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VULNERABLE

By Aquarius

## DAY ONE

“I don’t know about you,” Han said, “but I’m getting pretty hungry. What do you say we wake up Goldenrod and have him whip us up some lunch?”

“I can do it,” Leia said hastily, looking for a reason to leave the cockpit. She hadn’t meant to kiss him on the cheek, didn’t know what possessed her to do it, but right now she welcomed the idea of something to do other than facing him. She had tried to play it off, hoping he was too absorbed in the task of escaping the Imperial fleet to take much notice of her moment of weakness.

The news that it would take four months to get to Bespin at top speed was slowly sinking in, and the princess felt the need to digest it alone.

Han turned in his seat, putting a hand on her arm to stop her. “I don’t really think that’s such a good idea.”

The kiss forgotten for a moment, Leia bristled defensively. “I’m not *that* bad of a cook!”

He smiled her favorite lopsided smile and folded his arms. “Your Highness, you are many things...a beautiful woman and an accomplished diplomat...but I wouldn’t feed your cooking to a bantha.” Han’s nose involuntarily wrinkled at the memory of her last attempt in the galley, something the princess had claimed was stew.

Once again, he had managed to throw her off-balance. *Beautiful woman...?*

Leaning past Leia to reanimate the droid, Han didn't see her jaw drop as she registered the insult over the compliment. "Rise and shine, Threepio. You're on K.P. duty indefinitely." Han stood, preparing to usher the droid out the hatch.

"But sir, do you think that's necessarily the best use of my talents? After all, I am a protocol droid, not a--"

Han leaned closer and said in the hushed voice of a conspirator, "It's not so much your talents I'm worried about, as it is *her* lack of talent in that department." He gave a nod toward the princess. "The galley still reeks. I don't think we'd have to worry about the Empire for very long if we let her feed us again."

Threepio looked from Leia and back to Solo. "Yes, well, now that you say so, sir, I see your cause for concern."

Leia threw her hands up, rolling her eyes. "Great. Turn him against me, too. Chewbacca wasn't complaining, you know."

Han turned back to her. "That's because that walking disposal unit will eat anything."

Threepio obviously didn't want to become entangled in an argument between the two of them and hastily excused himself. "Your midday meal will be ready shortly." With that, he was gone.

Han and Leia stared at each other awkwardly, neither really sure what to do or say next, now that they were alone again. The anxiety and frustration in the air threatened to suffocate them both. At the *Falcon's* best speed to Bespin, four months allowed for countless more moments like this one.

Han wasn't sure how many more he could take.

"I'll be in the engine access pit," he told her and made to leave.

"Wait," Leia said abruptly.

Solo turned, eyeing her expectantly. He could not, would not, let her win this one. He had kissed her earlier as a test of her feelings as well as his own. Since then, Leia seemed to be locked into a pattern of timidly bringing herself out of hiding, doing something he was sure she considered to be bold, then running away again.

While these gestures weren't lost on Han, they weren't exactly the honest declaration of what was in Leia's heart that he'd been looking for. No, the next

move was still clearly hers. He would make absolutely no mention of anything that had been transpiring between them until she did.

“What would you like me to do?” the princess asked him.

*Do you really want me to answer that, sweetheart?* he thought, her question taking on a much deeper meaning in his own mind. “I don’t know,” he said when he finally spoke. “You can either help me finish finding my tools, or you can see if Threepio is up for giving cooking lessons.”

Leia’s expression was unreadable as she considered his answer. After a heartbeat, she said, “I’ll be in the galley,” and pushed past him.

Han wasn’t the least bit surprised. *That’s okay*, he told himself. They would be crawling to Bespin at a slug’s pace. Four months was a long time for the princess to drive him insane, but it was also plenty of time for him to continue wearing down her defenses. True, she might kill him before Jabba and his pals had another shot at it...

...but if she didn’t, he at least still had a chance of dying a happy man.

Shrugging off the thought, he looked around the cockpit. *My poor girl*, the pilot thought sadly. He patted the nearest console with a loving hand before leaving to put his ship back together, at least the best way he could before they reached their safe haven on Bespin. The *Millennium Falcon* had gotten him out of some pretty tough jams before, but Han had always relied on the vessel’s almost impossible speeds to save his hide. Without the hyperdrive, they might as well be at a standstill. Solo hated feeling so vulnerable, but there was nothing he could do but his best and nowhere to go but forward.

Ruefully, he realized it would be a recurring theme in other aspects of his life until he got the princess back to the fleet. He tried not to think about it as he stooped to remove the access panel from the floor.

## DAY EIGHTEEN

Things went on much the same way for the next two weeks. Han continued to ignore the princess to the best of his ability. They would speak when it came to repairs, course corrections, and occasional small talk, but the smuggler was bound and determined to make her come to him when it came to matters of a more personal nature.

Predictably, Leia resisted by putting up her own shield of indifference. Within a few days of engaging the course for Bespin, she began taking her meals in the privacy of her bunk if it wasn't her watch in the cockpit.

On the eighteenth day of their limp to Bespin, in the middle of dinner, after Han had finished exactly half of the food on his plate, he decided he'd had all he could take.

Solo purposefully put down his fork, dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, and washed down the last of the bite with water as he stood. Chewbacca, still heartily enjoying his meal, gave his friend a cautionary rumble.

"Don't worry, pal," Han assured him. "I know what I'm doing."

Even without an interpreter, Chewbacca's rebuttal was unmistakable: "The hell you do."

Han could only muster an irritated glare as he moved past his copilot. He had been so focused on his frustration with the princess, he forgot to tell Chewie to shut up.

Chewbacca's next response was equally clear: "You're not going to eat that, are you...?" With a shrug, he helped himself to Han's plate.

As had become Leia's habit whenever traveling aboard the *Millennium Falcon*, she had taken the bunk that was tucked away behind the recreation area. She found it preferable to the ship's other spare bunk, which had been converted to double as the medical bay. Han was unsure if her preference had more to do with the extra equipment in the other bunk and not wanting to be in the way if there was an emergency, or if it was because of this room's location away from his own living space. The first few times the princess had journeyed with him, he had warned her about this bunk's lack of a hatch. Prior to their involvement with the Rebellion, Han and Chewie had used that room for storage and they rarely had company. Leia insisted that she hadn't minded, citing the room's counter-intuitive location as seclusion enough.

After a time, as Solo had come to realize the regularity of such trips, he had purchased a decorative screen that the princess could hang magnetically in front of the doorway for additional privacy. Leia had seemed unimpressed with the design and the gesture but thanked him nonetheless.

Han stood outside that screen now and rapped on the wall next to it. "Hey, Your Holiness...When you're done, I need your help in the starboard pit." He stalked off, not waiting for an acknowledgement.

Whistling to himself, Han paused in the galley on his way to his repairs. He reached into a cupboard and pulled out the flask of whiskey he kept there, and poured himself a shot—a *large* one. An experienced spacer, Solo didn't usually indulge in alcohol unless he was in port, but damn it, Leia's behavior was enough to drive any man to drink.

He downed the amber fluid in one gulp, reveling in its burn in his stomach. He knew it felt good compared to the scorching he would probably be suffering from the princess in a few minutes...

~\*~\*~\*~

Leia's heart filled with anxiety and dread as she listened to Solo's footsteps fade away.

She sighed, resigning herself to the obvious inevitability: it had only been a matter of time before the Corellian smuggler tried to get her alone again. He either wanted to talk, or he wanted to initiate another romantic encounter.

Not that the distinction between the two wasn't becoming more and more blurred by the day.

The princess could not risk letting that happen. That's why she had been limiting her contact with Han as much as possible.

It wasn't his advances that she feared, not any more. Leia was also no longer apprehensive about his attempts to get inside her head, to root around and see what made her tick.

No, what she feared now was her own inability to resist.

*Why does this have to happen now?* She asked herself this question at least once a day. It seemed so unfair. Leia had finally mustered the courage to face her feelings for Han head-on, to act on them, to lay herself open to an intimacy that went so much deeper than the physical: the intimacy of allowing another to know her soul inside and out, her every hope and fear, every dream and the nightmares that threatened to destroy them, every weakness she hid that countered every strength she so proudly displayed.

At least he had said his piece first, informing her that he would be leaving and not likely coming back, sparing her the embarrassment of expressing her feelings in vain.

Still, Leia could not silence the little "what if?" needling the back of her mind. What if she had kept her temper and told him how she felt any way? Chances

are they still would've ended up in this situation, and four months was an awfully long time; time she could have used to talk him out of his suicidal plan, come up with an alternative, or at least talk him into letting her come with him.

*You're being ridiculous!* The princess chided herself. Even if she could tear herself away from the Alliance (which she couldn't), there was no way Han would allow her to accompany him on his mission to pay Jabba. Her place was with the fleet. She had heard that the Alliance's Bothan contacts were onto something big, something that could potentially end the war. When the Rebellion was ready to make its move, Leia would need to be there, not chasing starry-eyed after a handsome smuggler whose recklessness would likely lead to his death, as well as her own.

No. Leia had chosen a course of action, and she would stay committed to it. She would ignore her desires. She had her duty and she would put the Alliance first, the way she always had. She would disregard the injustice of knowing that she was going to lose the only person she truly felt safe with, both literally and emotionally. She would try to not think about how much she was going to miss those hazel eyes ripping through her or that swagger that feigned indifference or the lopsided smile that made nothing else matter but the moment.

Leia swiped at the tear that had escaped the corner of her eye. With that came the realization that she had been sequestering herself from Han not to sidestep a confrontation, but to avoid letting him see her cry. She had shed tears in the Corellian's presence only once before, and the prospect of him knowing that she was crying over him now was mortifying. The princess believed that if she could not be stronger than that, she had to at least *appear* so.

The corners of her mouth turned up ruefully. *Do you look strong, Leia? Or do you look like a coward?*

Leia smoothed her hair and straightened, defiantly raising her chin to the emotions betraying her. She would go to Han and find out what he wanted, her head held high and her heart guarded.

First, however, she would help Chewbacca and C-3PO clear away the remnants of the evening meal. Leia would need the mundane activity to center herself and make her composure less fragile.

The truth was she needed to buy herself time, to convince herself that she had made the right decision in keeping her feelings hidden away, but she wasn't ready to admit that yet.

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Trying not to give the princess another thought, Han went to work on some of the *Falcon's* more minor systems. It served no purpose to keep working on the hyperdrive, other than to give himself idle busywork. Without a new motivator, anything he did to it was ineffective. Solo felt less impotent if he worked on systems and components that would actually show him results.

He was just easing himself out of the pit when Leia drifted into the hold.

“Nice of you to join me,” he said dryly, although it hadn’t really been that long since he asked for her help. He spared her the briefest of glances as he pushed to his feet, preferring to register her appearance without her deep brown eyes boring into his.

She actually looked rebellious in a cute way, wearing the old clothes he'd given her. Despite her haughty air, she looked more like an angry, defiant kid than a former Senator of twenty-three.

It was easy for him to forget how young the princess really was. Both choice and events beyond her control had forced Leia to grow in ways no ordinary person could comprehend. Her career and living in the public eye had robbed her of her childhood, and being forced underground by the Empire was stealing away her adult life, too. Solo often imagined that she behaved like a woman in her twenties before she even saw her teens.

Han’s faded black shorts were cinched tightly to Leia’s waist, the top folded over. She had nice legs, and he had to repress a smile the first time he saw the incongruity of them disappearing into the top of her insulated combat boots. The off-white shirt he’d given her was big enough to be a short dress on her petite frame, but instead she had the bottom rolled up and knotted in front. Han could sometimes catch a sliver of royal midriff as she moved whenever she wore it that way.

That was part of the reason he did not look at Leia now. Solo had too many memories of that midriff on Ord Mantell, a time when the princess seemed more open and trusting with her soul...a time when she seemed to want a friend, maybe more.

He had also observed the new absence of the shirt’s sleeves; apparently she had tired of them riding down despite her efforts to roll them up.

*She does make your clothes look good,* Solo allowed himself.

Leia had left everything she owned behind when the Hoth base was evacuated, except for what she kept on her escape transport...and that had been forced to leave without her. She hadn’t asked the smuggler for a change of clothes, and he hadn’t asked her if she needed them, either; the princess had simply found

them neatly folded at the end of her bunk when she went to bed the first night.

"I was helping Chewie and Threepio with the cleanup," Leia explained, leaving the *because you didn't* accusation remain palpable but unvoiced.

"Well, Your Highness, I need you to get your royal behind down there and help me find my spanners." Clearly, Han thought he was being funny, but it had come off more gruffly than he had intended. He let it slide without apology. His frustration with the princess was as genuine as it got, no matter how much he cared about her. He resolved to simply try to not be so mean during the rest of the conversation.

"You lost them *again*?" she demanded incredulously.

Han's answer was a glare. He hated it when she used that tone, the one people saved for pets who behave badly.

"Weren't you just down there?" she pushed.

"Yes," he answered with the feigned patience of someone trying to explain to a four-year-old why the sky was orange. "And I'm clearly too big for a few of the spaces down there. It'd take me forever. You, on the other hand, should fit nicely." So much for not being mean.

Leia didn't even open her mouth to speak. She simply regarded him coldly and started down into the pit.

Unable to maintain his cloak of indifference, Han peeked over the edge. "Be careful."

"I'm always careful," she retorted, making her way between the conduits.

"I know." *Gods, do I ever know...*

"I swear, you do this on purpose," she complained. "What is it, the fourth time now? Why don't you wear a tool belt when you come down here?"

After several moments of silence, save for Leia's occasional grunts as she strained to slip into here or slither through there, Han was ready to try again. "Princess, you alright?"

"Aside from a broken nail and a bruised royal behind, yes."

He paused for a heartbeat or two before calling out to her again. "Princess?"

"Yes, Captain?" she answered with thinly veiled impatience.

“Why are you avoiding me?” Han was almost shocked at his own directness. He couldn’t see her, but he knew she was stunned. There were absolutely no sounds of movement coming from the pit.

“I’m not avoiding you,” Leia said unconvincingly. *Please don’t do this, Han*, she mentally implored him.

“Oh, yeah? Then what do you call it? Let me guess: you’re just trying to make it easier for *me* to avoid *you*.”

Leia took a moment to answer. “Something like that,” she finally said. *Don’t do this don’t do this don’t do this...!* She was almost overcome with panic.

Han was taken aback. She might have actually *meant* that! “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” he said.

“So?” she snapped tersely. “You have a monopoly on ridiculous behavior?”

“Just tell me why.” Her assertions about him slipped past. Now he was wishing he’d brought the bottle of whiskey with him. His voice softened a bit. “I thought we were making progress.”

He heard the princess start shifting around down there, as though in doing so she could wiggle her way out of this conversation. “Toward what? You think one kiss solves everything?”

There it was: she finally acknowledged their romantic encounter directly.

Han defended himself. “I’d have to say it’s a good start.”

At that moment, Leia popped out of the opening in the floor, spanners extended toward him. He took the proffered tool, and gave her a hand the rest of the way out.

“I’d appreciate it if you stayed,” he said before she could go, his hand lingering on hers. “Maybe you can keep me from losing my tools again.”

Leia lowered her eyes to the floor, speaking softly. “I have to go. It’s my watch in the cockpit.” She risked meeting his gaze for a brief moment before looking away again. “I’ll send Chewie back to help you.” With that, she was gone.

Han doubted it was her watch already, but if it wasn’t his imagination, her eyes had started to glisten with tears. Leia was obviously hurt and conflicted.

Solo was conflicted, too. He felt like bantha dung for contributing to her distress, but as unfair as it seemed to her, he was unwilling to give up on his feelings for her, and the feelings he was positive she had for him. Leia was proud and stubborn, but then, so was he.

Just over three months left. Plenty of time...

## **DAY THIRTY-NINE**

Five weeks and four days into their limp to Bespin, Han wasn't sure if he was making any progress with the princess or not.

Leia had stopped taking her meals alone, but Han didn't know if that was because he'd gotten through to her in any way, or if she was just lonely and tired of having only Threepio for company. Her contact with him still seemed superficial and distant, compared to how she had been before the evacuation of Hoth. At least she was willing to be in the same room with him now.

In her eyes, Han had violated her trust; he'd figured that much out by now. It hadn't been an easy bit of reasoning, because she was so good at putting up barriers, both emotional and physical, so he pretty much had to go on what little he'd learned about her so far. Ord Mantell had been a real eye-opener for Solo, as far as figuring out how Leia's mind worked, and he had the insight to know that the problem began there. The princess had started to open herself to him, to tell him things she would tell no other. She had even given signs of physical attraction... only for him to tell her that he was leaving a short time later. From her perspective, Han supposed, it had all been for nothing. He had even accused her of being afraid to get close to anyone, and he had just given her another reason to be, hadn't he?

Of course, most of this didn't make much sense to Solo. For his own part, Han had always been a "live for the moment" kind of guy, because hey, you never knew when your number was up, right? Leia's reluctance to give in to her impulses—and the laws of nature—simply baffled him at times. Maybe it was her courtly upbringing, or maybe things were just different on Alderaan, but Han didn't have the luxury of living with regrets. Assuming that something terrible did happen, that Jabba *did* kill him or leave him otherwise unable to return to the Alliance, he and Leia could've at least made the most of what precious little time they had, richer for the experience.

For that reason alone, Han could not resist tempting fate on this day.

Bored, he and Chewbacca had started a friendly game of Sabaac. They were finishing a hand when Leia approached from the direction of the cockpit.

"Hey, is anyone going to relieve me? I've been sitting up there for six hours."

Chewbacca moved to leave, but Han put a hand on the Wookiee's furry arm. "Just patch everything through to engineering. We should be far enough away from that last Imperial patrol now, that'll be good enough. Me and Chewie can see from here."

Leia made the necessary adjustments on the engineering console. She was about to head to the 'fresher for a bedtime shower when Han stopped her.

"Want us to deal you in, Princess?" Solo took note of the fact she was wearing her white coverall again. Was it coverall day already? Hey, how could he have missed shorts and cut-up shirt day? It disappointed him that he would be stealing no glances at her legs this evening. Including the old clothes Han had provided, Leia had exactly two outfits to her name, and she started off each morning with a ritual that included cleaning yesterday's clothes in the ship's sonic laundry unit. He started to wonder what she wore to sleep in, if anything. He was so tempted to ask her it hurt, but Han was unwilling to give Chewbacca the satisfaction of seeing the princess slap him across the face.

She regarded him suspiciously. "No thanks."

"Oh, come on, Your Worship. Afraid you'll lose because I know how you play now?" His taunt sounded friendly and casual, despite the fact that the thoughts of her bare flesh on bed sheets just wouldn't let go of him.

Leia was hesitant, but then she realized that she didn't exactly have anywhere to be at the moment. It beat the monotony of looking at the ceiling in her quarters until she fell asleep, and since Chewbacca was playing, she didn't feel she had to be so guarded around Han. Before she knew it, Solo was sliding over to make room for her and she sat beside him. "In your dreams, flyboy," she laughed. "I went easy on *you* last time."

Chewbacca watched in quiet amusement as Solo whistled. "That sounds like a challenge, Princess."

"It is," she answered confidently, but then her smile faded. "Or at least it would be, if I had any money."

Chewie began to speak, but Han cut him off with a look. "No money?"

"Emergency evacuation, remember?" Leia answered impatiently. "Come on. I'm good for it."

Han considered as he shuffled the cards. "I don't know..."

Even as she was looking at him expectantly, Leia couldn't believe she was actually going to be disappointed if he chose to leave her out of the game.

Han shifted in his chair, appearing ready to make a concession. "I've got an idea. It's a good alternative to money, and it might make the game more interesting."

*I don't believe this*, thought the princess. *I'm really going to take the bait.* "What?" Her heart missed a beat as his lopsided smile returned for the first time in days.

"Strip Sabaac," Han finally answered with a leer.

Chewbacca startled them as he began grumbling emphatically, gesticulating as he pushed himself from the game table and headed for the cockpit.

Leia looked on in shock, eyes flicking between the direction of the Wookiee's departure, and Han as he sat there, shuffling the cards with a smug grin. Her mouth worked silently as she struggled for the words to say something—anything—about what had just happened. Should she go apologize to Chewie on Han's behalf, for making him so obviously uncomfortable? Should she admonish Han for making the suggestion? Should she--?

"What did he say?" she finally demanded. "What did you do?" Leia was mortified that Han may have used her to violate some kind of Wookiee taboo or something.

Han shrugged. "He's just mad because all he has to do is lose one hand and he's out of the game. It's not *my* fault Wookiees don't wear much in the way of clothes."

Leia's expression changed to one of mild disgust, but she had to laugh at that in spite of herself. She developed a mental picture of a Wookiee after losing a strip Sabaac match, and was amused by the fact that he didn't really look any different from when he started.

Han gave her a predatory smile. "Well...?"

Her laughter faded. "'Well,' what?"

He gestured toward the cockpit. "Now that we got rid of Chewie, ante up." The smuggler began to remove his jacket as he looked meaningfully at her coverall.

Leia's jaw dropped. As if she'd really consider such a thing!

"Relax, sweetheart," Han said. Letting her off the hook, he slid the flight jacket back onto his shoulders. "I was only kidding. I'm going to regret saying this, but you can keep your clothes. For now." He gave her an exaggerated wink as he dealt the cards.

Leia smiled ruefully as she realized she'd been had. "You never change, do you?"

"Oh, come on, Your Worship. Chewie knew I didn't mean it. We were just playing for bolts and couplers, see?" He pushed a bunch of the tiny pieces of hardware in her direction. "Bolts are one, small couplers are five, and the big ones are ten."

Leia anted up and picked up her cards. She suspected that he had deliberately misinterpreted what she said. "I was talking about your preoccupation with seeing me naked."

Han tossed her two from the deck when she discarded. His earlier thoughts coming back to haunt him, he mused that she didn't know the half of it. "Why shouldn't I want to see you naked? You're a beautiful woman...I'm a normal, healthy man..."

She spared him the briefest of glances before she realized she was blushing. "As if that's all it takes."

"Sometimes it is," Han pointed out. He matched her bet.

Leia began to feel nervous as they continued to wager. She was afraid of the pattern that was emerging: Han would distract her with something like the game, use his charm to draw her out, make her say too much... She had to fight it, at all costs. She would not answer him, no matter how strong the urge was to debate the issue.

"Did I strike a nerve, Princess?"

"Not at all. I call."

They showed their hands.

"A tie," Han declared.

Leia took the little pile of bolts and couplers from the middle of the table. "Except my hand didn't need any negative values to make the score."

Han offered a gesture of concession. "That's right. You do know your stuff."

They were quiet for a moment as she shuffled. Leia's expression was unreadable to him. She seemed guarded but not distressed. Maybe this was progress.

Being a gambling man, he decided to push his luck. "Leia, don't you miss this?"

Her breath caught in her throat. *Of course I do, she wanted to say. All the time! And I'm going to miss it even more when you go off and get yourself killed. Damn you! Don't you know this is torture? Don't you care how much this hurts?*

Maybe cowardice was the better part of valor. "Miss what?" she asked instead.

So she was playing that game again. Han decided it was best to ignore it for the moment. "This...us...just two people talking." He paused. "I've missed it."

His sincerity was beginning to have the desired effect. "Han, I..." She trailed off, unsure what to say next.

He put a hand on hers. "Stop thinking so much, Leia. Stay in the moment, for once."

Leia met his gaze. Her eyes were troubled. Han could tell that she wanted to give in, but she had too many things at war inside her. "I wish it were that easy."

"It's as easy as you make it. You don't like it when I over-complicate things for you...why are you doing it to yourself now?"

Predictably, she didn't have an answer for that.

Han slid closer to her, squeezing her hand. "Talk to me," he urged softly. "Please."

Leia shook with indecision. His face was drawing so close to hers...

"You've done it before," he whispered. His lips were almost on hers...

Leia closed her eyes, turning her head away from him. She moved to push herself away from the table, but Han held her hand firmly. She tensed as though restrained, but she could've gotten away easily if she wanted to.

Han touched her chin, tipping her face up to meet his gaze. "Leia...hey...I'm sorry."

She believed him.

Sure that he had her attention, he pushed on. "I want you to tell me something. The night before Luke got attacked, you were looking for me. You never told me what you wanted." Han was pretty sure he already knew the answer. Even if Leia couldn't move forward, maybe she had the courage to discuss the past, to tell him if his suspicions were correct.

Instead, she shook her head sadly. "It doesn't matter any more."

"What if it matters to me?" he countered tenderly.

Leia seemed to consider it, but shook her head again as she took her hand from his. "No. It's too late." She slid away from the table. "Thanks for the game."

Han cursed himself as he watched her go. There he was, urging her to stay in the moment, and all he did was scare her off. He was getting tired of the games, but Leia still called the shots. All he wanted was an honest answer. He wanted to know what was in her heart...and he knew he was never going to find out for sure, as long as she was convinced she'd never see him again once he returned her to the fleet.

*Damn!* Why did she have to be so proud?

Then again, why did he...?

## **DAY SIXTY-ONE**

They were at the midpoint of their journey when trouble came.

Inspired to cook one last time before they cracked open the field rations, Han had relieved C-3PO of kitchen duty and ordered him to close down for power regeneration. Solo was whistling quietly to himself as he chopped and stirred. He actually liked to cook occasionally. Once he had been on his own and able to afford luxuries like food, he had demonstrated that his imagination was not limited to creative engineering...or other more personal distractions.

The semblance of tranquility was broken when Leia's voice came over the comlink.

"Han, get up here!"

Registering the intensity of her voice, Han dropped the knife on the counter and raced for the cockpit.

“What’s going on?” he asked when he reached Leia’s side.

The princess pointed to the sensor readout. Six blips flashed on the screen. “I don’t recognize those configurations,” she said worriedly, reading the information the long-range radar had given her. The computer began to show them a starkly-lined vessel that was more engine than anything else, save for the multitude of weapons systems that peppered the surface.

“We’re in trouble,” Han said quietly. He punched the comlink. “Chewie, get up here!”

“What is it?” Leia asked.

“Marauders,” he answered tightly. “Looks like Kor Darkwind’s gang. They think we have cargo, and we can’t outrun them.”

“Marauders?” she repeated. “You know them? Where’d they come from?”

“We’ve met once or twice on the shipping lanes,” Han said sharply. He shook his head. “They must have a base set up somewhere nearby. Otherwise there’s no way they’d try something like this. Not here.”

The princess was losing her patience. “Something like what? Han, what’s going on?”

Exasperated, Han slowed down to explain. “Darkwind’s group preys on unsuspecting cargo vessels like ours. They’re not the most ethical of criminals. They steal your shipment and sell it to the highest bidder. If they like your ship, they take that too, and you get to see an airlock from the wrong side. And by the way, Your Highness, your life will become *very* interesting for a few hours if they manage to board this ship, and I guarantee it ain’t your idea of a good time.”

Grateful that Han didn’t go into detail, Leia swallowed the distasteful images her own mind supplied. “What are we going to do?”

At that moment, Chewbacca arrived and took his seat in the copilot’s chair.

“How’s your shooting, Princess?”

Leia nodded in understanding, already heading for the gunwell. “How long before they get here?”

Right behind her, Han answered, “Not long, at the pace they’re going.” As if on cue, the already battered ship rocked from blaster impact. He could imagine Chewbacca howling angrily in the cockpit.

Quickly, Solo climbed into the top turret while Leia slipped into the lower. As soon as he had taken his seat and put his headset on, he told Chewie to do his best with evasive maneuvers.

A clipped voice broke over the comlink. "Unidentified Corellian vessel: prepare to be boarded and surrender your cargo. You will be destroyed if you attempt any hostilities. You will not be warned a second time."

"Board this!" Han said through gritted teeth, thumbs pressing into the firing pads the moment his targeting sensors had a lock. The three-man vessel in his scope disappeared in a flash.

He had no time to rejoice in that small victory. There were still five targets out there, and now they were mad as hell.

"Damn!" he heard Leia breathe over the comlink.

"You alright, Princess?" he called to her.

"I think your targeting scanner is a little off down here," she answered. "I'm having a hard time getting a lock."

Han fired another volley at an approaching marauder and missed. "It takes some getting used to," he answered. "Don't anticipate."

Han saw an eruption of sparks and debris rise up from the bottom of his turret window; Leia had gotten one.

"Good job, sweetheart!" he encouraged. He knew she would be able to handle it as well as she could any blaster.

Solo's chair swiveled as he tracked two of the attackers zooming overhead. His shots missed, until one grabbed the tail of the second ship. It went spiraling downward, easy pickings for Leia when it came onto her scope.

*That's three,* he thought.

The *Millennium Falcon* shuddered again as Darkwind's gang took revenge for their lost comrades.

"Oh, really?" Leia's voice came again, in response to the beating.

Han allowed himself a slight grin; the princess was starting to take it as personally as he was. "Take out the trash, Leia," he called, going after an assailant of his own.

“Got him!” she answered.

Her triumph was short-lived. Solo lost his smile as his scope flashed on and off and he heard the princess scream. His targeting scanner went blank. The controls in the gunwell went black and silent.

“Leia, what’s going on?” he asked darkly. When no reply came from the headset, he shouted over his shoulder, “Leia, answer me!”

The lights on his consoles came back on. There must have been a surge of some sort. The computer had shut everything down and taken a moment to reroute circuits. Han shot furiously as he continued to call Leia’s name.

“Chewie, something’s happened to Leia!” he barked over the headset. “Keep our belly away from them whatever you do.” With that, another marauder exploded into sparks and debris.

Chewbacca's response did not please Solo.

“What do you mean the ventral cannon’s been hit?” Han demanded. He dropped the thought as quickly as he’d expressed it. There were still two very dangerous ships out there, and in the *Falcon’s* present condition, two were enough to finish the job.

The Wookiee grumbled a warning.

“I’m on it, pal,” Han answered. These last two pilots were good; he gave them that as they darted in and out of his scope, launching blaster volleys at his beloved ship.

Han’s shooting was just that much better.

Finally, one of the marauders had gotten sloppy, but only for a split second. That’s all Solo needed. It drifted onto his scope and the instant the lock was confirmed, he fired. His cannon caught the enemy square in the port engine, blowing it off. The fighter spun out of control for a moment before erupting into sparks.

The last of Darkwind’s marauders hightailed it out of there. There was no way it could’ve taken the *Falcon* by itself.

“Chewie, are we clear?” Han called to the cockpit. At his copilot’s acknowledgement, Han hung up his headset and bolted out of the turret.

The moment his feet landed onto the deck he spun for the ventral cannon, startled to find the princess staring him in the face. He almost jumped.

“Leia...!” Han took note of the smoke that was still lingering in the corridor. “What happened? Are you alright?” He put his hands on her shoulders, as though making sure she really was in one piece.

“I’m fine,” she assured him with a cough. “The turret was hit. There was a feedback, some sparks...you’re going to have to replace that targeting scanner for sure now.”

Relief spread over Han’s features as he took the princess into his arms. “When you didn’t answer me, I...” Not wanting to complete the thought, he trailed off.

Leia coughed again. “I singed some of my hair. I was making sure it wasn’t still burning.”

Han pulled back from her, really seeing her for the first time. Sure enough, some of her tresses had fallen out of the simple knot she’d thrown them into that day, the edges withered and scorched. There was a little soot on her face. He took note of a few burn marks on her arms as well. “Yeah,” he said distantly, still reconciling the fact that she was largely unhurt. “I hate it when my hair’s on fire, too.”

Her eyes fell to the spots on her arms. “I’d better get some bacta on these...”

Han pulled her close again, squeezing tighter this time. “You had me worried.”

“Really, I’m alright,” she insisted.

His arms lingered around her for a moment, then suddenly, but not too abruptly, he released the princess, as though someone had reminded him of the invisible little wall between them. “Let’s go take care of those arms,” he said gently, taking her hand to lead her away.

They ran into Chewbacca just outside the rec area. “You go ahead,” Han told Leia. “I’ll be right there.”

As the princess left them, Han said to Chewie, “Go wake up Goldenrod and see what you can do with that ventral cannon. We’re vulnerable enough as it is. I’ll be right there as soon as she’s bandaged up.”

The Wookiee grumbled his assent and moved to locate Threepio.

When Han appeared at the first aid unit, Leia didn’t notice the flask and two glasses he’d been carrying. She had already slathered on the bacta gel, and

was struggling to bandage her arm one-handed. "I just scanned my lungs," she informed him. "They look fine, under the circumstances."

"Here, let me help you with that," he said, putting the stuff down.

Leia turned away slightly. "I've got it."

Han paused before taking the bandage roll away from her, sitting on the bunk beside her. "Why won't you let me be nice to you? I thought we were past all that."

Reluctantly, silently, she held her arms out to him as he wrapped each wound. The burns weren't bad; it just would have been uncomfortable to have anything brush up against them, and the bacta would prevent scarring if kept moist. Leia relaxed a little as he quietly tended to her. She watched as his strong hands held her arms, marveling at just how gentle his touch could be.

"There," Han said, tearing off the last bandage from the roll and pressing it down to form the self-adhesive seal. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Leia gingerly touched one of the wraps. "Not at all, flyboy. I think you missed your calling."

He grinned at her, grabbing for the flask and glasses he had brought with him. "Well, don't move, 'cause Doc Solo's got something else for you."

She looked quizzically at him, eyebrow upraised. "What's all this?"

Han filled the glasses with his whiskey and passed one to her. "Your shot, Your Highness."

Bemused, she took it from him, unsure of his intentions.

"After all that, I figured you could use one. I know I could..." He trailed off, reluctant to say any more. After a pause, he raised his glass to her and swallowed the contents.

With little hesitation, Leia followed suit. Han looked on in admiration as she, too, took all the liquid in one swallow without so much as a cough or a gasp afterward.

"You never cease to surprise me, Princess," he said appreciatively.

"You're a decent doctor," she returned, "but you make a better bartender."

He grinned briefly at that as he poured another one for each of them. His glass stopped halfway to his mouth, his smile fading as he became serious. “Leia, I’m sorry...”

She shifted uncomfortably on the bunk, as though she suddenly became aware of just how close they had been sitting next to each other. She made no attempt to move away, but this unexpected apology seemed to make her edgy. It had come from nowhere and she had no idea where he was going with it. “For...?” she prodded.

“For getting you into trouble again.” Han looked into his glass. His mind drifted between this recent battle and their encounter with Cypher Bos on Ord Mantell. “You had me scared when you didn’t answer me. I thought you were seriously hurt...or worse.” He downed his shot and straightened. “It’ll all be over soon enough. After we put down on Bespin for repairs, we’ll find the fleet. You won’t have to worry about being chased by my demons any more.”

Leia put a hand on his arm. “Han, I’m alive today because of you. I thought you were a madman for coming after me in the command center, but if you hadn’t, I’d be dead on Hoth, or a prisoner of the Imperials.” She almost shuddered at the thought. “It’s worth a little trouble along the way. You shouldn’t be apologizing to me; I should be thanking you, and I’m long overdue for that...”

In a move that caught Solo completely off-guard, the princess kissed him. It was nothing like the full-contact moment they shared in the asteroid field. Sweetly, tentatively, she pressed her lips half onto his mouth, half to the side.

What surprised him more was how she lingered there for a while. Not wanting to push too hard and frighten her off, he also did not want to let her go without capturing everything he could from the moment. He returned her kiss the same way, resisting the overwhelming urge to pull her closer and take more of her lips onto his.

Han also pushed aside the desire to pull her back as they parted. They locked eyes for a moment, each seeming to wait for something to happen.

Leia finally drank her second shot and put the glass down next to him. “Thank you, flyboy,” she said softly, in a way that made Han question what she was really expressing her gratitude for; was it his rescue of her she was acknowledging, or the fact that for the moment, he seemed to be following the rules of engagement she had established?

She stood, her hand slipping up his arm and over his shoulder as she did so. Han continued to watch her, mystified. Her fingers trailed their way to his cheek briefly, as though there may be something more. Instead, her hand slid off as she turned away and left the crew area, leaving Han alone with his flask.

“You’re welcome,” he said to the empty room. Solo stared dejectedly into the direction she had gone. Never had something so close to him seemed so unreachable. His mind tried to wrap itself around her most recent kiss, which had felt as undecided as she seemed to be.

The smuggler toyed with the idea of pouring himself another shot, but thought better of it. Chewie was going to need all the help he could get in the gunwell, and their survival could very well depend on the results of those repairs. He needed to be clear-headed if he was going to be of any help.

Han shrugged to himself. Was this progress? It seemed like it, but he didn’t know. It would be interesting to watch the princess for more clues over the next few days, though. Of that much he was sure.

## **DAY NINETY-NINE**

Three weeks away from Bespin, things took a decidedly interesting turn for Han.

He sat at the table with Chewbacca and Leia, having eaten yet another meal of bland, reconstituted field rations. For all any of them knew, they could’ve been eating liquefied cardboard and that stuff that collects at the bottom of your water recycler tank when you’re overdue for a filter change. No one complained, though, and for that Han was grateful. He was also grateful that he’d been stocking the *Falcon* before the whole invasion on Hoth went down, and grateful that his Rebel friends hadn’t been sold expired food packets...again.

Yep, these days Han Solo was a pretty damn grateful guy.

He was still alive...never mind the fact that the situation would probably change the minute he set foot on Tatooine to pay his debt to Jabba the Hutt. He had his health...never mind the fact that being dead could alter that aspect of things. He’d spent the last few months locked up on the same ship with the most beautiful and spirited woman he’d ever known...never mind the fact that not only was touching her out of the question, she also wasn’t about to win any awards for congeniality on this trip, either.

Actually, he amended, that wasn’t entirely fair to the princess. She had been measurably nicer to Solo since that odd little moment after patching her up a few weeks ago. Periodically Leia would share in his jokes and even show him the smile he missed, but only while Chewbacca or Threepio were around. In many ways she was still timid, especially when it came to being alone with Han. The

moment the two of them were alone in the same room, she would find an excuse to slip away or he'd simply find himself talking to the air.

This was such a moment.

Chewbacca had moved to throw the ration packets into the recycler. Han got up to help, and when he returned, the princess was gone from the table. It wasn't unexpected, but still he felt a profound sense of disappointment.

Solo shrugged to himself as he meandered toward the cockpit. If no one wanted to hang around and talk to him, that was fine. He'd go talk to his ship, even if that meant swearing at consoles as he hit them, his own special way of coaxing good performance out of systems in need of an attitude adjustment.

~\*~\*~\*~

Leia sat at communications, staring at nothing in particular through the cockpit canopy.

Her mind was consumed by thoughts of Han. The closer they got to Bespin, the closer they were to the time when he'd simply drop her off with the Rebel fleet and be gone. The very thought filled her with an emptiness she had not felt since...

No, she couldn't think of Alderaan right now. One could only take so much sorrow and loss at a time.

Leia Organa had been trained to be the picture of confidence and poise; that picture was fading now. She had even maintained an air of certainty when her homeworld was destroyed. Somehow the Corellian pilot was the only one who had cracked through all those years of conditioning so easily.

*I cannot continue this way...*

Why was she grieving the end of her association with a petty criminal?

*He's not a petty criminal!*

The princess had tried so hard to isolate and remove the place in her heart that Han Solo occupied. Tried to shield herself from the pain. Tried to minimize the difficulty of his departure. In the beginning, it seemed as though she may succeed, but instead of getting back to "normal" (whatever *that* was any more), a dark void was beginning to take his place. The harder she tried, the bigger the expanse of despair got. Some days it almost made her sick.

*I can't do this any more...*

The prospect of life without Han Solo was becoming more and more unpleasant. Unlivable, even.

*When did that happen? Ord Mantell? Before?*

Leia lowered her face into her hands. Not to cry. She just couldn't face...well, anything right now.

*Damn, this hurts...*

After a moment of contemplation, she stopped shaking.

*When did I start shaking?*

With a deep breath, Leia turned her gaze back out toward the stars, painfully aware that Bepin circled around one of them. She had to end that pain. She would not live with regret. She knew what she had to do.

*I just hope it doesn't hurt more this way...*

~\*~\*~\*~

When Han passed through the cockpit hatch, he was surprised to see Leia sitting at communications. She seemed lost in thought, idly fingering the controls without any real awareness of it. She didn't even move when he came in.

He sauntered past her to take the pilot's seat. "Well, Princess," he began lightly, "I have to say that after so many days of rations, I'm getting pretty desperate for some real food. Hell, I even miss *your* cooking."

"Mmmmm..." was the only answer she gave.

Han glanced over his shoulder, trying to make his movements as subtle as possible in order to avoid alerting her to his interest in her reaction, or lack thereof. Sure enough, she gave no real indication that she'd heard him at all. A jab like that would've at least sent color to her cheeks or set her jaw any other time. He was a little let down that the usual toxic remark was not forthcoming.

A wave of suspicion came over the smuggler. Why was she still hanging around? Lately it wasn't like her to let herself be alone with him. Where was her lame excuse, her stammered apology for intruding on his space, her silent retreat? After all, she'd come in here to get away from him.

Hadn't she?

Unless...

Had she come here, knowing he'd find her eventually?

Interesting. Han cautiously decided to continue testing this uncharted territory.

"I should tell you," he began in a confiding tone, "Chewie just about begged me to have you do all the cooking. I guess that stew you wrecked made a hell of an impression on him."

Nothing.

"And come to think of it," he went on, "I could always use another grease solvent. Did I tell you it worked great for that?"

"That's great," Leia said absently.

So at least she was pretending to listen. Han resolved to see what else he could get away with.

"I think when you're done here, Princess, the floors could use a good scrubbing. Especially the floor in my quarters..."

"Mmmmm...."

"Wow, that's great, Your Worship. I actually expected a big fight from you about this. Hey, since you're in such an agreeable mood, why don't you change into my shorts before you get started? Somehow that seems a little nicer than watching you do all that back-breaking work in those coveralls."

"Yeah," she murmured. "Great idea."

Han raised his eyebrows in disbelief. Whatever was going on in her head had to be big, if she was letting him get away with so much. Leia always carried a lot on her shoulders, and the recent complications between them couldn't be helping.

Although he generally loved having a little fun at her expense, Han wasn't enjoying himself much without Leia putting up the least little bit of a fight. He thought that maybe he could recapture her attention by being nice. "Tell you what, Princess," he started. "When we get to Bespin, I'll take you shopping. We'll get you some new clothes, and you can have your hair done by someone else for a change. You could use something nice after all this time. When you're all shopped out, we can get something to eat. I'm sure Lando can recommend--"

It all happened so fast, it took Han's mind several moments to process what was going on. The cockpit spun as a pair of strong but delicate hands—Leia's hands—swiveled his chair away from the control panel. Before he could ask her what she thought she was doing, she placed a knee on the seat, pressing it into the outside of his thigh. It took another heartbeat or two to realize that she was kissing him as she half stood, half sat in his lap.

He didn't think about what could've motivated her boldness as his arms snaked around her waist; he just thought about how the only thing he could hear was the blood rushing in his ears. He didn't consider what made her caress the inside of his mouth with those deep, mind-altering kisses; he thought only about returning her passion and her enthusiasm as he felt her trembling in his grasp.

No, Han Solo had absolutely no idea what had brought all this on, and he would've been a liar if he said he wanted to find out. The truth was he was afraid the moment would break, or that he'd find out it wasn't really occurring at all, that he'd be waking up from a dream if he thought too hard about why it was happening.

He stood, gathering Leia even closer to him as he rose. Her fingers dug into his hair as he turned her around, backing her toward the hatch, pressing her into the navigation console. Han couldn't believe how his heart was thundering as he opened his eyes, just long enough to silence the alarm that warned him of the course correction Leia had almost made with her bottom. As their hands roamed outside each other's clothes, Han thought about everything that had ever felt good about being with Leia, many of the memories reaching back to Ord Mantell during the times when she was more open, less guarded.

"Leia..." he breathed, moving his lips from her mouth to shower kisses all over her face.

In that instant, it all shattered, as though the very sound of his voice caused the moment to unravel. Leia's hands were on his chest, gently pushing him away.

He didn't fight her. Instead, he searched her eyes, finding panic and something that resembled abject horror there.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, sliding past him and hastily fleeing through the hatch.

Dumbfounded, Han mentally replayed the event, trying to recall anything he may have done to offend her, to frighten her away. He came up empty. That girl was a living conundrum at times.

*So go after her, you idiot!* Han admonished himself. He punched the navigation console as he moved to obey.

He caught up to Leia in a few long strides. She was headed for her quarters, but she stopped at the sound of his voice calling out her name. She kept her back to him.

“Leia, what’s wrong?” he asked tenderly. He could see from the way her shoulders were shaking that she was crying. “Did I do something?”

Torn, Han took another tentative step closer, his hand outstretched in a beckoning gesture she couldn’t see. It killed him to see Leia so conflicted and he wanted to comfort her...but how could he soothe her tears when he knew he was the source of them?

His moment of indecision over, he pressed up behind her, one arm wrapping around her waist while his other hand stroked her hair. Leia stiffened, but she made no effort to disengage. She seemed to want the contact as much as he did, and was equally apprehensive to take it as he was to give it.

“It’s okay,” he said in a hushed tone. He pressed his lips into her hair, then rested his cheek on the side of her head. “Just talk to me.”

With a gasp, she choked back a sob. “I can’t.”

“Please.”

Biting her lip, the princess shook her head.

“Hey,” Han said into her ear. “Come over here and sit down.” He guided her to the rec area’s table and gestured for her to take a seat. “How ‘bout a drink? And I’ll get something for your eyes. Just stay there, okay?”

Leia nodded. He could see her confusion slipping into embarrassment.

Han disappeared into the galley. As he snagged a napkin and two glasses, he pondered the situation. While he felt badly about being at the center of Leia’s emotional upheaval, he was going to lose his cool if he returned to the table and found her gone again. He grabbed the whiskey flask and inhaled slowly to center himself. One way or another, the games he and the princess were playing were going to have to end. Now.

Leia was still waiting there for him as she had silently promised. Gratefully she took the proffered napkin and dabbed at her tears, which were already slowing down.

Han slid in next to her and began pouring the drinks. “Here,” he said, pushing a glass in her direction. “This’ll help.”

"I don't see how," she said.

"We always talk better when you're relaxed," Han countered. "And we obviously need to talk."

Leia grimaced wryly, giving him a small nod of acquiescence. "I don't know where to start...or how to say some of it. Some diplomat, huh?"

Han took another deep breath. It was now or never, he reasoned. "Why don't you start by telling me how you really feel about me?"

Leia considered her shot for a moment before downing it, then motioned for him to pour another. "Alright, Han. How bad can this be? After all, it's only going to be humiliating until you're gone."

Solo felt genuinely pained at that. "Leia..."

Shaking her head, she took back her freshly filled glass. "No, it's okay. I do have feelings for you. *Strong* feelings." She stopped, looking into her drink as though searching for the strength to say what she had to say next.

"I couldn't tell..." It was sarcastic, but somehow Han had managed to take most of the sting out of it before it left his mouth. His lips still throbbed from the almost bruising expression of their desire.

Leia ignored that, choosing to start over. "That night...the night you told me you were leaving..."

*Here it comes*, Han thought nervously.

"You know I was looking for you. I...I was coming to ask you to dinner." She stopped again, re-ordering her thoughts. "We both know that something happened between us on Ord Mantell."

Han nodded, urging her on.

"We also know it's been coming for a long time. I...I just don't know exactly *what* it is. But I wanted a chance to find out, and I wanted to see if you felt the same way." Leia threw back her second shot, bracing herself for his reaction.

Although surprised by her sudden willingness to be frank, Solo was genuinely pleased and he didn't stop it from showing. "I wish you would've told me."

It took a moment before she'd meet his eyes. "You're leaving. What was the point?" Leia's breath shook; the tears were threatening to start again.

Han leaned closer, taking her hand into his. "The point is, we could've had the time before I left."

Leia shook her head. "This is a crucial time for the Alliance...and for me. I can't afford any entanglements that are just going to end up with me getting hurt."

He caressed her cheek. "Is that what you're afraid of? Getting hurt?"

Silently she looked away.

"You know I'd never want to hurt you."

"Not intentionally," she agreed. "But if I let myself get close to you, I'm afraid I wouldn't be strong enough to let you go...and I don't think I could handle you walking away from me that easily."

"Who said it'd be easy?" he asked quite honestly. "Leia, I have to do this *because* of you. You almost got killed and it's my fault. They've seen you with me, which means you're in as much trouble as me, at least until I take care of this. What kind of guy would I be if I let them hurt you?"

Once again, he'd rendered Leia speechless. He was right, and she didn't like it a bit.

Before Han had a chance to lose his own resolve, he asked, "Do you know why I kissed you before?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "There's a good chance I'm going to die, Leia. Jabba's not exactly the forgiving sort." Seeing the tears well up at the suggestion of his execution, he squeezed her hand supportively. "I had to know how you felt before that happened. I had to know what it was like to kiss you before I died."

Her lower lip began to quake. Han felt terrible about it, but the reality had to be faced. He tried to lighten the mood in an effort to soothe her pain. "But hey, it's *me*. Anything can happen. You just made my life a whole lot more interesting, Princess. Jabba's got another thing coming if he thinks I'm gonna give all that up that easy."

She considered his words, looking measurably relieved that her admission to him hadn't been in vain. "So what do we do now?" she asked.

Han thought for a moment, a million answers swimming through his head. "We could just be friends," he suggested, "at least until I come back."

Leia dabbed at her tear-stained face. "You'd really come back? For me?"

Han grinned. "Even if I have to do it as a ghost and haunt you."

His attempt at levity failed miserably. The princess looked absolutely horrified at the thought. She gasped with the effort of containing the sob that was threatening to shatter what little composure she'd regained.

*She's right, Solo*, he admonished himself. *You really are a nerfherder sometimes*. Han wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "I didn't mean that, Leia. I'm sorry. I was just kidding."

"It wasn't funny."

"I know." He kissed her forehead before looking into her eyes. "So what do you say, Princess? Friends?"

With a small smile she nodded, resting her head companionably on his shoulder. "Good friends," she agreed. The princess felt newly empowered, having told him her deepest, most guarded secret of all and surviving the experience.

"*Close friends*," Han amended, squeezing Leia tightly. The usual sexual innuendo that would've been dripping from such a remark was absent, and Han hoped the meaning wasn't lost on Leia. It served only to affirm their understanding, and he hoped she knew how serious he was about her in his efforts to do this her way.

*Close friends...* his mind echoed. Never before had he let himself get so twisted up over a woman. Leia was a special woman, though, worth all the pain and aggravation she'd caused him along the way. Just don't ask him to admit that out loud.

Come to think of it, the only thing she could do worse than driving him crazy with one of their verbal jousting matches was to ignore him. She had been ignoring him plenty on this trip, and as painful as it was to face, that's when Han realized how much she meant to him, how much he'd come to depend on her demanding nature to challenge him, and how much he'd hoped her nurturing, devoted spirit could heal him, restore his faith in...well, anything.

They made an unspoken toast to their friendship with another shot. Han tried to sit there and just enjoy her in silence, but he was never one to resist pushing his luck. What kind of gambler would he be if he didn't?

"I'm still going to have to try to kiss you sometimes, you know."

Han braced himself for her protests, but no show of offense was forthcoming. Instead, she said, "I suppose that's alright, as long as you're still taking me shopping, but you'll have to do better if you want me to clean your floor."

Solo almost didn't believe his ears. Had that actually been a *joke* coming from the princess? He laughed, and was gratified to see her smiling, too. Leia's face was swollen from the tears she had shed, but she was no less beautiful. "So you *were* listening!" He gave her a firm, closed-mouthed kiss. "Deal."

They sat there for a while, snuggled into each other while acclimating to their new-found closeness without barriers. After a moment they became aware of a pair of Wookiee eyes peering at them. Before Han or Leia could speak, Chewbacca grumbled yet another unmistakable comment: "It's about damn time..." With that, he whisked past them and headed toward the cockpit.

"Either I'm beginning to understand him better," Leia said, "or he's gotten more expressive on this trip."

Han grimaced. "I've been avoiding this, but I think it's time to have Professor Goldenrod set you up with some lessons from the Wookiee language lab."

Her brow furrowed. "Avoiding it? Why? Afraid of the trouble you'll be in if I can understand how well he assassinates your character?"

Solo met her gaze squarely. "Exactly. You've already given him plenty of ideas; I didn't need him feeding *your* head. He's got too much on me."

She nuzzled back into him. "Don't worry," Leia said. "I'll be nice."

Han stroked her hair. They were just shy of three weeks away from Bespin. Regardless of their banter, he knew that this trip had just gotten a hell of a lot more bearable, now that they weren't living in fear of upsetting a delicate balance that didn't exist any way. It had been driving them both crazy, he reflected.

Now all he had to do was keep from thinking about the madness that would come on the day he would have to leave her. It just figured that he would discover the right woman at such a wrong time.

He gave Leia a gentle squeeze and a light peck on the side of her head. "I know," he answered, closing his eyes and absorbing the feel of her, driving away the thoughts of being without her.

END

## MUSICAL INSPIRATION:

“Crystal” by New Order

“(Three Fingers of) Love” by The Art of Noise

“Circles” by BT

Portions of the LOST IN SPACE movie soundtrack

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