you make any big decisions?"

"Yeah, a really big one..." He took her hand and brought it to his lips in a gesture that took her breath.

"Well?" Leia whispered as he rubbed his callused thumb over the back of her soft hand where he had just pressed a feather soft kiss.

"I decided I'm getting you safely away from here. We'll see what happens after that. More than likely I will kill you or I'm beginning to like you and I will wind up dead myself for that mistake later on."

"What are you--" Leia clearly had not expected this.

He again pressed his finger to her lips silencing her. "First I have to get you to a safe place, and then we'll go from there." He pulled her against his bare chest despite her protests and continued in a soothing voice. "If we get away, they will probably just assume that we got our sorry asses killed and that will be the end of that. We'll steal a ship and--"

Leia pushed him away and stared at him in shock. "Excuse me I think I should have a say in whether I want your company or not! What's with all of this we stuff?"

He silenced her with an unexpected tweak of her nose. "Sorry sweetheart it's out of your hands." He flinched at her daggerlike eyes. "Hey it's not my fault, I'm so stubborn and chauvinistic." He held his hands up in a mocking apology.

"Oh well I guess that fully explains it then!" She said rather sarcastically and Han wondered for a moment from where she had inherited her scathing wit and silently cursed them.

"Explains what?"

"Explains why you are such a- a- a scoundrel!"

Han grinned at the choice of such a Leia-like word. "A scoundrel?" He mused.

Leia had a self-satisfied smirk on her face as she nodded regally. Her chin raised righteously.

Han responded with one eyebrow cocked mischievously. "Scoundrel?"

Leia unfolded her arms slowly, letting them drop to her sides. She did not like the look in his eyes as he moved closer to her. She backed away but was brought to

a halt by the cold hard wall of the cave. She had nowhere to go. She put her hands on his chest pushing with token resistance.

An imperceptible nod of his head caused her to reconsider her statement. Only Han Solo would consider her insulting remark a compliment. "I like how that sounds..." His voice was like velvet-- rich, smooth, warm.

He trapped her shoulders between his arms, lightly resting on the stone wall on either side of her, his eyes never wavering from hers. She found herself hypnotized, swimming in a sea of emerald, as his handsome face loomed closer. His weight shifted and he trapped one of her trembling hands in his, against his bare chest.

The fine hair tickled her fingers. She could feel the beating of his heart beneath her palm. Steady. Strong.

"Stop it!" Leia's weak voice demanded.

Han played dumb. "Stop what?"

"Stop t-touching me..." Don't stop...

"Why?" His fingers gently caressed the back of her hand then pulled it up to his full lips. That caress was much more intense.

"Because... because I'm getting angry..." She insisted although her body was telling her something different, altogether.

"You don't look angry..." He whispered into the suddenly damp hand he held. His lips caressed the skin of her palm intimately.

"How do I look?" She asked crossly.

"Beautiful..." He did not hide the emotion in his voice.

Leia was at a loss for words as his body drew closer. The cave felt confining; she fought for her breath as he stared into her eyes and began moving his lips towards hers...

"Scared..." He continued, their bodies pressed together.

"I-I'm not scared..." Somehow she had forced the words from her lips. In truth, she was beyond scared-- she was terrified. Leia was used to dealing with men in the arena of politics--in the arena of passion she was but a beginner.

"You're a bad liar, Leia..."

"I hate you..." She insisted, though his lips were closing the distance fast.

Han's face grew serious. "I know... but you still want me."

Before she could retort, he closed the distance between them. How many ways did the man know how to kiss? His lips moved against hers sliding from them to her cheek, her neck as he found the wild pulse beating there. Her head fell back weakly as he moved again to her mouth capturing her astonished gasp as she felt his hands moving sinfully over her body. His lips moved sideways and gentle teeth nipped at her earlobe, sending liquid fire rushing through her entire being. They moved downward again to the bare skin just below her neck finishing what he had begun earlier. All she could do was hold on to him. She could feel herself sliding with him down the wall, her treacherous body providing no resistance. This was wrong ... but she could no longer resist.

*** Han surfaced into the beginnings of a glorious sunrise. The water rushed over his back as he made for shore and freedom.

He moved quickly to dry off and begin pulling his clothes on. He had just grabbed his boots and jacket as he heard an enraged female cry.

Leia?

Han gripped his blaster tightly and shoved the foliage aside as he raced for the cave where Leia had been peacefully asleep only minutes ago. The branches slapped him across the face, thorny stalks tearing into his legs and arms, but he was oblivious as he concentrated on getting to Leia.

The scene Han stumbled onto would forever be etched in his mind. Leia fell impossibly in slow motion and landed sprawled on the hard ground just outside the cave entrance. Blood dripped from her lip and nose, blazing an accusing red trail down to the nearly bare flesh she desperately tried to shield from the leering faces surrounding her. She raised her head proudly refusing to back down as she had when facing Han's rage.

General Toff was poised over her with a lascivious grin plastered across his wide distorted mouth. His meaty fist still clenched above her from the violent blow he had just delivered to her face with a satisfying crack. "Well now men, we seem to have found a most delectable prize, haven't we?" He moved to drag her up by the arm.

Leia grunted as her arm was nearly wrenched from its socket, the pain overwhelming but bearable.

"Well, Princess Organa, you seem to be all alone."

Toff grasped her chin turning it one way then the other, as if examining a breeding animal. She felt much like one in truth.

"Guess Solo wasn't the soldier he thought he was if he was bested by the likes of you. Then again women do have natural weapons, " He ripped her shirt open.

Male laughter assaulted her ears and she was terrified. Han had been unwilling to share with her the fates that befell female prisoners, but she had heard unfathomable horror stories circulating in the court.

"Get your filthy hands off of me!" Leia screamed defiant even in the face of insurmountable odds as she clutched her shirt to cover her bare chest once again.

At that moment, Han blasted from the trees like a comet, skidding to a grinding halt before his superior.

Leia's heart stopped as she watched Han snap to attention and briskly salute Toff. A portrait of discipline. The fact that he was a trained Imperial soldier was driven home hard. Nausea swept over her. She had trusted him.

The General stood quietly glaring at Han, his face expressionless. Han could sense the questions racing through the mind of his superior. He was almost certain that Toff knew he and Leia had become lovers. Leia gazed at him in stark wide-eyed terror, but he divorced her presence from his thoughts.

"You are out of uniform Commander, explain." Toff leaned toward Han threateningly. "This had better be good Solo."

Han stared right back at Toff, defiantly as the older officer diverted the gaze first. "Sir, yes sir!" He snapped succinctly. "I pursued the princess to the mouth of the cliff where she was attacked and severely wounded by a bloodsniffer. Her injuries caused her to fall down the cliff, where upon I followed. Not knowing of the cliff, I also fell and broke my comlink. " Han took in the rescue rappelling gear on the ground beside the cave. "Knowing of no other escape, I was forced to hold her in custody waiting for a rescue team."

The General looked from Han to Leia and back again. "The princess was found- shall we say "flagrante delicto"- and if anything, Solo, I would venture a guess that she was your lover, not your prisoner."

"Yeah it would seem so huh?" Han chuckled in his superior officer's face.

"We all stood up there and watched you at the water's edge for hours, Solo." Toff gestured to the cave ceiling.

"Learn anything, sir?"

Han pasted the sleaziest leer he could garner on his features as he turned to face his commanding officer.

"I'm a man, I got really bored. And, well frankly sir, we have been missing for a couple of weeks now. I had to do something while I waited for you. And she looked so good in that little black bra." He chuckled before continuing. "Yeah, I seduced her more or less. Fed her a line about agreeing with the rebellion. You know, the tortured Imperial soldier who can't stomach the Empire's methods routine." Han refused to look toward Leia "Said a few fake I love you's and showered her with some pretty promises. You've always said that these young girls are gullible and easy."

Han looked directly at Leia. "She even gave me the name of her Rebel contact and the location of the rebel base." He ventured a look at Leia, whose face had grown as white as the starchy collar showing above General Toff's collar. "Could we discuss this after we are safely out of here, sir?" He looked straight at Leia with a smirk of distaste. "I need a real shower to rinse the stench of rebellion from me." He hardened his eyes. "I'm sick of pretending to be something I'm not. This has put a strain on even my acting skills."

Leia's eyes went from wide-eyed shock to narrow angry slits. Her heart refused to beat.

Pretending? Acting?

How could she have been so stupid? She had entrusted her heart to a man who had been brainwashed for years to be loyal to the Empire and its cause. She had trusted him enough to reveal that she knew about the Rebels and their whereabouts. The Empire could reach Yavin and destroy it within the week with the new planet destroyer at Grand Moff Tarkin's beck and call--The Death Star. She had let him... nausea swept through her like a wildfire upon recalling their passionate encounters.

Fool.

The General stroked his chin thoughtfully and then burst out into a belly laugh. "My compliments, Solo. You have not only found the Rebel stronghold, but you've sullied the virtue of the High Princess of Alderaan. Won't her daddy just love that?"

Han laughed right alongside Toff, confirming everything he had vehemently denied to her. He would not look at her.

"Noo!" Leia screamed in outrage at Han. She pulled away from the strong arms that were trying to restrain her.

It had to be a lie. Everything he had said and done could not have been a ploy to find the Rebel base, could it? Had he merely seduced her to gain the knowledge to destroy her? She had been stupid! She had been naïve and foolish enough to believe his sweet words and beautiful lies as he had made love to her--

She rushed up to Han and the General. Her eyes begged him to deny his hateful words. He looked at her with indifference, his eyes granite, his jaw fixed, and obvious relief on his face. Hesitantly, trembling hands slipped into the collar of his shirt, forcing him to look at her. "It isn't true, Han. Tell me the truth!" A harsh silence permeated the morning air. All she heard was the rush of breath and the beating of their hearts.

"Tell me, damn you!" "Sorry, Sweetheart, you made it too damn easy." He chuckled stroking his finger down the side of her face.

Her hands slipped wordlessly from him, her mouth opening and closing in disbelief.

"Look at it this way Your Worship... You may be used goods, but at least you've added some new tricks to your repertoire. Although, you do need a little more practice. I like my women a little on the wilder side." He winked at her insolently.

Her eyes snapped shut.

This isn't happening.

"You're way too trusting, wise up." Han advised with a smirk of satisfaction.

Leia slapped him, hard and stinging, but it could never match the pain deep in her heart as it shattered into a million pieces, scattering in the wind.

*** Home.

Familiar. Comforting. At least it had been at one time.

Leia smelled the familiar scents of the palace. The evening meal had just been served and a faint spiciness remained in the air. There were the overpowering sweet smells of her aunts' fragrances lingering in the entry. Sandalwood and pipe smoke, scents she had always associated with her father, informed her of his presence. She heard the hushed whispers of the staff remaining after dinner. At the whine of a protesting servo, a manufactured breeze blew in. It chilled her, but not as much as the icy daggers she shot at the back of Han's neck.

She walked listlessly behind him-- deep in thought, agitated.

Leia slipped her arms around her shoulders. A Trooper shoved her into the royal audience chamber, and she barely quenched the desire to murder the man. Her aunts stood waiting, ready to further humiliate her she was certain. They meant well she knew, but their sheltered existence hardly qualified them to give her life advice.

Her friend and aide Winter cried out and rushed to her side as Leia stumbled and fell to the hard floor with a gasp of pain as her knees struck the marble with a smacking sound. Winter's hand flew to her mouth with a cry at their brutality. Raising herself painfully onto her arms, Leia caught sight of her Aunt Celly, rapidly fanning herself.

"This is dreadful! My salts, I must have my salts! I think I am going to faint." Leave it to Aunt Celly to make Leia feel even worse than she did at the moment. Was there any crisis that her aunt did not face unconscious?

Her Aunt Rouge clucked her tongue disapprovingly at Leia. "Now see what you have done dearie?" Somehow it would inevitably be Leia's fault, no matter what the circumstances. Aunt Rouge also loved her, but never thought of anyone other than herself. "This is all your fault, young lady. I have told you time and time again that your stubborn hot-headedness would get you into trouble. Look at the shame you have caused this family! Will you never learn to listen, child?"

Leia ignored them both as best she could. "Yes Aunt Rouge, you are right as always." Leia whispered in defeat.

AT-AV, a tiny candy-pink pitter squalled and leaped from her Aunt Tias's arms, to rush into Leia's arms and lick her face.

"Oh Leia, child," her aunt spoke with what seemed genuine loving concern as she moved to stroke her disheveled hair gently. "You look wretched. These swine have not touched you have they?"

Some memory in the back of Leia's mind always seemed to leap to the forefront when her aunt comforted her. Whether she had been dealing with major crises or just everyday difficulties, Aunt Tia always made her feel much better. This time nothing could help her feel better.

Leia numbly shook her head as her father moved into view. She could not bring herself to meet his eyes.

How could she face him knowing what she had done?

"Leia!" He cried out and rushed over to her checking her over in fatherly concern. "Dear gods what happened to you child?"

"I-I was injured by a bloodsniffer, daddy." She fought the urge to roll her eyes as her aunts gasped collectively behind her. "Han--I mean Commander Solo, saved me from bleeding to death."

Now though I wish he had let me die.

Han fought back the urge to rush over to her and cradle her in his arms, whispering that everything would be fine. However, he could not bring suspicion upon himself if he had any chance to save her.

There has to be a way out of this mess. Think-- dammit Solo-- think!

Bail Organa stood proudly and moved to stand before Han extending his hand and deliberately ignoring the smirking General Toff. "Well I thank you Commander Solo. It seems that I owe you a great debt of thanks. You have saved the life of my only daughter... I owe you her life and my eternal gratitude."

Han bowed slightly.

Was that the appropriate thing to do in the presence of royalty?

"I merely applied the first aid she required and kept her fed until my squad arrived. No thanks are necessary. I was only doing my duty as an Imperial soldier, sir." Han could easily like this older man in another situation. His green eyes danced with life and though his black hair was sprinkled with gray, Han knew that this was a man who was young at heart and a truly wise leader. His vibrancy was contagious.

"Come now Commander Solo, you're being much too humble." The stout commander moved to place his arm about Solo's shoulder in a brotherly fashion.

Han stiffened visibly, hand still locked in the warm grip of Bail Organa. Behind him he caught the vocal disapproval of Leia's aunts, berating her for letting a strange man see her bare shoulder and wearing her hair down like some commoner. He laughed silently at the irony, recalling the locks spreading about her like a halo as he watched her sleep.

Toff continued, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "He is such a modest boy. Not only did he save your lovely daughter's life. He shared a pallet with her to keep her injured body warm. She would surely have frozen to death if not for his thinking of her well-being."

Han blanched at the gasp behind him and the eyebrow that lifted slightly on the royal visage before him-- most definitely an Organa trait. The look of glee on his commander's face told Han what was coming next.

He closed his eyes begging the gods for intervention. But nobody upstairs seemed to be listening.

"And I must share this with you, Your Highness, from the look of things as we came upon them this morning, the handsome Commander took it upon himself to instruct your sweet innocent daughter in..." He looked as if he were searching for just the right phrase.

Hansilently begged his Commander to stop talking.

"Oh let's not sugar coat this any- Solo and your daughter have become lovers in this past week. She was well instructed in the sensual arts from what we saw. Our Solo is quite the ladies man if rumors are anything to go on. Your daughter is unmarriageable, courtesy of the Empire. And it was not a pleasant encounter either. "

Han fought the impulse to cry out as his hand was nearly crushed by the hand that tensed around his. The emerald eyes before his gaze turned suddenly black with fury.

"You son of a Sithspawn!" Organa roared.

Han did not see the fist moving toward him, but he felt the impact of the force behind the vicious blow to his jaw then staggered and dropped heavily to the marble floor.

Han raised himself up with his arms, shaking off the dizziness that threatened to put him down again.

"You raped my daughter? I will have your head!" Bail hissed and tore a broadsword from the nearby wall, hefting over his head as he stood before Han. Han closed his eyes, resigned to his fate. Beside him he could hear Leia's aunts wailing over their niece's lost virtue. It was better to let them think that he had raped her, whether he had or not.

"NOOO!!!"

Before the sword could begin its downward arc, Han heard Leia scream and felt the familiar weight of her slight body cover him, one arm clutching his head to her breasts and the other across his torso making herself an effective shield.

"Heaven help me Solo, as much as I hate you ... I still love you." Her trembling lips whispered softly into his hair.

The fury and disbelief on her father's face tore at her heart. The questions and accusations in his face became more than she could bear.

"Leia get away from that monster..." His voice was on the edge of murder.

"Father...please don't hurt him... He didn't rape me. I-I-I love him." She frantically searched for something to save the enemy she loved. Simply begging would not be enough. It had to be something that gave him a reason to let Han live. "You can't kill the father of my baby... your grandchild." The words were out before she thought.

"Leia--what are--" Han gasped but was interrupted by a shriek behind him.

With a crash her Aunt Celly collapsed to the floor in a dead faint. Aunt Rouge fanned Celly rapidly with her fan and passed the bottle of smelling salts beneath her nose as Aunt Tia just stared at Leia with a mixture of disappointment and possibly...understanding? Bail Organa's eyes widened and his still raised hand dropped the sword to the floor with a metallic clatter where it bounced several times before it stilled. The only sound that was heard was Leia's harsh intakes of breath. Breaking the silence of the uncomfortable moment, Winter moved to help Leia to her feet. "Her Highness has been through quite an ordeal. She needs to rest. May I take her to her room?"

Toff waved her off with a satisfied gleam of triumph.

Leia turned from Winter and quietly reached her hand out to a shell-shocked Han Solo. When their hands touched, Leia bowed her head to hide the tears that swam in her eyes.

There were a thousand questions in Han's eyes.

She allowed Winter to lead her off. Han's hand remained outstretched, reaching for her even after he was forced to let her go.

Once she was through the door she picked up a crystal decanter and let it fly toward the oversized door, through which she had passed. Winter left her ranting and went in search of food. Leia was her best friend and she knew that this was a time to leave her alone.

Nearly an hour later, Winter came back in with a tray of cheese and crackers, with a variety of fruits. It looked as if there were not a single item of crystal intact

in the room. Her slippers feet maneuvered around the broken shards littering the lavender carpet. She sat down on the bed beside her now occasionally sniffing friend and softly stroked the soft locks of her hair falling in disarray down her back. Never before had Winter seen Leia really cry. It was a disturbing sight that worried her immensely. Always the pillar of strength, Leia had not even cried when her mother or foster mother had died. What had happened to her in the forests?

"Leia, sweetie, are you ready to talk now?" The melodic voice held a hint of uncertainty about dealing with this new Leia.

"I-I can't talk about it, Winter...I just can't." Her muffled voice could barely be heard as she clutched the pillow to her face.

"Tell me one thing Leia...Are you really pregnant? " Her soft question finally raised Leia's head. She stared for a long silent minute.

"I could be Winter. Don't ask me any more--please?" A single tear fell from her eye and followed a path across her cheek, down her nose to fall off the reddened tip and land on her lip. She wiped it away angrily. "Why did he lie to me?" She threw her pillow across the room with a frustrated shriek. "I'm ruined now-- Blast him!" She screeched , irritated.

Winter held back a surfacing grin as she watched her frustrated friend now fuming on the bed. "So you did consider it? Gave him the time of the day, the hour, minute, month, year, and century. An Imperial?"

Leia glared at Winter who was giving Leia that knowing look that just rubbed her the wrong way. Curse that girl's eidetic mind, she never let Leia forget anything.

"You aren't going to shut up until I tell you what happened are you?" Leia folded her arms defiantly, cocking her head daring Winter to deny it.

Winter wore that familiar calm smile.

"Fine!" Leia snapped. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Start from where you tried to kill yourself jumping out that window. He almost didn't make it you know? He barely caught hold of the chandelier chain. When he got across he was cursing and waving his arms around like an idiot. Then he put his hands on his hips, yelled and jumped out too." Winter waggled her brows. "He sure is cute when he gets angry."

Leia sniffed regally. "Yeah, it was real cute when he tackled me and nearly broke my ribs. But I gave him a good ... headache." Her smirk of satisfaction caused Winter to snort in a very unladylike manner. "Guess Old Beyond the Pain Durane

would be proud." Winter groaned. "Stang-- no wonder he defied a direct order to return to go after you. "

"It wasn't an order? He just decided to do it on his own?" Leia's face softened some.

"Come on Leia, tell me how you two wound up stranded together and you admitted to everyone you love him."

Winter gazed in wide-eyed admiration as Leia described a very grown up encounter. Their childish fantasizing could not begin to compare to Leia's real adventure.

"He said he loved me Winter, and I believed him. I would never have let him touch me, if I had known it was all a lie to get information from me." She recalled the passionate encounter the previous night.

"Leia, I'm sorry he betrayed you like that... Maybe... maybe he had no choice."

Leia turned hard eyes to Winter. "We all have a choice." Her voice dripped with venom. "Look Winter I just want to go to sleep and forget that this ever happened." She stripped off Han's shirt and her improvised shorts and stood quietly in her underclothes, holding the gray shirt between her hands. The memories refused to go away.

"I just want to forget..." But even as she spoke, she knew it was a lie.

Han pulled himself into the open window as quietly as possible. Bless the warm controlled air of this city, or else he might have had a difficult time reaching her room this way. Han tumbled in headfirst to land on the plush lavender carpet of Leia's bedroom. He tucked his chin and rolled soundlessly coming to his feet, standing to the side of the window to make sure that he had not been discovered below. All was clear.

Even in the darkness, he could make out the confines of her room. It was larger than any room he had ever seen for one person. It was a testimony to the opulence in which she had been raised. An octagonal shape, half of the alcoves held remnants of a happy childhood. Stuffed piffins, bantha cubs, and intricately detailed dolls lined shelves filled with trinkets of youth. A snow globe held the palace in the midst of a snowstorm with tiny ice dancers on the miniature ice rink in the foreground. Several musical toys lined the higher shelves. An elaborate dollhouse covered a good portion of one alcove. Han whistled under his breath as he realized that a human could live comfortably in there.

The other portion was covered with the trappings of education. A computer console stretched a good three or four meters, complete with a hookup to the holonet, microphones, headphones, datapads, disks, a replicator and transmitter-- a virtual smorgasbord of technology. The shelves along this wall held volumes of information holodisks. There were even a few archaic bound volumes-- very ancient and probably worth a fortune themselves. A few holopics covered a portion of her desk. A couple of snaps of her and Winter being girls, a formal portrait of Leia in shimmering white silk, hair done up rather softly, with curls cascading down her back. She was smiling elegantly. There was a few in which Leia was with a variety of young obviously rich men. Han felt a twinge of jealousy seeing her flirty poses with the hopelessly lovestruck males in these holos.

He turned in the direction of the bed where Leia lay sleeping. She curled up on her side like a child, one hand tucked under her chin and one reaching in front of her as if searching for something beside her. That incredible hair spilled onto the pillow fanning out like a waterfall of dark silk.

Leia stirred with a groan as she sensed something out of sorts in her room. She rolled to her back and gasped when she met hazel eyes in the darkness. In a flash she was on her feet. "Get out of here, Han!" She spat. "I don't want you in here--Go!"

Han stood his ground and slipped his hand across her mouth to keep her quiet. "We have to talk, Leia." She nodded behind his hand in agreement. Han removed his hand.

"Don't you think you talked enough Han?" She placed her hands on her slender hips. "You've caused all the damage to me you can. Physically, emotionally and politically. I am ruined--disgraced!"

Han laughed aloud. "You're not being rational--"

"Rational?" Leia squeaked indignantly. "Now that everyone knows what we did, and thinks that I am carrying your bastard child, you dare call me irrational?" She fired back at him.

"Now hold on a minute, that was not entirely my fault." His voice softened. "Is it true?"

"How should I know, I'm not exactly experienced. You made that perfectly clear." Her eyes held back tears. "I hate you for this!"

Han frowned. "If you hate me that much then why not just let everyone think I raped you?"

" Because my father was about to kill you and I--" She stopped before she said anything more.

"The way you're carrying on now, I would think that his killing me would have been a good thing. So..." He reached out and took her face between his palms. "Tell me the truth, Leia."

Her eyes filled with angry, unshed tears. "How could you lie to me? How could you?" Her fingers reached up to rest atop his. "Was everything a lie, Han?"

Han lowered his forehead to hers gently, a shuddering breath escaping and brushing across her nose and lips. "I never lied to you.... I lied to Toff to buy us time." He admitted quietly.

Her eyes were bright with tears, now slipping down her face. With no warning she jerked her face from him. "You're a liar, Han! Get out of my sight!" Her voice rose in volume as she launched herself at him, fists flying. Han held his ground.

"I hate you!" She screamed and sobbed as he grasped her wrists between his strong fingers.

Leia pulled and twisted, fighting desperately to escape.

Han succeeded in turning her body in his arms and pulling her against him, holding her arms tightly against her chest as she raged into the darkness. Her legs left the ground, and he held her tightly to him, his arms unyielding. Angry screeches soon became pain-filled sobs, wracking her entire body.

"No Leia," he whispered into her ear. "You don't... You love me... That's what you hate."

Her head fell forward and she began crying silently.

Han loosened his grip and sat her on her feet. He turned her toward him. When she looked up, he saw the confusion in her face. She was so very young and innocent. Or had been until he'd entered her life.

"I won't love you..." She still insisted though less vehemently.

Han leaned forward and kissed her forehead, lingering, putting all of his feelings into that simple gesture. "Then I'll love you enough for both of us."

Leia sighed into his soft kiss.

"I still hate you..." Her whisper fell into his mouth, before he swept her into his arms and lay her on the bed.

Han tossed his discarded shirt onto the floor. "I know." He said simply before he joined her on her childhood bed.

Much later Han lay behind Leia , cradling her to his bare chest, as he had the previous night. He marveled again at how perfectly their bodies fit together, and how right this felt as he spooned her slender form into the haven of his body.

Her touch... Lips meeting...Exploring ... Curious...Demanding bodies...until ultimately they gave in.

Han knew that he was playing with fire, taking her in her bed with family and military just beyond the door. He just hoped that neither he nor she got burned. He had started to dress, but been coaxed back to the warmth of her arms and her plead for him to stay until she slept. One arm wrapped around her shoulder holding the delicate hand that even in repose clutched to his. His other hand brushed the silk of her stomach beneath the gown in wonder. The peaceful in and out of her breathing lulled him. The mess that he seemed to have led them into seemed insurmountable. He could lie here for a few moments more and then he had to get up. But she felt so good. Warm. Safe. Trusting. It had been a long while since Han had trusted another person and been trusted in return. His last thought was that he needed to leave soon.

Awareness crept upon Han, slowly. An insistent touch. A gasp of discovery tore through the haziness in his brain. Where was he? He remembered... Leia... Cradling her in his arms... Closing his eyes for one---

"Oh k'ala!"

"Get up slowly, Commander Solo."

At Leia's sharp intake of breath, Han slipped his arms from his terrified bedmate and lifted his hands in a show of compliance. General Toff had the business end of a standard issue blaster held against Han's temple.

"Give me one reason to pull this trigger Solo. I dare you!" The man's bloated face moved inches from his.

"Sir," Han began pulling the sheet around him. Leia's aunts were wailing over the immorality of their niece and the officer before them. "I was trying to--"

Toff grinned evilly at him. "Lies, Solo, all lies. You couldn't get this one out of your system obviously... You had me fooled I will admit. Seems your sins have found

you out, though. You were discovered missing from your post not long ago." He moved back, still aiming the gun at Han's chest "Do you know how long I have waited for this Solo. I have waited for you to mess up one time." His face was growing redder by the moment as he railed at Han. "I am sick of you and your damned superior attitude toward me. I am the superior officer in this unit! Now you have not only disobeyed a direct order from a superior, you are consorting with a known Rebel sympathizer. That is the equivalent of treason the way I see it and it warrants a quick execution, so get dressed and let's get to it! Escape is impossible! Now!"

Han's quick mind searched frantically for a solution. "Do you mind sir, I would rather not reveal all of my assets to the ladies in this room. They might faint for real this time."

Toff stepped back still aiming as Han reached down with one hand to retrieve his shirt, the other clutching the blanket to hide his trousers. Beyond his shirt lay his blaster beside Toff's booted feet. Toff hadn't been that careless, reveling in his chance to gloat over Han's slip up. He clenched his hand beneath the shirt angrily. He needed Toff closer.

Leia was frozen in fear behind him

Han grunted. "Stang, You're not gonna believe this Toffy." Predictably the man leaned closer and Han struck with the speed of a panther. One arm relieved Toff of his blaster at the same time the other snaked around the pudgy neck. Toff found himself against a bare-chested Han Solo, unable to catch a breath, his own blaster shoved hard into his temple. He had made one mistake. Never tell Han Solo that something was impossible. Corellians did not have a word in their vocabulary for impossible.

"What is the meaning--" Toff exploded violently before Han tightened his arm, cutting off the obese man's airflow.

"The meaning, Toffy?" Han snarled. " The meaning is that you are a first class idiot and I'll be damned if I will let you touch me. And I sure as hell won't let you touch her." The man was gasping for breath, turning an unbecoming shade of blue. "Get some clothes on Leia, I'm getting you out of here, Sweetheart whether you want to go or not." He tossed back over his shoulder and heard the whisper of silk as she leapt from the bed. He could see in the mirror Leia tucking her short gown into a pair of trousers she was hurriedly tugging over her hips. "Grab some things because we won't be coming back."

In moments Leia stood beside him a small duffel bag clutched in one hand, Han's boots and shirt in her other.

"Now Winter, help her throw all of their blasters into the sauna over there." He gestured to the squad across the room with his head, never letting up on the strangle hold around Toff's neck. Han could feel the man cringe when the sound of shorting electronics reached his ears. "And, now Toffy, me kahda svat!" He planted a kiss, a Corellian custom in the battlefield and also a signal that the man was about to meet his maker, on the side of Toff's pudgy face.

Han kept the hold on Toff's neck while Leia blasted the engine of the single troop carrier on the launch pad. The whine of shorting circuits and the smell of burnt components reached him as he searched for transportation.

Toff still struggled, although Han's well-conditioned body and limbs kept him practically immobilized as Leia punched in the access code and opened the entry ramp to a small Alderaanian craft. Han dragged Toff in as the ramp raised behind them, heedless of his desperate attempts to dig his boots into the hard ground. He was impressed that Leia knew how to execute a quick lift off, since it kept his hands on Toff.

"Hold her here Sweetheart." Han dragged General Toff to stand before the controls to lower the ramp. His eyes searched for a parachute for the man. Han was a soldier, but he was no cold-blooded killer. The humiliation of losing his first officer to the rebellion would be enough to end his career.

As he slapped the switch, a blast of air nearly pulled both he and the General down. "What are you doing Solo?" The fat man's throat was painfully raspy as Han held his arms behind his waist in a painful armlock.

"Well Toffy, I'm gonna do to you what you had planned for me all along." A gleeful expression crossed Han's face as the officer struggled to keep the pain at a minimum.

"You're going to kill me?" Toff's voice was calmer than Han expected.

"I ought to, but I'm no murderer like you." He clenched his teeth, his breath hissing as he leaned close. "I want you to have time to think about all of those wretched souls you have tortured, murdered, raped. And I want you to know the whole time that I was always better than you were and in the end... I won." He poised the man on the foot of the incline.

Toff brought his foot down on Han's insole, shocking him into loosening his grip. Twisting almost impossibly for a man of his girth, he was free and charging into Han. The two men slammed into the bulkhead with a grunt of pain. Leia came running into the corridor with a cry of fear, panicked when she saw Han and Toff at the edge of the ramp, being assaulted by the buffeting winds. One wrong step

and both men would plunge to the hard ground miles below. The two bodies fell to the metallic floor. Toff forcibly pressed Han's head over the edge of the ramp, as both men fought for possession of a small blaster that had appeared in Han's hand. Toff succeeded in turning the blaster into Han's temple. His finger sought the triggering mechanism. "I'll see to you when I'm done with him." He tossed threateningly back at Leia.

At a touch of a button, an unseen cylinder opened and a thin, razor sharp blade appeared with a whisper. The small blade came into Toff's view and slid across his throat. Toff's eyes widened and he turned as white as the fluffy clouds below the ship as he felt the first stab of pain at his neck. Shooting, quick and throbbing, the pain grew in intensity.

"This is designed to make a cut so fine Toff that it takes at least fifteen parsecs for the you to bleed to death. But, I figure you'll be nearly dead as you splatter on the ground below." Han gasped and pulled as hard as he could, flipping Toff off the ramp.

Toff now clutched wildly at his own throat. Tiny rivulets of blood seeped from between his fingers as he fell off the edge with a scream. Han stood unsteadily to his feet, clutching at the landing strut that threatened to buckle under the assaulting winds. He frowned and spit into the wind after Toff's receding form.

The wind caught Toff's hurtling form and sent him into an uncontrollable spiraling descent. His scream could be heard, growing weaker as his life fluid trickled down his throat. Han's last words rushed through his mind as all of the demons of his past beset him. Their screams mingled with his and created a maddening symphony of pain. The ground loomed closer, larger. He felt himself going into shock as his blood slowed to a trickling drip. He screamed-- a soundless wail that stretched grotesquely across his face as the ground rushed up to meet him. The impact shattered every bone in his body, but he felt nothing.

Han hissed a phrase in Corellian, slapped the ramp switch closed and wiped the blade on his pants carefully before bringing the closed knife reverently to his lips and muttering more strange words. He replaced the knife in his pants pocket and raised his eyes to Leia's. "Don't look at me like that."

Leia stared speechless at him. "Is it over?" She whispered quietly.

Han gazed at her with a hard look on his face. "Your honor has been defended, sweetheart."

Leia folded her arms. "My honor?"

Han moved to stand before her. "It's like this Sweetheart. Blood for blood... blow for blow..."

At her obvious confusion he explained further. "Leia, on Corell a man defends his woman to the death if he needs to. "

Leia bristled at that statement.

Han sighed. "Leia you are my woman and I will protect you to the end. I love you. Toff struck you down in the cave and that demanded retribution. It just happened to be self defense, but the result would have been the same either way."

The corners of Leia's lips turned down. "You planned to kill him, even if he had not attacked you." Leia accused quietly.

"I was in the right here sweetheart. Anything less would have been an insult to you." He stroked one finger down the side of her cheek.

"Don't you ever call me your woman where people can hear it. I am nobody's property."

Han shook his head, holding back his laughter.

Leia looked into his eyes and smiled, realizing that they were free from the Empire and Alderaan. And best of all, they were together, even if she had a long way to go in changing his archaic perceptions.

"Okay so we'll work on that attitude-- your woman indeed!"

Han could no longer hold in his laugh.

Leia decided that Han looked absolutely delicious standing there in nothing but his trousers laughing uncontrollably.

"So what do you have in mind for our next move." She folded her arms across her chest expectantly.

"Well, it just so happens that I have a little Corellian freighter that I won in--" Han began but was interrupted.

"Don't tell me, you won it in a game of Sabaac." She finished for him.

Han gave her a dirty look.

"Damned straight Sweetheart. I got it dry docked on Corell with the family I used to stay with... a long time ago." He smiled at some thought that passed through his mind. "She's called the Falcon, the Millennium Falcon actually. Don't suppose you'd be interested in accompanying me there, would you? Maybe meet them?"

Leia slipped her arm through his playfully.

"Sounds like fun, and then you can tell me exactly what our plans are once we reach the Rebel Base."

"We? Rebel Base?" Han shot back.

"Yes, we. You have a problem with that? But first we have to make a stopover on Tatooine." Her brows raised mischievously.

"Are you ordering me around?" His body language became defensive.

"No, but that is an idea. You will take me to the Rebel base, that's an order."

"Look Sweetheart, I take orders from only one person from now on--me." He had that irritating finger shaking at her as usual. It was close enough that she could bite it.

She decided to stop the games. "Then you can drop me off on Tatooine and go your own way if you must. I don't own you. Sometimes I don't even like you. But I do love you." At least she was honest.

Han stared at her incredulously. "Yeah? Well the feeling's mutual, lady."

"What was that?" Han questioned at her breathy mumbling.

Leia stepped toward him resolutely. "I said, nerf-herder, that I hope I don't regret this someday."

"Regret what?"

Leia gave him an exasperated tilt of her head to match her scowl. "Regret getting involved with you. Regret getting the Rebellion involved with a stubborn hardheaded ass like you."

Han held his hands up. "Whoa sister, I ain't joining your precious cause."

"Then you can just drop me off at the next planet with a communication station and--"

Han swept her into his arms and planted his lips firmly on hers, halting her tirade. She wrapped her arms around his neck, her fingers softly stroking the hair curling along his nape. When he raised his head, she still leaned into him, a dreamy expression across her face.

"You're irresistible when you're angry Princess. You win. I'll tag along for a while if it makes you happy." He held his arm at his side like some proper suitor and gestured toward it with his head. "But I'm in this for you not your cause, remember that."

She grinned and linked her arm through his.

"Hey, do you think I could get any kind of monetary compensation for rescuing their Rebel Princess? After all, I am out of a job after that mess." Han teased as they headed toward the cockpit.

"Why Han Solo, am I not enough for you."

He kissed the tip of her nose and winked. "Uh-uh Sweetheart, I'm only in it for the reward. Haven't you figured that out by now?"

Leia pulled back and shot him a saucy look. "The Rebellion is newly founded and very poor, Han. We may have to come up with..." She reached around and squeezed his buttocks brazenly as Han startled and lifted a curious eyebrow. "A different kind of arrangement for now."

"Fine by me Your Worship." Han swept her into his arms and kissed her long and hard, leaving her breathless yet again. "But I expect to be well paid." He winked at her and made for the cockpit, snagging his shirt along the way. Leia followed with a seductive laugh. She had a very good feeling about this.

Finis

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