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Tricks of the Mind

Part 2

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

It seemed to take him forever to wake up. His head felt heavy, stuffy, and he knew it was the after-effects of the sedative. It was tempting to lie there and let the galaxy carry on without him, and so he did just that for a while. The webbing belt that had encircled his hips eventually put paid to that plan; the clasp was now digging into the small of his back. Wondering how his belt had managed to come undone, he opened his eyes and pushed himself up on his elbows.

The dim lighting revealed that he was still in his cabin, though where else he might be he had no idea. His feet were bare, poking up at him from the end of a blanket, a blanket he couldn't remember placing over himself. That must've been Leia. He closed his eyes and cringed. He hadn't returned outside to see her when she had been expecting him to. Hadn't even said good night to her. He looked at the empty space beside him on the bunk. And it looked liked she hadn't spent the night with him either.

Pulling the blanket from himself, he realised that Leia had loosened the rest of his clothing, hence the reason for the belt becoming entangled underneath him. And then he understood perhaps why Leia hadn't slept with him: he stunk. It was more than just body odour. It was a battle's worth of sweat, mud and blood. The smoke from Vader's pyre had also seeped into his clothes and skin.

He was in the refresher cubicle before he had time to think, pushing the fatigues to the deck as he stood in the stream of hot water, his uniform piling up around his feet. For long minutes he stood there, face and mouth open to the shower,

and allowed the water to wash over him. He soaped himself up with the liquid cleanser, rubbed it through his hair and across his body.

Once he'd rinsed himself, he swiped off the flow of water. He dragged the clothing out of the stall and shoved them into the auto valet, then stepped back in and set the 'fresher for sonics. The sounds waves gently buffeted him, opening his pores and extracting the dirt and grime that he still felt covered him. With the sonics completed, he had a final water rinse. Only then did he feel clean.

His right hand was trembling again, but as it had been happening for days now, he was beyond caring. If one hand refused to cooperate, then he would use the other one. Naked, he stood in front of the mirror and methodically combed his hair with his left hand, then used the shaver to cut through the week's growth of beard. He lifted his chin, and stopped when he saw the synthflesh patch. The synthetic skin had taken nicely, the edges melding with his own skin. Soon, it would be impossible to tell he'd burnt himself with the muzzle of his blaster. Only he would know the truth.

As the hair follicles had not yet grown through the synthflesh, there was no need to shave over the patch, plus he didn't want to disturb the healing process. He was mildly surprised at how easy it was shaving with his left hand, but then he'd always been partially ambidextrous.

Back in his cabin, he dressed in his old spacer clothing: boots, trousers, a light-coloured shirt, and the jacket Leia had given him to replace the one lost on Bespin. Deciding these clothes felt better than the uniform of an Alliance general, he then stripped the bedclothes from the bunk and replaced them with clean sheets and covers.

The gun-belt encircling the medpack on the desk finally caught his attention. That hadn't been where he'd left his weapon when he'd come into the cabin last night. His fingers brushed over the scope and he released the restraining strap, slid the blaster from the holster, and drew it towards him. He studied the muzzle, looking for any traces of his skin that might have stuck to it. Even now, both of his hands shook with the memory of how he'd pushed the weapon under his chin and pulled the trigger. So close. He'd come so close to ending it all. And it was only through fate, dumb luck, or blind instinct that he was standing here, hadn't left his brains fried across the forest.

Solo returned the blaster to its holster and pushed it aside. He couldn't wear the gun-rig, not now. The memories were still raw. The injury barely healed. The temptation to try it again perhaps still there.

He went to seal the medpack, and noticed the drofic capsules on the desk. A '*present*' from Leia, he thought wryly. The observation grated on him. That wasn't fair. After all, he was the one who had asked her to get the medication for him.

But he couldn't take it. He longed to feel the way he had back on the Mon Cal cruiser when the doctor had first prescribed the drofic for him. He'd been unstoppable; one hundred metres tall and laser-proof, like he'd been before the carbonite. The trembling in his hand had even ceased. The craving to feel that way again – the craving for the drug – was almost undeniable. Almost.

He sealed the capsules inside the medpack and left it on the desk. Stroking his hand down the thigh his blaster normally sat on, he turned and left his cabin. He had a speeder bike to return.

"Where's Chewie?"

Leia looked up at the sound of Han's voice, but was surprised to see that she was still alone. That was odd. She'd distinctly heard his voice, and had thought that he'd come down the *Falcon's* ramp without her noticing. Yet she was most definitely on her own, sitting out in the sunshine, enjoying what was left of the day.

She turned back to the datapad sitting in her lap. She was obviously missing Han, hence the reason for conjuring his voice in her head. She'd been on her own for most of the day. Luke had returned to the Fleet that morning in the shuttle he'd used to escape from the Death Star. Once he'd given his report to the High Command and ensured his X-Wing was operational, he was off to Dagobah. Chewbacca and Lando had returned to the Fleet with Luke, supposedly to hunt down a new sensor dish and other parts to repair the *Falcon*. But they had also left Endor in order to give her some time to be with Han, time together and away from the Alliance.

Leia had cleared her own and Han's leave with Rieekan. She'd explained to the general that as she was injured and Han exhausted, not quite having recovered from the hibernation sickness, they intended spending the next few days on the forest moon. Rieekan had appeared mildly amused by Leia's advice, that was more demand than request, but he had agreed to their leave, only after making a wry comment about whether spending time alone with Han Solo was the best way for her to recuperate. When she considered that she had spent most of their first day on her own, working while Han slept, she was starting to wonder the same thing herself, though not in the suggestive way Rieekan had meant.

At least being on her own had given her time to practice the healing techniques Luke had taught her last night. Something must have been working because she'd been able to remove the bandage this morning. She rubbed at the place where the wound had been. By simply concentrating on the area and imaging the healing process, her own skin had rapidly grown over the synthflesh. The new skin was still pink and shiny, but thankfully it hadn't itched since Luke had started her Force lessons.

When she wasn't experimenting with the Force, she had been researching the functions and disorders of the human brain. She had downloaded information from the medical database located on one of the medical frigates orbiting Endor. Studiously digesting and selecting those items she considered relevant, Leia had compiled a report that only she would know about and use. If she was going to help Han, she needed to have some idea of what she was dealing with.

One thing she had confirmed was that Han was exhibiting symptoms associated with schizophrenia: depression, anxiety, mood swings, delusions, episodic aggression, and inappropriate emotional responses. Although schizophrenia usually developed in early adulthood, a cluster of stressful events could also trigger it. Han had definitely experienced an inordinate amount of stress over the last ten months. But as the disorder was normally the result of a combination of factors, Leia wondered if somehow the freezing process had produced a biochemical imbalance in his brain.

Her theory took on shape when she discovered that the spice derivatives prescribed to schizophrenics worked on the chemical neurotransmitters in the brain, blocking excessive levels of dopamine and replicating the properties of serotonin. The drofic had been successful in bringing Han's behaviour back to something close to normal and allowing him to think straight again. His depression had even disappeared, and as anti-depressant drugs were successful by increasing serotonin levels, this suggested a chemical imbalance was highly probable.

All of this hypothesising still didn't mean she really knew what to do or where to start. She read back over some text she had extracted from the medical journal:

The extent to which these factors (genetic predisposition, chemical imbalance and trauma) affect a patient varies with the individual. Due to the complex and ambiguous nature of the causes of schizophrenia and other mental illness, different therapeutic approaches may have to be tried on different patients.

Great, she thought bitterly. This could take forever. Or most likely longer than the remaining four days we've go down here.

Successful treatments combine the use of drugs, psychotherapy and supportive therapy. Acute schizophrenia may require the use of a spice (andris has proven to be successful in most instances) to relieve or eliminate symptoms such as delusions, hallucinations, thought disorders, agitation and violent behaviour. Psychotherapy can be useful in relieving feelings of helplessness and isolation, reinforcing positive behaviour, dealing with emotional conflict, and helping the patient to distinguish between psychotic perceptions and reality. Supportive treatment, such as occupational therapy, is usually required to rehabilitate a patient back into their social and work groups. It may also prove beneficial to

counsel the relatives of schizophrenic patients, in order to help them deal with the patient's symptoms.

The last sentence was particularly accurate, Leia realised. She had tried ignoring Han's behaviour, and then making excuses for it when she couldn't ignore it any more, but she'd never been able to accept it. She didn't think she would be able to successfully cope if he remained like this for the rest of his life. And if she couldn't help him and was forced to have him committed for professional treatment, she would need the guidance of a counsellor to help her come to terms with Han's illness and her own reaction to it. Whatever happened, she hoped she would never reach the point where she was scared of him. Afraid *for* him perhaps, but never *of* him.

The *click* of boots on the boarding ramp caused Leia to look up again, and this time she saw Solo duck out from under the hull. He looked rested, his eyes less haunted, so his decision to use the sedative had been worth it. She was pleased to see he had showered and shaved, reassured that he now wore the spacer garb he seemed most comfortable in. But then she realised he was unarmed, the ubiquitous blaster absent from his hip, and she wondered if it had something to do with the way he had discarded the gun-rig on the deck of his cabin.

He stopped at the end of the ramp, his eyes scanning the clearing as he wiped his hands on his trousers in a vaguely nervous gesture.

"Hi," she called out to him brightly, switching off the datapad and rising to her feet.

Solo's eyes briefly met hers before continuing to search the clearing. "Where's Chewie?"

Leia flinched, silently forgiving his lack of greeting and the fact that he was more concerned with his friend's absence than her presence. "He's gone back to the Fleet with Lando."

"What?" Solo shook his head irritably. "Doesn't he know we've got repairs to make? Especially after what Calrissian did to her."

Leia moved towards him, calmly explaining, "That's why they've gone. Lando's feeling guilty enough about the scorch marks on the hull, let alone the fact he lost the dish for you."

Solo gruffly agreed, "So he should."

"They've gone to hunt down a new one for you." Disregarding his apparent desire to be annoyed, Leia reached for his hand, and was grateful that he allowed her to hold it. "And how about you?"

He met her concerned gaze. "Me?"

"How are you holding up for repairs?"

He pulled an indifferent face. "Fine."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Good. Did you sleep well?" When he didn't respond, she added, "I was a bit worried when you didn't come back for dinner."

He averted his eyes. "I wasn't hungry."

She suspected he was feeling guilty about not returning to at least say good night, but she didn't push him for an apology. "Are you hungry now? I can get you something to eat, if you'd like."

"Maybe later. I've gotta return a bike to the base."

She tilted her head at him curiously. She hadn't heard him pull up on a speeder bike last night, and wondered where he might have left it. Or perhaps he had hallucinated the bike.

"And then I suppose I better think about getting you back to the Fleet, Your Highnessness. The High Command probably think I've run off with you."

His heart wasn't in the banter, but at least he was making an effort. She poked her tongue at him in an attempt to lighten the mood. He pulled her into a light hug and she returned the embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist and resting her head against his chest. It was the first time she had hugged him since she had told him about Vader. It felt wonderful to be back in his arms.

"We don't have to go anywhere," she told him. "Carlist's given us the next few days off. I thought we could spend some time down here. Alone."

"Rieekan's given us leave?" he asked sceptically. "How did you talk him into that?"

Leia chuckled and squeezed her arms around him. "I cannot reveal my secrets."

"And so you sent Chewie and Lando away?"

"And Luke too," she added. "He's off to Dagobah."

"Sounds like you've got something devious in mind planned for me."

She pulled back from him so that she could look into his face, leaving her arms around his waist to maintain the contact. "Nothing devious," she promised. "Just

catch up time. You, me, getting to know each other again." ...*and what's going on in that mind of yours.* "We haven't had a break since Bospin."

Solo gently caressed her cheek, a gesture he hadn't made for a long time. "I know."

"Love you too, flyboy," she whispered, struggling to control the emotion in her voice and wishing he *was* the way he used to be, this had all been a bad dream.

"You're going mushy on me, Princess," he lightly warned her.

She smiled shakily at their private joke. It was moments like this that made her believe there was nothing wrong with him. It took all her strength but she stopped her lips from trembling and admitted, "Perhaps a bit." The last thing he needed was to be consoling her; he had more than enough problems without worrying about a blubbering princess.

Reluctantly, she stepped away from his embrace. Her eye caught on the synthflesh patch under his chin, and she was tempted to ask him how he had hurt himself. Her instincts told her that now was not the right time. When he was ready, he would tell her. She noticed that his hand, the one she hadn't been holding, was quivering slightly, so he probably hadn't taken any of the medication she had brought back.

"I left the drofic in your cabin for you," she said. The sooner she got him back on the spice, she figured, the sooner she could start dealing with the cause of his disorder.

He consciously rubbed the back of his hand with the other. "I saw it. Thanks."

There was something about his tone that made her believe she knew what he was thinking. "You're not going to take it, are you?"

He dropped his eyes, shook his head.

She repressed a sigh, wanted to understand. "I thought it was working. I thought it was helping you." He certainly wasn't going out of his way to make things easy for himself.

A grimace twisted his face. "I can't take it anymore."

"Why not?"

He was silent for a moment before mumbling, "I want it too much."

Her stomach dropped as she empathised with him, and she recalled the argument she had used on Luke the previous night: the drofic relieved his symptoms but it didn't solve the problem. She had since changed her mind once her research had indicated that a psychotherapeutic drug, combined with other therapies, would help him. Luke had also suggested the spice might make Han more receptive to the Force; as well as easing his anxiety, it would probably bring down the barriers his mind normally held in place.

Leia was also aware that if *she* took the drofic, it might enhance her burgeoning Force skills. In addition to stimulating the brain's pleasure centre, spice was renowned for invigorating any extra-sensory ability a user might have. The drofic hadn't caused this result in Han, but Leia suspected this was more likely because he was Force blind, not because it was ineffective.

Leia laid a hand on his forearm. "It's not supposed to be *the* solution, Han. It's to make you feel more like your old self. To help you cope. Then you can separately tackle the main cause of the problem."

He pulled away from her touch. "You're not listening, Leia. I said, I want it too much."

"You told me yourself it's not overly addictive," Leia reasoned. "I think you're over-reacting to the fact that it's doing you good."

"I'm not taking it."

There was no point in arguing with him. She knew that once he'd made his mind up, that was usually it. She understood why he was afraid of becoming addicted to the spice-derivative, no matter how much of a long shot that was. Even before the carbonite, he'd had an almost paranoid distrust of any medication. She suspected his attitude towards drugs – of any kind – had probably arisen from his street-wise experience, seeing too many lives destroyed by the affects of countless stimulants, depressants and spices. His distrust of drugs was so fervent, it was possible he may once have been an addict himself. It had been a genuine surprise to her when he had agreed to take the drofic to help with his symptoms. But unlike other forms of spice, drofic was reasonably innocuous and infrequently habit-forming. The medication Han had been given was probably even less addictive, as it was only a derivative and not the spice in full strength.

Up until yesterday, he had seemed eager to get back on the medication, especially after he had experienced life both on and off the drug. Something must've happened to make him change his mind. If she could work out what that 'something' was, she might be able to convince him otherwise. But she would have to take things slowly and surreptitiously.

"So," she began, "are we heading off to return the bike?"

Solo frowned, then his eyes widened. "It's all right. I'll go on my own."

She cocked her head at him, trying to work out why he was unenthusiastic about her suggestion. "You don't want me to come?"

There was a pained expression on his face as he tried to explain. "It's not that."

"But you don't want me to come?"

"It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Breathing heavily through his nose, his eyes looked everywhere but at her. She wasn't about to let him off easily, no matter how ill he was.

"Han?"

He ran a hand through his hair, and finally met her gaze. "The bike." He stopped, grimaced at her. "I left it...out where Luke landed the shuttle."

Leia immediately understood his hesitation. He had gone out to see the pyre. To see the remains of Vader. And he hadn't wanted her to know. He was either embarrassed, ashamed, or something had happened out there. Was that why he had left the bike there?

She gave him a small smile. "It's all right. I was thinking about going out there myself."

"You were?"

She hadn't. Going anywhere near the remains of her father had been the last thing on her mind. But if it meant being with Han, being there for him and helping him, then she would go.

Leia took his hand again, squeezed his fingers and smiled at him. "If we leave now, we should be back before it gets dark."

His look was wary but he squeezed her fingers in return. "Lemme close the *Falcon*."

She let go of his hand and watched as he climbed the ramp to the seal the hatch. Her mind, however, was trying not to think what lay across the forest. *I can do this*, she re-assured herself. *What am I going to see, anyway? Perhaps some human remains. I've seen worse than that. Far worse.* And usually what she had seen had been created by the one person she was going to see.

Vader. My father.

The trek to the clearing was relatively easy. An effortless two-kilometre walk through the trees that could have been considered romantic if not for the reality of where they were heading. They walked hand-in-hand in the late afternoon sunshine, as if on a lovers' stroll. The silence between them was relaxed and comfortable, a simple look or the gentle squeeze of a hand speaking more than words. Solo seemed much less depressed and distant than he had previously. Leia took note of this apparent mood-swing and wondered if her theory about his illness was off-track.

Leia, herself, was not as unperturbed as she pretended. It took all her concentration not to think about what lay ahead, what she would see at the funeral pyre, how she would react. But trying *not* to think about it was almost as bad as thinking about it. Instead, she focused her attention on Han and practised the passive sensing techniques Luke had taught her. It was surprising how easily she was able to detect the essence of who he was, perceive the patterns he generated and displaced in the Force. It was as if she was suddenly able to see and read a script that had previously been invisible to her. She realised this is what she had been doing, unknowingly, last night in the *Falcon* when she had been thinking about Solo.

His underlying emotions also became apparent to her. Despite wearing a mask of serenity, he was tense, on edge, and she suspected he was trying not to think about something, just as she was. The closer they got to the clearing, the more reticent Solo became. His pace slowed, and Leia found herself almost tugging on his hand, encouraging him to follow her down the path she instinctively knew to take. At least Han seemed content for her to take the lead, and did not question how she knew the way.

The ground rose up into a gentle hill and the trees began to thin out. At the top of the incline, a speeder bike sheltered next to a fallen log. Leia supposed it was the one Solo had used, and Luke had removed it from the clearing prior to lifting off in the shuttle. She couldn't help feeling grateful that Solo hadn't hallucinated the bike.

Leia released Solo's hand without giving it another thought and moved ahead of him up the slope. Studying Solo for the last thirty minutes must have heightened her senses; she was extremely aware of her increased heart rate, the rush of breath in her ears and an inexorable pull, an enticing curiosity that urged her on. Strangely, she was no longer fearful of what she would find.

The clearing came into view as she neared the crest of the slope, rising into her line of sight. The open ground was vacant and, she realised, barely big enough to land a Lambda class shuttle on. A blackened smudge of dirt was the only indication of what had happened here. Her immediate reaction was

disappointment. She didn't quite know what she had been expecting. Perhaps the remains of the pyre, burnt logs, dead coals – *something* to indicate it was over. Something to give her closure. But this...this was literally nothing.

Luke must have cleared it up, she reasoned to herself. To stop the souvenir hunters and scavengers from desecrating the memory of Anakin Skywalker.

"Luke must've—"

The sharp glance she aimed at Han halted his comment. She hadn't realised he had caught up to her and now stood beside her at the edge of the clearing. She softened her eyes with a contrite smile, but his gaze had drifted to the scorched patch of ground and he missed her apology. Leia followed his eyes. There was nothing left to see. Part of her was relieved she didn't have to deal with the emotions that seeing Vader's pyre may have generated. But at the same time, she couldn't help feeling a sense of regret that she had been denied the opportunity to experience those emotions. She couldn't even say good-bye to a man she had never really known.

Leia stepped out from under the trees and onto the bare ground, moving towards the place where Luke had cremated their father in the fashion of the Jedi. Tentatively at first, then more confidently as she neared the blackened earth, she opened herself to the Force. For a moment, she sensed nothing. Closing her eyes, she widened her scope and stretched out her feelings. An incredible surge of energy suddenly assailed her mind and body, overwhelming her in a white-green squall. Almost sensory overload, it was like nothing she could ever have imagined.

Concentrating on what Luke had taught her, Leia rode the wave, accepting and revelling in the energy the life-force gave her. It took her a few minutes to separate the different strands into distinct groupings. She could sense the trees and plants in the surrounding forest, the animals and insects hiding in the lush vegetation, and the comforting presence of Han back behind her where he'd remained to check out the speeder bike. But immediately in front of her, where Vader's pyre had been, there was nothing. There was a 'gap' in the Force, an absence of the energy that sent shivers through her body. It was as if a black hole had opened up in the fabric of space and sucked it away.

Leia opened her eyes and looked back at Solo. He was staring intently at the speeder, fiddling with a display on the instrument panel, deliberately trying to ignore the fact she was looking at him. He grimaced as he rubbed a spot on his temple, and she assumed he was getting a headache.

Leia returned her attention to the puzzling gap before her. Although only a novice to the Force, she instinctively knew it wasn't anything she was or wasn't doing. She again wished that Luke had remained with them, that he hadn't been so

eager to rush off to Dagobah. He may have been able to explain this phenomenon to her.

The hair at the nape of her neck rose, and laser bursts suddenly rained down on the ground she'd been looking at. Gasping, Leia wrenched her head towards Solo again. The Corellian was unarmed and still concentrating on the speeder bike, oblivious to any blaster fire. He'd neither caused it, nor seen it; otherwise he would've rushed protectively to her side at the first sound of danger.

She was still staring across the clearing at Solo, when an image of him suddenly swamped her mind. He was kneeling on the ground at her feet, shaking violently as he vomited into the dirt. She immediately looked down, but he wasn't there. She found him back by the speeder where he'd always been. Her eyes zipped between the spot on the ground where she had seen Solo retching and the outskirts of the clearing where he physically was now. It was a vision, she realised. An insight into something that had happened, or a premonition of things to come. Nothing to be frightened of at this point in time. If it had already happened, there was nothing she could do to stop it, but if it was in the future, then she may be able to help him.

Leia glanced over her shoulder at the discoloured patch of dirt, the place where a hole in the Force existed, but nothing was clearer to her. She caught movement out the corner of her eye and turned her head back again. A young man, even younger than she was, stood between her and the edge of the clearing. His light brown hair was cut short, a few strands of hair plaited into a thin braid that hung over the front of one shoulder. The cut of the tunic and trousers he wore reminded her of the dark clothes Luke had recently chosen to wear. There was a familiarity to the shape of his face, but also a strangeness that found her wondering who he was. His eyes were dark and had a mischievous glint that was like Han's and yet also slightly menacing.

Then he spoke in an accent that reminded her of Luke's, and one she felt certain she had heard before. "I'd be much too frightened to tease a senator."

The corner of his mouth tugged up to one side and he seemingly spoke her name without moving his lips. "Leia?"

She blinked and Han's features materialised over the face of the stranger as he asked, "Leia? Are you all right?"

She realised Han *hadn't* suddenly appeared. He'd always been there; it was the young man who had vanished.

Leia swallowed the constriction from her throat and nodded absently. She scanned the clearing for any sign of the stranger, wondering who he was.

Another vision? Someone who would come into her life in the future? Or someone from the past she would never know?

Solo didn't appear convinced as he moved towards her. Leia could sense the protective concern he felt towards her, his own unease forgotten.

"Princess?"

She met his questioning gaze and gave him a reassuring smile.

"I'm fine," she told him. "Really."

Solo brushed the back of his finger down her cheek, his mouth twitching up sceptically. "Come on." He took her hand. "Let's get outta here."

Leia gave the clearing one more furtive glance before following him back to the speeder bike.

Leia had watched him suffer with the headache for the last three hours. She suspected the headache had struck Solo when they were at the clearing as he had started rubbing his temple back then. It appeared to have gotten progressively worse. By the time they had returned the speeder bike to the Imperial compound and walked back to the *Falcon*, the pain had been bad enough that he was almost continually massaging his forehead. He had stubbornly refused to seek out medication that might help him; it almost seemed as though he was equating any drug with the spice derivative.

Solo lit a fire while Leia had prepared them a meal of leftovers from the previous night, though the night was balmy and the fire more for atmosphere and light than warmth. Lighting the fire had seemed to be the extent of what he could cope with. He'd barely touched the food on his plate, the pain no doubt making him nauseous. As he hadn't eaten for over a day, she had been mildly disturbed by his lack of appetite. The warm, humid night wasn't helping him, and he'd removed his jacket and sat away from the heat of the fire, resting his elbows on bent knees and holding his head in his hands.

She wondered if the vision she'd had of Han vomiting on the ground was related to the headache. A migraine could make him ill enough that he might throw up, but she'd never known him to experience a migraine; the worst she'd seen was the occasional hangover headache, but as they were self-induced, she'd never had any sympathy for him then.

Now was different. She couldn't bear watching him endure the pain any longer. On the pretence of taking their plates back inside to the ship's galley, Leia made a detour to Han's cabin before heading outside again.

When she returned, Solo was lying flat out on the blanket, his arm slung across his eyes. He didn't move when she knelt down next to him until she gently touched his elbow. He dropped his arm and looked at the capsule and beaker of water she held out to him.

"Analgesic," she explained softly in an attempt to assure him it wasn't one of the spice capsules. She left the drofic safely in her pocket where she'd put them.

He eyed her and the medication warily.

"Han." Her tone brooked no argument. "Please. You're in pain."

Solo sighed in resignation and, to her relief, nodded. He propped himself up on his elbows, took the capsule and water from her and swallowed them. Leia took the beaker off him and sat it on the ground. It would be at least a few minutes before the pain-relieving properties kicked in, but in the mean time, she would make him as comfortable as possible. She scooted around behind him and propped her legs out across the blanket so that her body was at right angles to his.

"Lie back," she encouraged, easing his shoulders down until his head rested in her lap. She removed his hand from his temple and laid it across his chest. "Let me do that." She *shushed* his mumbled protest. "Relax, Solo. And do as you're told for once."

Han closed his eyes and muttered, "Yes, ma'am."

The moment she placed her fingertips to his forehead, his face instantly relaxed and he sighed in relief. At first she thought it was the effects of the analgesic. Then she briefly raised her fingers from his skin and the grimace returned to his face until she resumed her touch. She realised it was her doing; the simple touch of her fingers on his forehead was easing his pain.

With slow, deliberate strokes, Leia brushed her fingers across his forehead, squeezed the bridge of his nose, moved down and pushed firm circles into his temples. Each movement of her fingers drew soft whimpers from Solo.

"Better?" she asked, already knowing the answer to the question but wondering what it was exactly that she was doing.

The corner of his mouth lifted and he whispered, "Better."

There was a tingling in the tips of her fingers, one that increased with each stroke across his forehead, and she concentrated on the sensation. The tingling was not intense, more like a warmth that did not extend past the first joint of each finger. The warmth seemed to flow in a stream back from the end of her fingers before dissipating. She followed the flow to its source, and realised it was coming from Han. She had never experienced something like this before, but believing she knew what it was, she tested her theory by *not* thinking about relieving Han's distress. Immediately the tingling current in her fingers stopped and the scowl of pain returned to his face. She turned the flow back on just as quickly.

Her first reaction was gratitude that she had somehow acquired this skill, then regret that she hadn't learnt how to use it earlier during the war; there were so many battles, so many dying and injured who would have benefited if only she had known she had the capability to relieve their suffering. But then she realised what she was doing now was not much better than the spice-derivative. She could take away Han's pain – the symptom – but she wasn't solving the cause of it. If she really wanted to help him, she should try dealing with the source of the headache. And she had experienced enough headaches herself that she knew where to look.

Closing her eyes to intensify her focus, Leia slowed her breathing and projected a sense of relaxation and comfort towards Han the way Luke had taught her.
Relax... Relax... Calm... Peace...

His breathing synced to hers and the weight of his shoulders increased against her thighs as he followed her suggestion. Leia suspected the blood vessels that encircled his skull were the cause of the headache, and so she called up a view of them in her mind. Unnervingly, she was able to picture what they looked like. The extracranial arteries were swollen, distended from stress and tension. It was as simple as imagining the arteries as they should be and they reverted to their normal size.

A shuddering groan from Solo made her open her eyes again. Head still in her lap, his eyes were wide and alert.

"It's gone," he told her, a touch of wonder in his voice. "Just went."

Leia smiled at him and ran her fingers through his hair, continuing to massage his scalp. "The analgesic must have worked."

"That quickly?" he asked sceptically. "And it didn't go gradually. One minute it was there. Then suddenly it was gone like—"

"Magic?"

Solo's lips contained a hint of amusement. "Whatever. As long as it stays away."

He raised his shoulders as he gathered himself to move off her, but Leia pushed him back down again. He didn't resist.

"Why don't you stay there for a while longer," she suggested, continuing to work her fingers back through his hair. "To make sure the headache is gone for good."

He closed his eyes and settled against her legs. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he lightly accused.

"And you're not?"

He opened an eye and his mouth twisted into the crooked grin that she had seen so little of lately. "But don't tell anyone. It'll ruin my reputation."

"I won't tell a soul," she promised.

The princess continued with the head massage, enjoying the opportunity to give him her complete attention while at the same time repairing and re-affirming the bond between them. This, she recalled, is what it had been like at the beginning of their intimate relationship. The sub-light flight to Bespin had offered them time for love, peace and friendship. And there had certainly been a lot of love. Solo had awakened a sexuality in her that she been trying to ignore for years. Her whimsical smile soured at the thought that they hadn't successfully made love since Bespin. There had been numerous attempts since Solo's rescue from Tatooine, but they had not consummated their love for each other. Unfortunately, she knew the cause of this was in his mind. However it was that the carbonite had affected his psyche, it now also affected their love-life. She couldn't help but wonder if the revelation that she was Vader's daughter might also have tainted the way Han looked at her.

Leia had the distinct impression that someone was watching them. She raised her eyes from Solo's face. The young man she had seen in the clearing was standing on the other side of the fire. His transparent image flickered slightly and she knew it was another vision. She stared at the familiar-looking stranger, trying to remember where it was she knew him from. He smiled at her sadly, a smile reminiscent of the one Han had given her as he had been lowered into the pit of the carbon-freezing chamber on Cloud City. The memory of that moment was so horrific, Leia had to look down at Solo's peaceful face in her lap to reassure herself that was all in the past. He was here with her now. Safe.

When she looked back at the fire, the image of the young man was gone.

"Leia?" Solo's sleepy voice captured her attention. "Come back to bed."

She smiled fondly at his request and considered whether he had fallen asleep and was dreaming or if he was hallucinating that they were in bed together. No

matter what the reason, she figured it was reasonably harmless and even mildly erotic. Wondering if she might be able to share the experience with him, Leia closed her eyes and focused on Han again, silently chanting to him, *Relax... Relax... Calm... Peace...*

She recognised the boundary of his consciousness as if it was a physical object and moved towards it. *Relax...* she repeated to him. *Relax...* The outer layers of his consciousness drifted around her as she gently entered his mind, and she realised he was in the semi-conscious state between sleep and wakefulness. His body momentarily stiffened in automatic response to sensing another sentient in his mind, and his barriers started coming on-line as he tried to push her out. But Leia soothed him and reassured him, told him she loved him and he gradually accepted her. It was easier than she had expected, and appeared as though she didn't need the drofic after all.

Leia floated at the edge of his consciousness, revelling in the simple pleasure of being surrounded by Han. Wary of disturbing him, she cautiously stretched out her feelings. What she encountered made her glad he wasn't fully conscious. Confused snatches of thoughts crackled around her. Memories and emotions welled up indiscriminately. She could only guess what his mind would be like if he was fully awake. The idea of having to endure such turmoil, even as an observer, was unnerving.

Whether he had previously been dreaming or hallucinating them in bed, she couldn't detect it now. She gave up her half-hearted attempt to read his mind, content to enjoy the sensation of being enfolded by him. Something again that reminded her of the time she had spent on Bespin. The night they had spent in the opulent stateroom, before Calrissian's betrayal, had been the most incredible night of her life. They had made love throughout the evening, luxuriating in the chance to be on their own after being cooped up in the *Falcon* with Chewbacca and Threepio for so many days. They had eaten the meal delivered to their rooms in the centre of the enormous bed, sitting naked and cross-legged across from each other. And then they had made love again. It had been obvious to both of them that they had fallen deeply in love with each other, but as their future had been uncertain, neither had been brave enough to say the words.

The memories of that night and the passion they had shared were enough to make her tremble. She sent him a burst of happiness and desire, and on a whim imagined that she could increase his serotonin levels.

Solo unexpectedly stirred from her lap, and the link between them broke. He slowly rose to a sitting position next to her. No traces of drowsiness marred his features or movements. He lifted a hand to her face, cupped her cheek, leaned forward and kissed her. The kiss was gentle and undemanding, but revealed the depth of his love for her and promised his passion. His breath was short when they parted, and his eyes sparkled with the mischief she missed seeing.

Leia swivelled her knees around and leaned into him, placing her lips to his. As much as she wished this would lead further, she did not want to get her hopes up; too many previous occasions had started just this way and gone nowhere.

His arms pulled her closer and he lowered his back to the ground, taking her with him. Leia gave herself totally to the moment and to Han. She ran her fingers through his hair as she splayed herself across his chest, her legs on either side of his hips. His body was warm and hard beneath hers, and her heart skipped a beat when she felt the onset of his arousal against her upper thigh. Her instinct was to increase the pace, take advantage of the situation while it was there on offer. It had been such a long time.

She ran her hand across the front of his trousers, then tore herself away from the incredible things his mouth was doing to her ear and neck. She pushed herself up to straddle his hips and started work on releasing his belt buckle. His hands came down over hers as she began unfastening his trousers. Frowning, Leia raised her eyes to his. The eagerness froze in her stomach. That was it; it was over before it had begun.

Solo's gentle smile was not enough to quell her disappointment. He moved her slightly, but held her in his lap as he sat up and pulled her legs around his waist. He took her face in his hands and kissed her again, unhurriedly working his lips and tongue around her mouth, rekindling her desire. It was then she understood. He wanted to do this slowly, take their time, revel in the touch of the other like they had the first time and last time they had made love.

Leia surrendered all control to Solo. She relished the erotic nature of his caresses, the warmth of his mouth against her skin and the probing touch of his hands. Feeling him through the fabric of her clothes, being denied the contact of skin-on-skin, only made her want him more.

She responded to his unspoken suggestions like a woman bewitched, a woman who had been waiting for this moment for an eternity. The heat of the fire seemed to fuel her desire, heightening her senses until she believed she would be consumed by her need for him.

After what felt like hours of tender agony and teasing, they undressed each other. Finally naked, they gazed hungrily at the sight of the other. Han pulled her back against his chest and kissed her. Still holding her close, he rolled her over onto the blanket and made love to her.

It was like a thermal detonator exploding. The ecstasy that shot through his system was electrifying, shattering every nerve until he was a quivering, shuddering mess. Any hint of the depression he'd carried seemed to be wiped out in that single instant.

An involuntary cry escaped from him, and he held her tighter, burrowing his body further into hers and dropping his forehead to the nape of her neck. Her arms encircled his back, pulling him down until his chest touched her breasts, but he was able to support most of his weight on his knees and elbows. They held each other like that, a lovers' embrace, enjoying both the dizzying high and the bond that they shared.

When his breath had returned, Han whispered into her neck, "I love you."

The side of her face was pressed against his hair, and she turned to kiss his ear but said nothing. He moved his head up and rubbed his cheek against hers. Her face was wet with tears. He pulled back slightly and saw that she was crying. Something cracked within his chest, and it no longer mattered who her father was. This was Leia in his arms. A person in her own right, not defined by her parentage. How could he have ever doubted his love for this woman?

Han held her tighter and promised her would always love her. No matter what.

Solo was uncertain what woke him, only that a spasm had thrown him upright in his bunk. His eyes were wide and alert, his consciousness coiled taut like a spring, his nerves raw and on edge. He searched his mind but found no trace of nightmares. His pulse was slow and steady, and his skin was free of the cold sweat that usually came with these dreams. Then it hit him; an overwhelming feeling of dispossession. As if he had lost a vital piece of himself.

The place next to him on the bunk, the place where Leia had been sleeping, was bare. The emptiness inside him seemed to amplify. He had thought they had fallen asleep together, but not finding her there made him doubt his recollection. And before they had fallen asleep, he had thought they had made love, made love twice in fact. Once outside on the blanket in front of the fire, and then after he'd fed his hungry stomach, here in the bunk. He could still taste her on his lips, smell her on his skin. And even before they had made love, he'd had the worst headache he could ever remember having. These memories were so vibrant, he could've sworn they were real, that it had all actually happened. Except, he couldn't rely on anything lately, not his body or his mind. For all he knew, it was a dream. Or worse – an hallucination.

He scratched absently at the patch of synthflesh under his chin, then stopped when he remembered what had caused his injury. He glanced at the gun-rig that sat on the desk amidst some of Leia's clothes, and tried not to entertain the thought that the blaster could solve all his problems in one hit.

Even if he had imagined making love to Leia, he wondered where she was now. His internal chrono told him night had fallen on the Endor moon and dawn was

only a few hours away. His stomach tightened at the thought that she had again chosen not to sleep with him.

His gaze wandered back to the gun-rig and he noticed that the medpack, and therefore the drofic capsules, were no longer on the desk. He supposed Leia had removed it, which was probably just as well because despite his resolve not to go back on the drug, part of him was tempted. But there was also a part that was tempted in another direction, that wished he hadn't set the safety on his blaster.

Solo kicked the covers off and padded out of his cabin and into the refresher. He relieved himself into the sanit unit, washed his hands at the basin without looking at his reflection in the mirror. Then he went looking for Leia.

The tea had cooled in its mug and Leia winced at the bitter taste as she sipped from it. It wasn't quite enough to distract her from the datapad. For the past hour or so she had been sitting at the holographic game table as she studied her notes, trying to make sense of what had happened to Han earlier in the night.

She could understand how she had managed to 'cure' him of his headache. Although inexperienced in the ways of the Force, it had been instinctive for her to relieve his pain. But it had been mystifying what had suddenly cured his impotence. It was more than mystifying, she admitted. Much more. Her tears had been testimony to how she'd been affected; it had overwhelmed her. Not only had she been sexually satisfied, making love with Han had given her emotional fulfilment, something she had not experienced for ten long months. After they had made love, Solo had ravenously eaten the food he had previously left untouched, and then they had made love again in his cabin. Incredibly, his depression had also lifted. He had been like a new man – like the man she had known and loved on Bespin.

They had shared a shower after the lovemaking, then fallen asleep wrapped around each other. Leia had slept soundly until Solo's body heat had gotten too much for her and she had slipped from his arms. Once awake, it had been difficult to calm her mind and return to sleep. The night had turned out so differently to what she had expected. She had to understand what had happened to him, and if she had played any part. Hoping the answer might lie in the medical information she had compiled on the datapad, she had dressed in one of Han's shirt and gone out to sit in the forward compartment.

The more she read, the more engrossed she became. If he was suffering from a chemical imbalance, then somehow his dopamine and serotonin levels must have been affected. As it had all happened so quickly, and only after she had 'entered' his mind and started trying to help him, she *must* have been responsible. She wondered if she had 'transferred' her memories of making love with him to Han, and if that had finally sparked his desire. She was leaning towards this theory until she discovered that serotonin was concentrated in the

hypothalamus, and the hypothalamus was the control centre for, amongst other things, the sex drive. Had increasing his serotonin levels inadvertently stimulated the hypothalamus, and thereby stimulated him sexually?

Leia's thoughts came to an abrupt halt. She had been vaguely aware of the Force in the background, a constant flow of life, and so had been startled from her study when a gap had suddenly appeared in it. It reminded her of what she had experienced at the site of Vader's pyre. She looked up from the datapad, and came face-to-face with the same young man she had seen in the clearing and who had later appeared near the fire Han had lit outside the *Falcon*.

The young man stood on the other side of the hold, and he smiled at her as their eyes met. For a moment she thought he was real, a living, breathing sentient. She reminded herself that the young man had no corporeal substance; he was a vision, like the other times he had appeared, and she wondered what link she had to him that compelled this vision to re-appear.

His gaze broke from hers and he glanced around at the bulkheads and the tech station as he moved towards her, his face showing genuine interest and repulsion at the state of the *Falcon's* hold. Leia was shocked to realise the 'vision' was interacting with his surroundings. This was no Force-image from the past or future. This was a spirit. The pulse throbbed in her throat as the spirit came to a halt in front of the game table, and gave her an almost nervous half-smile.

"You remind me of her," he said softly. "And not just physically. I should have realised it long ago."

Leia swallowed deeply. Years of deep-seated anger towards the Dark Lord leeches from her soul. *This is Vader*, she reasoned, trying to calm her racing heart and repress the urge to rush as far away as she could. *Vader before he became Vader. And I remind him of my mother. My mother...* She had vague memories of her mother, her *birth* mother, not the woman who had raised her. She had told Luke these memories were not much more than images and feelings. They were the sole link she had to the woman only ever known to her by the name Padme. And now here was another link to that woman; she shared memories of her mother with this man.

She studied the apparition of the fair-haired Jedi. Luke had told her about the visions he'd had of Obi-Wan Kenobi, so she supposed she shouldn't be surprised that a Force-user as powerful as Vader would continue to 'live' in the Force after his death and materialise in whatever guise he wished. It seemed curious that he had chosen to appear as a young man around her age, perhaps at the stage where he was still learning the Jedi craft. She realised his intent was to appear as less of a threat, to make things easier for her. Damn him if it wasn't working. She found herself thinking of him by his original name, not Darth Vader but the name Luke had told her about: *Anakin Skywalker. Father...*

"Leia?"

The sound of Han's voice momentarily startled her. She turned to see Solo standing in the ring corridor, naked, his hair sleep-tousled and awry. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Anakin Skywalker's ghost shimmer then disappear.

Solo scuffed a hand through his hair. "What are you doin' out here?"

His mood had changed again. She could tell just by looking at him. The depression was back, though perhaps not as bad as it had been. If she had done something to help him, it obviously wasn't permanent. Her anger towards Vader resurfaced, rumbling and boiling in her veins.

"I couldn't sleep," she explained truthfully, rising to meet him. "I didn't want to wake you. So I thought I'd catch up on some work."

"Oh."

She stopped in front of him, raised her hand to his temple and pushed her fingers through his hair. "How's your head? Headache hasn't come back?"

His eyes sparked, as if she had confirmed something he had been unsure about.

"I feel fine."

Leia smiled at his reply, but only took it to mean the headache hadn't reappeared.

"Why don't you go back to bed," she suggested. "I'll be there shortly." She wanted to finish her research and come up with some sort of plan to tackle the cause of his disorder. And if Vader materialised again, she might find out what he wanted and even tell him a thing or two herself.

Solo averted his eyes and mumbled, "Do you have the drofic?"

Leia removed her hand from his hair, trying to keep the delight from her face while at the same time hoping he would lift his gaze to hers. "They're in the pocket of the shirt I wore today. I think I left it on your desk."

He nodded, then looked up at her from beneath his brows, the corner of his mouth twitching guiltily.

Leia took his hand in hers. "Go back to bed. I'll bring you some water."

He unsuccessfully tried to lift his mouth into a smile. "Thanks."

She kissed his cheek and let him go, taking her time to admire the view as he padded back down the corridor to his cabin. The relief and exhilaration hit her once he was out of sight. She hated seeing him depressed and so out of sorts with himself. With him back on the medication, it would at least provide him with some respite and hopefully make him receptive to other more permanent therapies.

When she brought him a mug of water, he was sitting on the edge of his bunk, staring at the desk, an almost haunted look in his eyes. He wasn't holding the drofic packet, so she assumed he'd been hesitant about getting them from her shirt. He came out of the daze as she entered the cabin. Without saying a word, she retrieved the medication from the shirt, and handed him a capsule and the mug. He shut his eyes, obediently swallowed the drug and the water, and with eyes still closed sat there and waited. Leia took the mug from him and set it on the desk, and silently waited with him. A few minutes later, he opened his eyes. The change in him was not as palpable as she'd previously noticed, and she assumed the drug hadn't quite kicked in yet. His lopsided grin wasn't working properly either, but he tried it anyway.

"Did we make love tonight?" he softly asked her.

To his surprise, Leia leaned down and kissed him gently on the mouth. She pulled back slightly, kissed the tip of his nose and smiled.

"You bet we did," she replied. "Twice."

His grin wavered. "And...?"

"And it was fantastic," she assured him. "And you weren't even on the medication."

A trace of discomfort crossed his face, but the well-known Solo confidence soon surfaced. "Well what did you expect?"

Leia laughed in genuine delight and fondness. "From you, darling, nothing less."

Chuckling with her, Han placed his palm on the side of her face and drew her down to briefly kiss her again. She touched his hair as they parted, realised she would rather cuddle up with him and enjoy his mood than continue studying her datapad. And receiving late night visits from ghosts.

"Why don't you lay back and get some rest," she told him, reinforcing her suggestion with subtle encouragement through the Force. She prodded the idea to him that he was tired. "I'll pack up and be back in a moment."

Solo yawned, lifting his head up so the underside of his chin was visible. The moment she saw the flaking patch of synthflesh, she knew how his injury had been caused. Her previous vision was correct. Han had burnt himself on the muzzle of his blaster. He'd been trying to kill himself.

If she hadn't been researching mental disorders, she might have reacted the way she had previously: with horror and denial. As she now knew that a high percentage of schizophrenics resorted to suicide, it was unsettling but not unexpected. By piecing together the different visions she'd experienced, she was soon able to see what had happened. Han had gone to the clearing to see the remains of Vader. Something had set him off, and he'd fired a barrage at the pyre, then turned the blaster back on himself. The heat from the muzzle had burnt his skin. Thankfully, his attempt at suicide had not been successful, and he'd ended up on his knees, vomiting into the dirt. What she wanted to know was why he hadn't succeeded. He'd pulled the trigger – she'd seen that much through the Force. Something had stopped him. Or saved him.

Her need to wrap him in her embrace became imperative, if only to convince him there was no reason to believe suicide was a solution. At the same time, spikes of black hatred pierced her heart. Hatred towards the being who had driven Han to suicidal despair. *Vader. My father.*

Solo stretched out on the bunk, propping his head on the pillows as if he didn't have a care in the galaxy. His demeanour seemed so distant from what she imagined suicidal to be, it was reassuring and gratifying, and seemed to quell the hatred boiling within. The drofic was working.

More request than instruction, he told her, "Don't be long, Princess."

Leia kissed his cheek and promised, "I won't."

The ghost of Anakin Skywalker was waiting for her when she returned to the hold. He was standing next to the game table, scanning the screen of her datapad. Prying.

Leia's eyes hardened. This man – vision – ghost – did not deserve her time let alone her respect, and she had far better things to do. Like shut down the datapad and return to Han's side.

"What do you want?" she growled. "No, don't answer that because I'm not interested. I'm not going to talk to you and I certainly don't want to listen to anything you have to say."

The wry smirk Skywalker gave her only served to infuriate her further. Leia snatched the datapad away from his view.

"I don't want you here, understand?" *Han* certainly wouldn't want Vader here, in the *Falcon*. "Leave. Disappear. Go back to wherever it is you now belong."

When the sardonic grin persisted, she turned her back on him and gave her attention to the datapad, checking to see the information was still intact, that he hadn't been tampering with it.

"How is he?"

She knew he was asking about Han. Intent on ignoring him, Leia scrutinised the datapad screen. "Why do you care?"

"I'm responsible—"

She rounded on him suddenly, sarcastically spitting out, "*Responsible?*" For the millions who had died and suffered through his actions, as result of his instruction, and by his own hand. For her own torment and interrogation on the Death Star. For the torture of Han, for no other reason than to lure Luke to Bespin and to punish the smuggler for defying the Empire. And then finally using Solo to test the capability of the carbon freezing chamber.

Responsible? Vader had hurt, destroyed or taken away everything she had ever loved or held dear. Her levels of protectiveness and indignation peaked.

"After everything you've done, you have no right to be concerned for Han. I won't let you."

In comparison to hers, Skywalker's voice was calm and reasonable. "Is his burn healing?"

The blood drained from Leia's face. She didn't want to ask, but the words came out regardless, bitter and edged with disbelief. "What do you know about it?"

Skywalker said nothing, but his eyes spoke volumes. He'd been there – at the pyre – when Han had turned up on the speeder bike. He'd seen it happen. And he knew something more.

"You were there," Leia accused. Her anger flared, a red darkness momentarily obscuring her vision. "What did you do?!" Then just as quickly she realised he had stopped it. He had saved Han.

The ghost of Anakin Skywalker – her father – seemed suddenly abashed. "Child's play," he explained dismissively. "A simple trick. Just flicked on the blaster's safety."

A chill crept up her spine and she hugged herself, fighting off the cold that threatened to seep into her bones. She couldn't look at him and her gaze sought refuge in the deckplates. She didn't want to believe it, but she knew that was what had happened. Her father had stopped Han from killing himself.

"You'll heal Han, Leia," Skywalker told her gently. "You've taken the first steps tonight."

Leia looked at her father and his half-grin returned.

"Believe in yourself," he urged. "It's as simple as my trick with the blaster. Love him, and it will guide you."

She found herself trembling as she hoarsely whispered, "What do *you* know about love?"

His face became solemn. "To hate, one must first know love."

Leia hugged herself tighter. She didn't want to hear any more. "Have you finished?"

He smiled at her sadly, then the spirit of Skywalker disappeared.

Leia inhaled deeply, desperate to compose herself and to dam the flow of the tears welling in her eyes. *Don't think about it*, she told herself. *Don't think about it, now or later*. She didn't want to imagine that her father – *Vader!* – might once have loved her mother. But at the same time she knew that she and Luke were the result of the love that Padme and Anakin had shared.

And why had he saved Han? After the total disregard and disgust Vader had shown towards the Corellian, why would Skywalker's ghost save Han? To make his daughter feel indebted to him?

Leia flicked off the datapad and dropped it on the console of the techstation. No matter why it had happened, Han was alive and for that she was undeniably grateful. And he was waiting for her in her cabin. Now, more than ever, he needed her. She could help him; she knew she could, because she loved him.

She left the hold and returned to her lover's side.

Solo was sleeping peacefully when Leia entered the cabin, the whisper of the hatch failing to wake him. He was usually a light sleeper, and as he hadn't had many restful nights since his release from the carbonite, she was surprised that she had not roused him. Not even the ambient light spilling across his face from

the corridor disturbed him. She wondered if the combination of spice and Force-suggestion had placed him into a deep sleep.

Leia closed the hatch and undressed while her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Han had pulled a light cover over himself before falling asleep, and she lifted it up and slipped onto her side of the bunk; from the first time she had slept with Han, she had always had the outer side of the mattress so she could make late-night trips to the 'fresher without waking him.

Solo turned in his sleep, draped an arm across her waist and pulled her into his body. Leia snuggled into him backwards, enjoying the warmth and touch of his skin. She suspected the movement of her backside against his groin was arousing more than his mind, and she spent a few minutes silently murmuring ideas of relaxation to him. His breathing deepened and the weight of his forearm across her waist increased.

When she was certain he was ensconced in sleep, she allowed her consciousness to drift into his. There was no resistance from him this time, no need to soothe and reassure him, and she assumed the medication had eased her way. What she could sense of his mind also gave her comfort. His thoughts appeared more ordered than they had previously, and the only emotion she could discern was contentment.

Recalling the notes she had compiled on the datapad, Leia focussed on the names of the chemical neurotransmitters that appeared to be the cause of his disorder: *serotonin, dopamine...* A wave of uncertainty gripped her. What did she know about psychotherapy? These were just words to her. Words she had known but barely understood before this morning, and how much could she have expected to learn after only a few hours of research? What did she honestly believe she could do to help Han?

She stumbled, lost concentration and found herself back outside his mind again. Cursing herself for rushing, Leia eased her way back and decided to take things slower, to start with the things she was certain of.

I love you, her mind whispered to his. I love your confidence and your belief in yourself. I love your loyalty to your friends, your heroism in the face of adversity, and your need to protect those you care about.

*I love you because you'll always be there for me. You always **have** been there for me, right from the beginning, and every time I tried to push you away and deny my feelings for you.*

I love that you think you're tougher and harder than you really are. Deep down, you're softest, kindest man I've ever known.

I love your eyes and the way you look at me. I love your laugh, your smile. I love what that smile does to me.

And I love the way you love me.

Instinctively, Leia knew what to do next, knew which path to take. There was nothing specific she had to concentrate on, no chemical levels to raise or block, no psychological terms she had to remember or magic to conjure up. It was less exact than that, and yet she knew it would be far more effective.

She stretched out her consciousness, mapping and weaving it over and through his, until they were loosely enmeshed, as if she was making love to his mind. And then she gave her strength and her love to him again.

I love you. I love your confidence and your belief in yourself. I love your loyalty to your friends, your heroism...

Leia found herself humming merrily as she put the finishing touches to her hair, and couldn't help smirking at her reflection in the mirror. She didn't believe she had ever 'hummed merrily' before, not even as a young princess growing up in the peaceful grounds of the palace at Aldera. She had every reason to be this content. She and Han had spent the last three days relaxing on the Endor moon, exploring the dells and streams around the *Falcon*, recovering from the horrors of the last 10 months, and re-capturing the intimacy between them that they had first discovered on the flight to Bespin.

Leia had also been providing Han with her version of therapy, healing him through the Force. At first she attempted the process only when he was asleep, but as it appeared to be working for him, two days ago she had first tried it on him when he was awake. They had been out for a stroll enjoying the afternoon sunshine when she had surreptitiously entered his mind and commenced the healing. She knew the spice-derivative had eased her way in and made him more receptive to the Force, yet she'd had second thoughts about what it was she was doing when his eyes had widened and he had looked at her sharply. Neither of them had said a word, and through silent encouragement and reassurances, she was able to convince him to let her stay.

With each therapy session that she gave him, his condition improved remarkably. He was still on a ten-hourly dosage of the drofic, and she suspected he probably should stay on the medication for the next few weeks. But she felt more far positive that he could be permanently cured than she had only a few days ago.

The princess secured the end of the single braid of her hair and straightened the collar of her shirt. It never ceased to amaze her that she could start her ablutions

before Han and yet he always finished getting dressed at least a good ten minutes before she did. Admittedly he didn't seem to worry about his hair quite the way Leia did about her own, or take time choosing which colour combination of shirt and trousers to wear, but he did have to shave. As it was, this morning he had already headed out of their cabin by the time Leia had returned from the 'fresher.

She looked at the state of the cabin. It was a mess. Clothes lay strewn across the desk and chair, mugs of forgotten kaffe rested on any available surface, the closet door was open and the bunk unmade. It seemed they'd been relaxing just a little too much. As today was their last full day planet-side, she knew they would have to start getting back into some sort of routine, especially if they were going to share accommodation. They had never really discussed future living arrangements. During the flight to Bespin, his cabin had become *their* cabin, but following Han's rescue from Tatooine, he had taken to sleeping with her in her suite onboard the Mon Cal cruiser, *Home One*. It made sense to her that he should move in with her; her suite was much larger than his cabin, and all her clothes were already in the closet. Leia hoped Han would agree with her on this matter, however she was uncertain how the Alliance hierarchy would take to the Princess of Alderaan sharing her bed with a Corellian smuggler, even if he was now a general. Although she and Han had done nothing to hide their relationship, neither had they 'officially' declared themselves as a couple. The High Command may have appreciated Solo's skill as a pilot and smuggler, but she knew they had scant regard for him as a person. She and Han were in for some interesting times ahead as the Alliance came to terms with their relationship. But first, she realised as she made a half-hearted attempt to collect the bed covers off the deck, they had some cleaning up issues to deal with.

Leia's stomach warbled hungrily. She wasn't used to sleeping in so late and her body was having trouble adjusting to the pattern of late meals she and Han were keeping. She dropped the covers back on the bunk and decided tidying up could wait for later. They only had one day left of rest and relaxation, and she intended spending and enjoying every available minute with Han. She headed off toward the galley, hoping that Han would have breakfast ready for her when she arrived.

Neither breakfast nor Solo were in the galley and she wondered where he'd gotten to. He hadn't even made himself the ritual mug of kaffe. Leia attuned her senses to the Force in an attempt to seek him out. Her instincts had her moving towards the *Falcon's* entrance hatch before she realised it was open.

Then she heard it. The horribly familiar sound of a laser blast – Han's blaster. The blood froze in her veins, and for one terrible moment she was unable to move. Her heart lurched sickeningly in her chest, the adrenalin propelling her forward and onwards. She hit the ramp at a dead run.

Solo's eyes were wide and unblinking as he squeezed the trigger. His hand was steady, his aim true, and it was with some satisfaction that he hit the target. The rock disintegrated into a million pieces. Readjusting the aim of the blaster he held near his hip, he fired twice more, destroying another two rocks before pulling his weapon up and returning it to his holster. Only then did he allow a slight smile to turn his lips.

This morning he'd woken with the urge to try out his speed draw. He hadn't worn his blaster since his unsuccessful suicide attempt, but he'd felt now was the right time to wear it again and test his aim. The tremor in his hand had not re-appeared since he'd gone back on the drofic, and he'd felt confident he would not be enticed to blow his head off. The medication, and Leia's *whisperings* in his mind, were working. He was nearly back to normal, back to feeling like his old self. He'd even come to terms with Leia's heritage, and if her use of the Force was anything to go by, was even a little grateful for it.

Leia's whisperings... He was quite sure that was an apt description of what she was doing to him, but it was definitely effective. The spice may have straightened out his thoughts and calmed his anxiety, however it was Leia's *mumbo-jumbo* that seemed to be helping the most. He knew if he hadn't been so desperate for help, he might have resented her poking around in his mind. He assumed the drofic had made him receptive to, and tolerant of, the Force as he knew that was a trait of spice. He didn't know what it was she was doing, but he did know that each time she did it, he felt stronger and healthier. He'd felt so good that this morning he'd even decided not to take another one of the drofic capsules, despite being due for more medication. His success with the target practice had vindicated his decision.

There were three rocks left on the fallen log Solo had placed them on. He drew his blaster, an explosion of muscle and pure skill, and the remaining rocks blew apart like the others. Solo straightened his pose, twirled the blaster around his finger and reholstered it with deliberate flourish. He couldn't contain the grin that lit his face.

A prickle at the back of his neck made him aware that he had an audience, and he turned back to the *Falcon*. Leia was standing at the bottom of the ramp and although she was a good fifty metres away, he could tell from the way she held herself that she was recovering from a bout of apprehension. He could guess why she might have reacted that way. He rubbed the pink skin under his chin where the burn had been, and suddenly felt the need to tell her what had happened, even if she already suspected. It was all part of the healing process. He might even assure himself – her – both of them – that it would never happen again.

Leia did not move from her position near the ramp as he strode across the clearing towards her, but her stance relaxed and the touch of a smile became

visible. By the time he reached her side, a self-consciousness had settled over him and he felt almost embarrassed that he'd tested his speed draw without first telling her.

Leia was the first to speak. "You're obviously in a good mood this morning."

Solo tried not to look abashed and he shrugged a shoulder. "Yeah."

Her lips twitched in amusement. "Show me that last move again."

He dipped his eyes but turned slightly so he wouldn't be aiming at her. He went through the drill of the speed draw, withdrawing the blaster even faster than he had earlier. Held the weapon steady for a few moments to prove to himself that he could, then rotated it twice on the axis of the trigger guard and returned it to the holster. As soon as the blaster hit the bottom of the holster, he withdrew it again, spun it three times around his finger and returned it to the rig.

Turning back to face her with a self-satisfied gleam in his eye, he winked and Leia chuckled with delight.

"Now you're just showing off," she gently reproved.

A smile slid up the right side of his face and he agreed, "I am. Because I can."

Leia wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face to his shoulder and hugging him tightly. He returned the embrace, using her strength and love to find the resolve to tell her.

As if she was reading his mind, she said, "You haven't worn your blaster for the last four days."

Solo laid his cheek against hers. "I haven't." A tightness gripped his throat as he told her, "I couldn't."

She pulled back from the embrace, reached up and tenderly stroked the underside of his jaw. "Because of this?"

She knows. He swallowed deeply, struggling with the constriction and unable to voice what he felt. *She knows...and she still loves me.* He wasn't surprised that she knew. After her skill with the Force over the last few days, nothing about Leia surprised him now.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

Leia's eyes revealed only wonder. "Sorry?"

Solo grimaced. "For being so stupid."

She took his hand and squeezed it. "You're not stupid." She pushed her other hand through his hair, grinned at him cheekily. "Perhaps a bit nerf-headed at times, but not stupid."

For a moment he shared her grin, then his face became starkly serious. "I love you, Leia."

She held his gaze with the same intensity. "I know, Han. I love you too. And remember that I can't live without you."

He took her in his arms again, resting his head against hers, reaffirming his words with his actions. "I'll never leave you again, Princess. I promise."

The princess and the Corellian held each other for what seemed an interminable amount of time. When they reluctantly separated from the embrace, they kept their contact by leaving an arm around the other's waist. Leia closed her eyes, taking a moment to breath in the incredible sense of well-being and relief. Solo pulled her into a loose hug again and kissed the top of her head before releasing her. She took his hand, entwined her fingers in his and smiled up at him.

"So, General," she began, "seeing as you're in such a good mood, what would you like to do on your last day of leave?"

His lips twitched in thought, yet the look in his eyes signalled he already knew what he wanted. "Spend it in bed with you."

Her giggle belied the shocked gasp she made. "On such a beautiful day? With all this sunshine?"

"There's something more beautiful I'd rather enjoy."

The sensuous rumble of his voice caused a spike of adrenalin inside her, but she teased him anyway. "*All day?* Do you think you're up to it?"

He squeezed her fingers and agreed, "Probably not. But it'd be fun practising."

Silently agreeing with him, Leia chuckled nonetheless. "*Practising?*"

"Sure. Practice makes perfect."

As if giving his proposal serious consideration, the princess laid a finger against her cheek and pursed her lips. "It's a tempting offer."

Solo puffed himself up in mock-pride. "Of course it is. It's with me."

Leia rolled her eyes. *This* was the Solo she loved and remembered.

The gold flecks in his eyes seemed to spark when she agreed to his suggestion and he wrapped his arms around her again. Then she added, "But I'll need some food first."

"I thought we'd live on love alone."

She laughed and wriggled from his embrace, keeping him at arms' length and wagging a finger in his face. "Food first. Then love."

He couldn't *not* agree with her. It was nearly mid-morning and they had not eaten since the previous evening.

"All right," he acceded. "Her Highness wants food, so Her Highness gets food."

"Lots of food," Leia stressed.

Han grinned. "Lots of food. And my treat." He ushered her to the fallen log they had been using as a backrest for their makeshift camp these last few days. "Just take a seat here, Your Highnessness, and I'll bring you out a breakfast that'll make your mouth water."

She accepted the offer of his hand and sat primly on the ground. "Lots of food," she reminded him.

"Yes, lots of food." He raised his eyebrows suggestively. "Cos you're gonna need it to keep your strength up."

Leia pouted her lips. "Promises, promises."

Solo leaned down and kissed her softly on the mouth. "For you, Princess, always."

He placed a lingering kiss on her cheek and left her with a parting wink before heading up the *Falcon's* ramp.

Leia leaned back against the log and stretched elaborately in the morning sunshine. The air smelt crisp and fresh, and a gentle breeze rustled through the trees. It was going to be another beautiful day, and she decided to enjoy it now why she still had the opportunity. Who knew how much of the sun she'd get to see if Han had his way.

Relaxed, she instinctively opened herself to the Force, her mind drifting on the gentle ebb and flow. Then the hair on the back of her neck suddenly rose, and she bolted upright.

"You," she growled at the ghost of Anakin Skywalker. He hadn't appeared again since that night in the *Falcon's* hold. "I told you before. I don't want to talk to you. I don't want you in my life."

The young Skywalker tried a disarming smile. "I wanted to see if you'd changed your mind."

Leia got to her feet as quickly as she could, amazed at his gall. "I haven't. And I won't." She had wanted to add, "*Ever!*" Except she wasn't convinced she could live up to the declaration. There may come a time when she would be comfortable talking to him. It just wasn't something she could deal with now.

"Han seems to be more like his old self."

She closed her eyes, uncomfortable with the familiar way he spoke about Han and the idea that her father was responsible for saving Solo's life. The thought that he purported to know Han's personality and behaviour was disturbing, let alone the fact this ghost was able to appear in her life whenever he felt like it. Would she have to contend with the possibility that her father may appear or pry on her at intimate moments?

Please, she thought. *Just leave me alone. Leave me be.* It seemed that she, like Han, needed time to recover.

"I'll go," he softly told her.

His words penetrated the shields she had drawn up around her. She opened her eyes as the warmth returned to her body. Anakin was still watching her intensely, though his gaze kept straying to the ground.

"I understand. If you ever change your mind, child, I'll be around."

'*Child*'... It surprised her, but she found the name almost endearing, not condescending.

"If you ever need me, Leia, just call." Without another word or look, the ghost of Anakin Skywalker disappeared.

Despite the warmth, Leia became conscious of the tremors that shook her, and she lowered herself to the ground again. She hoped that would be the last she would see of her father. For the time being at least. But she was both annoyed and confused that he had felt compelled to contact her in an effort to start some sort of a relationship, or make amends for the pain he had caused. She wondered if he would continue to keep an eye on her, the way he had been lately. The way that had saved Han's life.

Then it occurred to her that Anakin Skywalker could have played a part in Solo's recent target practice. Before, he had almost boasted about the ease it took to flick on the blaster's safety catch. Could he have been responsible for Han's success with his blaster? Was Han's recovery not as advanced as she'd thought?

Were you responsible? she silently asked.

The young male voice that had spoken to her only a few nights ago came in loud and clear; the same voice she had taken heed of when advising her to leave Han be.

Not me, he said. *That was you and Han.*

Me and Han... Leia smiled at the image that suddenly appeared in her mind: she and Han. A couple. Partners in life and love. That was no Force vision, or delusion, or trick of the mind. That was her reality, her future.

The princess rose to her feet and headed up the ship's ramp to be with the man that she loved. Her stomach rumbled and she added to herself with a smile, *And my breakfast!*

end

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