

[Back To Index](#)

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## Waking Up

by [Cindy Olsen](#)

Against medical advice, Han Solo opened his eyes, and immediately regretted the decision. An explosion pierced his eyes, twin lancets of pain penetrating deep through the retinas and into his brain. Physically cowering, he covered his hands across his face and screwed his eyes shut again, the pain momentarily blocking out the nausea and the bone-aching weariness.

Nearby, the huffing growl of a Wookiee chuckle did not improve Han's mood any. He waited for the inevitable lecture from Chewbacca, yet it did not come. Solo briefly wondered if he was more sick or pathetic-looking than he originally thought he was. He self-consciously straightened his shoulders and adjusted his seated position on the medical bunk, long legs dangling over the side. All things considered, he didn't feel too bad. Not too bad for a guy who had spent the last Standard year frozen in a solid block of carbonite. The medical examination had come to the same conclusion, if, however, agonizingly slower than Han had made up his own mind. The Alliance doctor had identified his symptoms as indicating stress, dehydration, and the electrolytes in his system having been upset by the primitive state of hibernation the carbonite dropped him into.

She had also told him he was physically exhausted and, more than anything, needed to rest and recuperate. Rest, he thought bitterly. I've had more than enough rest to last me a lifetime. But he knew that wasn't quite true. The suspended animation induced by the carbonite had not been akin to sleep or unconsciousness, not by any stretch of the imagination. Despite not wanting to think about it, he had rather vivid recollections of exactly what it had been like. A living nightmare: not quite fully cognizant of where he was, yet always straining to work it out, to remember, to fight against the constant pain and the suffocating need to draw breath.

Han rubbed his hands across his face and up through his hair, the examination room's regulated air suddenly ice-cold against his bare skin. He wouldn't think about the carbonite now, he decided. Couldn't afford to. The doctor had offered him psychological counseling but he had shrugged it off with the dismissive manner he was renowned for. This was Han Solo, smuggler and mercenary, they were talking to; he didn't need any shrink poking about in his mind. He was fine, he had told the doctor. If anything, he'd been a little insane before the carbonite. With any hope, he had joked, the freezing process may have straightened him out a bit. The doctor had simply regarded him with a raised eyebrow.

"The offer remains open, Solo," she had said. "You know where to find me if you decide otherwise." He shivered and told himself his senses were still hypersensitive, hence the slight ringing that persisted in his ears. At least the hallucinations had finally been jettisoned from his mind. That had been the worst thing about his sight returning; initially, he had been unable to tell the difference between reality and the delusions that had periodically gripped him.

A spasm contorted Han's stomach, eliciting a gasping wince from him. He fought back the stream of bile rising in his throat, refusing to heave up yet another mouthful of yellow-green liquid into the bowl he guaranteed Chewie was still holding. He had already vomited and dry retched more since his rescue than he could remember in his entire life.

The first time, he had thrown up as the guards had dragged him down the hallways to the cells in Jabba's dungeons. Shivering and sweating uncontrollably following his release from the carbonite, his body had convulsed, rejecting the fetid remains of the last meal he had consumed on Bespin and the small amount of carbonite that had entered his digestive tract. The guards had not been sympathetic, particularly as they had worn most of it across their boots. He had received a whack across the back of the head and a few ill-thought punches to his ribs and stomach, causing him to vomit again. Enraged, the guards had pushed him unceremoniously in through the cell door, aware that his blindness would only disorientate him further.

Not long after his reunion with Chewie, the nausea had overwhelmed him again. The Wookiee had tenderly held onto his friend as Han heaved up clods of bile and carbonite, dry retching for long minutes after his stomach was empty. Even if he hadn't had been so exhausted from all the vomiting, he would not have been abashed at his body's sudden need to expel the contents of his bowels. His bond with the Wookiee was deep enough that embarrassment was one thing that did not come between the two friends. Fortunately, Chewbacca was able to help him into the corner of the cell and remove his trousers before he soiled himself. Now that, he thought to himself grimly, would've been embarrassing if Leia had been around.

The sudden thought of Leia twisted his stomach again and increased the pulse thumping in his temple. Han wondered exactly where the princess was at this point in time. Throughout most of the 50-hour voyage from Tatooine, Leia had not strayed far from his side. She had insisted he rest in the medical bunk, and, despite an initial instinctive desire to argue with her, he had conceded. He knew it would ease her concerns if he recovered in the sensor-laden confines of the med bunk, when all he had wanted to do was snuggle up with her in his bunk - their bunk, as he had come to think of it - the way they had during that fateful trip to Bespin. Not that he would have been much use to her, he recalled wryly. He had slept most of the journey through hyperspace, and when he wasn't sleeping, he was spewing up his heart in the heads. Even the tasteless mush Leia fed him wouldn't stay down.

Though it felt like all he had done was sleep, it had been far from restful. Han had wrestled with demons from his past in carbonite-spawned nightmares: Jabba the Hutt; the tentacle mouthed Sarlaac; the long-dead gunslinger, Gallandro; the crime lord, Big Bunjii; Uul-Rha-Shan, the reptiloid assassin from Stars' End; Boba Fett; the Death Star; Darth Vader; his court martial from the Imperial Navy...

The worst feeling came just before he awoke. In those moments as he hovered between sleep and consciousness, he had been never being quite sure whether he was safe onboard his ship and simply dreaming those horrific images, or if he was still trapped inside the carbonite. More than once he had awoken from these nightmares, drenched in sweat, screaming, he suspected. And Leia was calmly at his side throughout all of it, holding his hand, wiping his face, soothing him with feather-soft kisses across his brow. His guardian angel, he had deliriously thought of her then. His princess. So where was she now?

Following their return to the Alliance fleet, the Millennium Falcon had settled into the cavernous hangars of the Calamari cruiser, Home One. Leia and Chewbacca had accompanied him to the medical center for a thorough medical examination and extensive testing. She had stayed with him, by his side, for an hour or so until the Rebellion had eventually called her away.

During their trip, Leia had explained to him about the leave of absence she had taken from the Alliance in order to rescue him. Her revelation had not only deeply humbled and indebted him to her, it had also caused him further confusion. Although she had freely and openly told him she loved him, he could not help notice the silent, significant look that had passed between Leia and Luke when they had bid farewell on Tatooine. The more he thought about it, the more it scared the hell out of him.

A softly spoken Wookiee interrogative drew Han back to the present.

"No, I don't wanna throw up again," Solo snapped defensively, but his body obviously thought otherwise.

With eyes still closed, Han doubled over and heaved up a small quantity of bile, knowing without a doubt that Chewie was holding the bowl immediately beneath his chin. The acid burned the back of his throat, and he heaved again, the convulsive gagging reaction feeding upon itself, despite the fact he had nothing left in his stomach.

Han gripped the edge of the bed in a white-knuckled hold, shoulders trembling as he willed the retching to cease. Despite the cool air, his bare shoulders and chest broke out in sweat as he rode the choking sensation. The nausea gradually subsided, his stomach settling into a solid lump that he still swore felt like a mound of carbonite.

He had been concerned enough about the lump to mention it in passing to the doctor when she had questioned him about his symptoms. After prodding his tender stomach, and running a diagnostic scanner across his abdomen she had told him it was nothing. Probably just psychosomatic; a result of the constant pressure of the carbonite's vice-like hold against his body. He had to admit that initially there had been a tightness in his chest that seemed to restrict his breathing, but that had since gone. He could only assume that, for the time being, the weight in his stomach would remain, along with the nausea. Together, they ensured that the last thing he felt like doing was eating. The doctor had advised that if he didn't start eating soon, she would admit him into the med center's ward and commence 'feeding' him intravenously. Her threat had, at least, made him accept the anti-nausea medicine she offered. Insisting he preferred solid medication to injections, he had taken the capsules from her hand but not actually swallowed them, hiding them instead under a fold of sheet on the bunk. Perhaps it had not been the wisest thing to do, but for a spice smuggler used to running drugs and intoxicants of many varieties, he had a natural wariness towards any sort of medication.

Now, still hunched over, rubbing at the contorted muscles of his stomach and spitting into the bowl, Han considered whether it would be prudent to take the medication, even if Chewie was watching him intently. First he would have to find the damn capsules with his eyes closed, then admit to his friend that he only pretended swallowing them. And he certainly wasn't in the mood for one of Chewie's sanctimonious lectures, especially when the Wookiee was right.

Coarse Wookiee hair brushed against Han's face as Chewie wiped a string of spittle from his mouth. "All right," Han acknowledged hoarsely, shaking his head in obvious self-disgust, "so maybe I changed my mind. Again." He accepted the tumbler of water pressed into his hand, rinsed his mouth, and then quenched the rest of his thirst. At least water stayed down. Most of the time.

[You are doing well, my friend,] Chewbacca rumbled. [Much better than I had hoped for.] There was a gentle ringing as the Wookiee set the metallic bowl between his feet. [Perhaps you should lay back and get some rest.]

"I'm tired of sleeping," Solo explained gruffly, trying to keep the annoyance from his tone. "All I've done since Tatooine is sleep. Sleep and throw up," he amended.

Chewbacca chuckled, then quickly apologized. The Wookiee's uncharacteristic apology was about all Solo could handle.

"Stop it, Chewie. This is me you're talking to. I'm not an invalid. I'm not so fragile that you have creep around me all the time." Without even thinking what he was doing, he opened his eyes. "You got something to say, you look me in the eye and you say it."

Han grimaced at the dull ache that throbbed in his eyes. At least now the pain was bearable. Now it only felt like grit was coating the inside of his eyelids, not shards of ground glass. But one thing was for certain; he still couldn't see. Smudges of color shifted across his vision, melding, wobbling and refusing to conform to anything near to sharp focus. It took considerable effort to ignore the sudden adrenaline rushing through his system, and to convince himself his sight had not returned to the state it had been at the beginning of his hibernation sickness. This was the result of the ophthalmic drops placed in his eyes so the doctor could thoroughly examine them. There was no damage to his eyes, the temporary blindness simply caused by lack of use.

Lack of use, he reminded himself dully. One year's lack of use.

The drops had relaxed the muscles in his eyes and dilated the pupils, which is why he could not focus properly. The doctor had suggested that a possible side effect of the drops, combined with the hibernation sickness, could be a sensitivity to light, hence the pain he had experienced previously. The drops would, he was assured, wear off within a few hours. Only a few hours, and he would be able to see again. A few hours...

What was he going to do, sitting in his underwear, on a bunk in the med center, for a few hours? He wondered if he might be able to make it back to the Millennium Falcon. He would certainly find it a lot easier to relax in the comfort of his own bunk on his own ship than he did in a medical center.

He realized it would be a struggle to convince Chewie to allow him to go back to the Falcon. If anything, the Wookiee wanted his friend checked into a ward for a few days. Solo doubted Chewie would even let him out of his sight, so there was no chance of waiting until he left him for a moment. Besides, not only would he have to stumble blindly through unfamiliar corridors to the hangar deck, first he had to find his clothes.

It just ain't gonna happen, he told himself. Not without Chewie's help. He needed to persuade his partner that the best place for him was back with his ship.

[How are your eyes?] Chewbacca asked, his concern evident. [Are they as light sensitive as the doctor predicted?]

Refusing to wince any more, Han replied, "Gettin' better. Only sting a bit. Worst thing is not being able to focus properly." He gestured towards the brown blur that had to be the Wookiee. "Reminds me of some of those screaming hangovers I've had."

Chewie grinned appreciatively. [You're certainly an authority in that field.]

"Years of dedicated study," the Corellian agreed. "As I recall, you haven't done too badly yourself, Professor."

Chewie spread his hands modestly. [I am a simple apprentice compared with yourself, little brother.]

Han nodded in mock condescension, raised a lecturing finger. "And don't you forget it."

Chewbacca chuckled and Han was relieved to finally hear his friend relaxing back into the familiar banter they shared. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps the Wookiee would be receptive about helping him return to the Falcon.

Han licked his dry lips. "Hey, partner, why don't we blow this joint? Head back to the Falcon and relax in the comforts of home. I'll even let you win at dejarik."

Despite the fact Han could not see, Chewie hid his smile.

[Doctor Tuulavich told you to stay put until you could see again.]

Han's stomach tipped and tightened again as a cold chill ran up his spine, but he raised a dismissive hand. "My sight's gettin' better. 'Sides, I never listen to doctors."

The Wookiee blue eyes widened. [I've noticed.]

"C'mon, Chewie." The plea was almost a whine. "You know how much I hate med centers. They make me feel like I'm sick."

[You are sick,] Chewie pointed out.

"Doc didn't think so."

[That's not quite the way she put it.]

The Wookiee took note of the set of Solo's jaw, the way he sat there on the bunk, his legs swinging slightly, a boyish defiance in the unfocused hazel eyes. Something soft twinged inside Chewbacca, and he fought the urge to indulge his friend, his instincts telling him his plan for Han was better than any alternative.

Solo's head tilted downwards, and he tried to gauge the distance to the floor based on the position of what he thought was Chewie's head. Not that far, he decided. Thirty, forty centimeters, tops. He slipped from the bed. The shock of his bare feet hitting hard floor jolted through him, the deck having broken his fall sooner than he had anticipated; the impact jarred through every bone in his body. A dizzying rush caused him to sway for a moment, and he steadied himself against the edge of the bed. He swallowed away the acidic burn rising in his gullet. Not again!

Chewbacca folded his arms across his expansive chest. [Han...]

"Look, I'm up. Get my clothes and we're outta..."

He was able to take a few faltering steps before the nausea returned in a trembling surge. The next thing he knew he was on his knees, coughing up more gunk into the bowl that had appeared from nowhere. He would not have believed his body had anything left to get rid of.

The attack did not last long. Han crumpled up onto his side, seeking relief from the sudden feverish sweat in the coolness of the deck. He did not resist when Chewbacca gently picked him up as easily as if he was child and laid him on the bunk in the same position, half on his side, his face turned against the cool sheets.

"S'just a bit dizzy from sittin' still," he weakly insisted, but he made no attempt to move, having finally found a position that seemed to combat the nausea. His pulse thumped in his ears and he tried to ignore the generally ill feeling that had engulfed him. He closed his eyes and bit his lip to repress a whimper.

Chewbacca pressed his palm against Han's forehead. A slight temperature, but nothing to be overly concerned about. Most likely a result of exhaustion.

[Please lay still,] Chewie insisted. [I've enough to worry about without having to chase you around the ship with a sick bowl.]

The corner of Han's mouth quirked up into a small smile. "You're all heart, pal." The gentle caress of Wookiee fingers across his brow was a surprising comfort. "Be fine if I could stop throwing up."

[You'd be fine if you allowed yourself time to recover.]

"I'm not sick." He opened a useless eye at the sound of Chewie's chuckle, then shut it again. "Besides, I had plenty of time lyin' around on the flight from Tatooine."

Chewbacca shushed him impatiently. [Rest. Relax. You'll need your strength if you intend staying with the Rebellion.]

The words stung Han more than he wanted to admit. More accusation, indictment and dare than casual remark.

When he spoke, his voice was tight in his throat. "Do you think I'd leave?"

Chewbacca sighed deeply. [You are very much your own being, Han. In the past you have done as you please, with little thought for what is best. Best for yourself, and for those who care about you.] His hand continued to smooth the hair on Han's forehead. [Besides, you have not told me your intentions. Yet whatever you decide, know this, little brother. I will be by your side, as is the bond that I pledged.]

Han's stomach dropped again, though this time it wasn't the nausea. He knew what he wanted to say. These people are my friends. Like you're my friend. And you all put your necks on the line to save me. Me! Even that slimy bastard Lando helped out.

Since his rescue, these thoughts had crowded his mind as much as the nightmares. His mumbled thanks on Tatooine had been totally inadequate. It frustrated him no end that he had been unable to express his gratitude, annoyed him only slightly less that his friends had not expected any more from him. Had instead accepted the quiet solemnity that held him as thanks enough. They deserved to hear more, just as he owed it to them to say more. Owed it to himself as well.

"We're staying." Staying with the Rebellion. Our friends. Staying to be with Leia.

[You love her,] Chewie asked softly. [Don't you?]

"More than anything." He was not embarrassed by the admission. "More than..." He struggled for a suitable analogy.

[Youself?] Chewie playfully suggested.

The Corellian smiled into the sheets. "Myself," he agreed ruefully. "You're pretty hard on a sick guy, you know. What'll you do once I'm back to normal?"

[Aah, so you admit you're ill.]



"I'm not sick!" He fought the urge to heave, then reconsidered his assertion. Well, maybe. A little."

"Maybe a lot."

Han moved his head towards the new voice. "Doc? Back so soon? Didja miss me?" He had not heard the hatch to the examination room open. "Are you here to send me out on parole? Return me back to society?"

He could almost hear her thick eyebrows rise in speculation. "A detention facility might be a good place for you, Solo. At least it would make you stay put."

Her fingers felt cold against his wrist as she took his pulse. He was tempted to sit up, to prove how well he was, but the bunk seemed very comfortable just at that moment, and it wouldn't do his argument any good if he threw up again in front of her.

"Am I still alive?" he asked seriously.

Doctor Tuulavich pressed her palm against his forehead, her breath expelling in a sigh of annoyance. "Despite your best efforts, yes."

Her examination of Solo was the first time she had met him, but his reputation as a difficult individual had preceded him. She also knew he was a smuggler and mercenary, and although she had heard him described as 'one of the best' working for the Alliance, she had little or no respect for those who would not commit themselves to the rebellion against the Empire. The fact that he was a criminal further soured her opinion of him, and she had obviously been unable to hide that disdain judging by Solo's snide remarks.

Yet the Princess Leia Organa had accompanied this man into the medical center. The princess had held his hand and gazed at him as if she couldn't let him out of her sight. What's more, Tuulavich had heard rumors that the princess had taken a leave of absence to rescue Solo. This man. This smuggler. She wouldn't have believed the gossip that the Alderaani princess had taken the smuggler as her lover if she hadn't seen with her own eyes the almost dreamy way they gazed at each other. Even more strange, Solo seemed to have a very special bond with the Wookiee, a being from a sentient race of great nobility and wisdom. So for the moment, she was prepared to cut him some slack. Tuulavich turned to the Wookiee. "He's not resting at all, is he?"

Chewbacca shook his head, and added for the benefit of Han, [He's always been difficult to handle.]

"Hey!" Han protested weakly. "I'm listenin' down here."

The middle-aged woman did not understand Wookiee but she gathered from the Corellian's response that Chewbacca's comment had provided some elaboration as well. What is it with human males? she wondered for perhaps the thousandth time in her career. When they're ill, they either carry on like they're dying or they try to distance themselves from it at the speed of light.

"I think we should move to 'Plan B'," Tuulavich suggested, removing a hypo-infuser from the pocket of her knee-length coat.

Chewbacca whuffed his agreement.

On the bed, Han's eyes were open, his head tilted upwards as he strained to decipher the blurs above him. "'Plan B?'" he asked warily. "What's that?"

"Say good-night, Solo."

"Good-night?" Han felt the head of the infuser press against his neck. There was a moment of panic - "No-" - before the sedative overwhelmed his consciousness.

[I am sorry, little brother, but you don't know when to give in.] Chewbacca affectionately brushed the hair back from Han's forehead. [Rest now. Fight another day. Believe me, this is for the best. And the princess would never have forgiven me if I had abided by your wishes.]

The doctor curiously watched the exchange, intrigued by the level of emotion the Wookiee expressed towards the man. She considered whether there was more to the smuggler than met the eye. More than just a ruggedly handsome face.

Tuulavich activated the repulsorlift on the examination bunk. She intended acting on her previous 'threat' and admit Solo into the med center. Under sedation, he would be nourished and hydrated intravenously until his electrolytes stabilized. With any luck, his exhaustion would also have abated by then. She expected that from the protective behavior of the Wookiee, he would remain almost a constant companion at the Corellian's side.

Through a series of hand gestures and soft growls, Chewbacca gently insisted he would take responsibility for pushing the gurney. The doctor did not protest.

"All right, then," she agreed. "Follow me."

The Wookiee unexpectedly took her wrist and placed two small capsules into her palm. Tuulavich recognized the medication as that she had given Solo. That man...Shaking her head irritably, she looked up to see a fang-filled smile plastered across Chewbacca's face. His good-natured grin was enough to make her see the humor in the situation. She shook her head in wry amusement now. "I don't know why you put up with him, Chewbacca."

The broad smile dissolved to a solemnity, but she could still see traces of amusement in the corners of his mouth.

[Because he is my Honor Brother,] he explained fondly. [And I love him, in spite of himself.] It was an eloquent explanation, and one Tuulavich believed she understood, despite the language barrier.

"I'll take care of him," she found herself promising. "You have my word."

Chewbacca nodded. [Thank you.]

The doctor glanced at the prone smuggler. "Come on. Unlike some, we've got work to do."

The datapad sat in her lap, but Leia did not even pretend she had been reading the reports on its screen. Her attention was riveted on Han as he slept peacefully in the med bunk. The dark circles were gone from under his eyes, the marks of pain absent from his face. A thin strip of synthflesh marking his inner arm was the only indication that an intravenous drip had once been inserted into a vein. It was all a considerable improvement from when she had returned to the med center two days previously to find him sedated and connected up to an intravenous system.

Despite Doctor Tuulavich's assurances, Leia had been disconcerted to find Han an unconscious patient of the ward, when only hours previously he had been upright and reasonably mobile, albeit exhausted and nauseous. The treatment had worked though, for his electrolytes had stabilized, and he was hydrated and looking much healthier. The doctor had ceased the sedation this 'morning' ship's time, and removed the lines and apparatus from his body. That was ten hours ago now, and still he slept deeply. Fortunately, it appeared to be a restful sleep. He had not stirred or made a sound since Leia had relieved Chewbacca of his vigil earlier in the evening.

Leia wondered if she should be worried. This sleep was so unlike the delirium he had slipped into on the flight from Tatooine. Then, despite his fear of falling asleep, at least he had slept. Admittedly, she had been concerned for him even then, mainly because nightmares and hallucinations had plagued his rest. But this slumber was so deep it seemed almost unnatural. He literally had not moved. Lying flat on his back, his nakedness covered by a sheet and lightweight blanket, arms resting on top of the covers. Not so much as a twitch or a snore, the slight rise and fall of his chest the only indication he was alive. It seemed almost as if he was frozen solid.

Leia shivered away that maudlin thought. Doctor Tuulavich had already explained that Han would wake when his body was ready. The carbonite had exacted a large toll on him; it was only natural that it would take time for him to return to full health.

Sighing in an attempt to relieve some of her stress, Leia collected the datapad off her lap and tried to turn her concentration back to the Alliance for a moment. Events were rapidly drawing to a head. The vessel they were on, Home One, was en route to Sullust to rendezvous with hundreds of other Rebel ships. Luke, and numerous other pilots, would shortly be receiving encrypted signals, directing them to convene at Sullust within the next few days. Soon, they would face the Empire in one decisive battle that would decide the fate of the galaxy once and for all. And all she could worry about was when her lover would awake.

Not for the first time, Leia dared to imagine what it had been like for Han, trapped inside the carbonite for all that time. Part of her had wanted to ask him, had wanted to share his pain, ease the burden. While another part didn't want to contemplate the horror. It had been bad enough watching Vader torture Han on the scan grid. Bad enough watching Han lowered into the carbon-freezing pit. Bad enough knowing how agonizing the carbonite flash-freezing process would have been for him. Bad... the word was so totally inadequate to describe what he must have endured.

The doctor had warned her that Han could have deep psychological scarring, intimating that she was surprised he appeared reasonably sane. The medical examination had not extended to include his intellectual and emotional stability, and there was scant history of previous cases of sentients being encased in carbonite. What little was known suggested he was lucky he hadn't been reduced to a blubbering mess or a raving lunatic. He's lucky, Leia contemplated. I'm lucky. So very lucky... A compelling sense captured Leia's concentration, forced her head up from the datapad, and drew her eyes back towards the sleeping Corellian. Han's head jerked, his lips moving silently. A moment later, his eyes flickered open and a weight lifted from Leia's soul.

Despite the room's low light levels, Han winced at the overhead glow panels. He groggily raised a hand to shade his eyes, a confused frown marring his brow. It took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust and for him to orient himself, and then his eyes found the princess sitting in a chair at the end of his bed. A small, almost bashful smile crept onto his lips. Leia returned the smile, allowing it to spread up to her eyes and through the rest of her body.

"Good morning, sleepy head." The desire to sweep him into her arms competed with her pragmatism that suggested giving him space while he came to his senses.

"Leia," he croaked from a tight throat.

The princess approached the bed as Han cautiously pushed himself up into a sitting position. The blood rushed from his head and he swayed to one side. Leia instinctively steadied him with a hand to his shoulder. The touch of his warm skin beneath her fingers was exquisite.

"Easy there," she soothed. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, grimacing at the way his brain rattled in his skull. There was a lingering ache in his bones, a lethargy in his muscles, but at least he was upright. Upright...Reflexively closing his eyes, Han steeled himself against the nausea that had previously plagued him, hoping that someone had gotten the ident of the speeder that had obviously run him down.

Allowing a moment to steady himself, he listened to what his body had to say. No nausea. No bile sneaking up the back of his throat. No phantom lump in his stomach. The sheets were cool against his skin and he realized he was naked. He scratched absently at an itch on his inner arm. Apart from the feeling that he had slept too long, he didn't feel too bad.

When he opened his eyes, Leia was sitting on the edge of the bed, a beaker of water held out for him. Accepting the glass, he drank from it thirstily, finishing the water without taking a breath. Leia returned the beaker to the bedside table as he ran a hand through his unkempt hair.

"How are you feeling?" She rested a hand on his covered thigh. The desire to touch him, to reassure herself of his presence, was undeniable.

His response was smoother now the sleep was cleared from his throat. "Naked." He was pleased to see his joke won a small grin from her. She squeezed his thigh in gentle rebuke and he said more seriously, "Washed out."

Leia nodded in understanding. As he had been sedated, it was probably to be expected. He scratched at the stubble on his chin, his eyes dropping downwards as his stomach rumbled. He looked up at her again, his eyes widening mischievously. They shared a grin.

"And hungry," he added.

"The nausea's gone?"

"Yeah." The gurgling in his stomach punctuated his sentence. "And I'm starving."

An intimate silence fell between them. Han glanced down at the delicate hand resting on his leg and covered it with his own larger hand, gently squeezing her fingers. Leia turned her wrist and accepted the warmth of his palm in hers, their fingers interlacing. His gaze returned to hers, the depth of his eyes speaking

more than words. For a moment, Leia contemplated again telling him how much she loved him, how much she had missed him. Instead she cradled her hand against his cheek. His eyes closed reverently at her touch.

A sudden, erotic vision of making love with Han filled her mind. The need to feel his warm skin against hers was compelling. To feel him hovering above her, within her... Still, she reminded herself, he has been through a lot. Take things slowly.

She removed her hand from his face. "Are you strong enough to leave?"

His eyes opened, then widened as he ran his hand through his hair again. "Guess so. What happened to me? I remember talkin' with Chewie and the doc-" An indignant look passed over his features as he remembered what had occurred. "Hey, she drugged me. And Chewie helped!"

"Sedated," Leia corrected.

Han rolled his eyes. "Whatever. She knocked me out."

"For your own good," she explained, hoping he would see the sense in the treatment. "You were exhausted. You weren't eating, and you weren't getting any better. You just needed some time to recover."

He grimaced begrudgingly, prepared to at least think about agreeing. "How long was I out?"

Leia mentally prepared herself, wondering if this conversation was really such a good idea. "You were under sedation for two days-"

"Two days!" Han interrupted. More time gone. As if a year ain't enough.

"And then you've been sleeping under your own power for about ten hours now."

He frowned, the color of his eyes shifting to a dark gray-green. Perhaps he had needed the sleep. "And you knew about this?"

"It was either sedation for two days, or five hours in the bacta," she pointed out, knowing full well how much he loathed the viscous feel and taste of the pinkish organic compound.

Han visibly blanched at the thought of floating in a tank of bacta for that long. Maybe he had endured the lesser of two evils.

"If you're feeling better," Leia reasoned, "then it must have been worth it."

His mouth screwed up as he muttered something under his breath. Leia decided to leave it at that. She raised the hand she still held, pressed her lips in a kiss against the backs of his fingers. "So do you want to get out of here, flyboy?"

"I wanted to get out of here three days ago," he reminded her plaintively.

Leia shook her head fondly. Was he going to milk this one for all it was worth?

"Why don't you freshen up, get dressed and I'll let the doctor know you're checking out." She turned his hand over and kissed his palm. "Okay?"

He held his mouth in a grim line, but his eyes sparkled. "Okay."

She moved out of his way so he could push the covers off himself, pivot around and slide his legs over the side. Remembering what had happened the last time he had tried to stand up, he inhaled deeply before shakily rising. The room momentarily spun around him, and his leg muscles quivered as they strained to support his weight, yet he refused to hold onto the bed for support. Leia refrained from helping him, recognizing that, no matter how small, this was something he needed to do without her assistance.

She tried to keep focused on his face, but her eyes roamed over him hungrily. His skin tone had returned to a healthier shade, and his muscles, now re-hydrated, had firmed up as well. She appreciated the strong lines of his body, the very essence of his masculinity. How wonderful to see him like this again. She had cherished this image of him: standing tall and naked in front of her, just as she had held onto the memory of the shape of his body as her hands danced over him, the taste and warmth of his skin on her tongue, and the scent that was uniquely Han. The need to immerse herself in the reality of these senses sent another rush of adrenaline through her. And as much as she wanted Chewbacca to know that Han was awake, she certainly hoped Han could wait at least until the 'morning' to see the Wookiee. She didn't want to head back to the Falcon right now. The idea of spending time alone with him - making love with him - in her cabin was foremost in her mind.

Han scratched at the synthflesh strip on his arm, then looked down at it in dismay as he realized why it was there. Not only had he been sedated, they had stuck a hole in him as well. Leia followed the track of his eyes.

"It's healing quickly," she assured him.

She noticed his gaze slide further down his body, and noted with interest the lack of activity below his waist. She had never thought the word 'flaccid' would ever apply to Han Solo. What did you expect? she silently rebuked herself. That you'd make out in a med center bed with him? She banished the unrealistic fantasies from her mind. Get real, Organa. Just be grateful he's here. When Han's eyes

returned to hers, she chose that moment to hunt around for the datapad she had left on the chair.

"Think I'll have that 'fresher," he said quietly.

"I'll be here when you finish."

The room's adjoining refresher suite offered only a small sonic stall, but it was better than nothing. Plus, he reminded himself as the sound waves vibrated against him, he had been fortunate enough to experience a real water shower onboard the Falcon during the flight from Tatooine. This was a warship he was on; luxuries such as water were a rare commodity.

He didn't have too much trouble staying upright in the stall, only swaying unexpectedly into the wall on a few occasions. Upon returning to the room showered and shaven, Han was slightly disappointed to find Leia still gone. He opened the main door and poked his head out into the corridor for a few seconds, listening for her voice, but all he could hear was the soft buzzing of the medical center in 'night mode'. Leaving the door open to keep an ear out for her, he padded back to the bed, his legs now confidently supporting his weight.

He was touched to find that the princess had laid clothes out for him on top of the covers. Fresh clothes, he realized, and ones he would have chosen for himself. Dark trousers with the gold Bloodstripe, white shirt, and a jacket and boots that look brand new. She had even picked out his underwear for him, he thought with a self-conscious smirk as he pulled them up his legs.

Han dressed and, with one hand steadying himself against the bunk, was stamping his feet into what most definitely were new boots when he realized there was something under the jacket that still lay on the bed. He lifted up the jacket, jaw clenching as he saw what lay beneath it; he wondered if he was hallucinating again. On top of the rumpled covers lay his gun-belt rig, complete with DL-44 heavy blaster pistol. The blaster Vader had snatched from his hand on Bespin. The blaster he'd had custom-made for himself upon graduation from the Academy. The blaster he had thought lost to him for good.

Without questioning it a moment longer, Han settled the rig over his hips, the familiar caress of the holster against his lower thigh causing him to swallow deeply. With one smooth motion, he raised his foot onto the seat of the chair and adjusted the tie-down strap above his knee. His eyes refused to budge from the incredible sight of the heavy blaster pistol tucked snugly inside the holster. It looked well cared for, recently wiped with gun oil and polished back. He drew the weapon out and stared at it in his hand, the comforting weight of it a panacea for whatever aches he had. If this was an hallucination, then he was going to enjoy it while it lasted.



Watching him from the doorway, Leia could only think of one word: Irresistible. Han's back was towards her but she could see his attention was absorbed in the blaster. She didn't know which she was enjoying more; his reaction to the blaster, or the way the material of his trousers stretched across his rump. Definitely irresistible.

He was mildly startled when he realized Leia was standing behind him, less than half a meter away. He glanced at her over his shoulder, the corner of his mouth tugging up slightly, embarrassed at having been caught a thousand parsecs away. His gaze returned to the blaster and he shook his head in disbelief. It was real. This belonged to him. This was his blaster.

Han lowered his leg and slid the blaster back into the holster, securing the restraining strap over the grip. His head dropped forward as his throat tightened involuntarily, unable to find the words to express what he felt. Then Leia wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her face against his back, and he knew he didn't have to say anything.

"I found it onboard the Falcon after we escaped from Cloud City," she explained, her hands moving up across his chest, relishing the shape of muscle, bone and hair beneath the fabric of his shirt. "Lando told me his assistant, Lobot, had it returned there as soon as we were captured." She inhaled deeply, eyes closed as his scent permeated throughout her. "I kept it for you. For when you returned."

Han turned slowly in her arms, maintaining the contact of his body against hers. She looked up at him as his fingers brushed against her cheek.

"You did that for me?" he asked softly. Her eyes teared at the trace of wonder in his voice, and she gave him a small smile in reply. "You looked after it well."

She lay her palm against his chest, covered his heart, in explanation. "Your blaster is a part of you. Holding onto it-looking after it for you-helped me go on."

His arms wrapped around her and she returned the embrace, eyes closing in relief and gratitude, holding onto to him as if she would never let go. This was not the time for crying, she told herself as a tear slipped down her cheek. She had done all her crying long ago; during those months she spent without him. Now was a time for happiness. Then she felt the warmth of his lips around her hairline and she buried her face further into his shoulder. For many heartbeats they stood there, each reveling in the touch of the other.

"Where to now?" he whispered into her hair.

Leia sniffed, amused at the magnitude of such a simple question: as a couple, where did they go from here? She knew it wasn't quite what he meant.

"Chewie's been worried sick about you," she told him, trying to be as selfless as possible. "We could go back to the Falcon and see him." Her tone lilted up, suggesting there was an alternative. He gently squeezed her and prompted, "Or...?"

Leia pulled away from his shoulder and met his eyes. "Or we could go back to my cabin."

A crooked smile curved up the side of his face. "I've never been asked by a princess to go back to her cabin before."

She matched his grin. "Well then we're even, because I've never asked a scoundrel back to my cabin before."

"Just as well. We can't be trusted."

She stroked the line of his collarbone. "Oh, I know at least one that I trust implicitly." "Gimme his name before he ruins our reputation."

"Oh, it's too late for that. Your cover is totally blown." Her hand moved up to the back of his neck and she ran her fingers through his hair. "So, are you coming?"

Han pressed his lips together and nodded seriously. "Not right now, but it's a definite possibility for later." He momentarily wondered if he had mixed up his ambitions with his capabilities. In the past, just being in the presence of this woman was enough to get a rise out of him. Now...well, now things weren't working quite as they once did. He hoped it was due to any number of things: the two-day snooze; the medication and sedatives; perhaps even an unexpected after-effect of the carbonite. Vader certainly had a lot to answer for if that was the case.

The princess was still smirking at his remark when they realized Doctor Tuulavich had entered the room. Leia stepped out of Han's embrace, but kept her hand possessively on the back of his belt. Considering his previously expressed attitude towards the doctor, she hoped he behaved himself. "Looks as if you're feeling much better, Solo," Tuulavich remarked, not in the least embarrassed at finding them in a lovers' clinch.

Han's brows raised and he shrugged. "Yeah." Leia tugged at the waistband of his trousers to prompt more of a response and he added, "Thanks. I s'pose you were right. I needed some sleep." "Just doing my job," she said dismissively.

"We're fortunate you were," Leia supplied when Han failed to respond.

Tuulavich nodded her head once in polite acknowledgment. She fixed Han with a no-nonsense look. "Remember, Solo. You're not one hundred percent just yet. Keep up the fluids. Get plenty of sleep, and don't over exert yourself."

Han's mouth dropped open in mock disappointment. "Doc, you're no fun."

Smiling to herself, Tuulavich wearily shook her head. "And I hope I don't see you again." As the doctor turned to leave, Han added, "Me too."

Tuulavich mumbled something to herself, continued to shake her head and left them alone in the room. Desperately trying to repress a grin, Leia swatted the back of her hand across the seat of his trousers.

"What?" he asked innocently.

He stepped out of her reach as she attempted to slap him again. Giggling, she tried another time and he caught her wrists in his hands, pulling her back against his body. She wriggled up against him and he released her hands, only to wrap his arms around her, smothering her in a crushing embrace, his head thrown back in laughter.

When they eventually departed the medical center, Leia deliberately took his hand in hers, interlacing their fingers. He stopped her before they could move down the corridor, staring at her quizzically.

"This is all right, is it?" he asked, indicating their joined hands with a tilt of his chin. They had not yet appeared as a couple within the public eye of the Alliance. And, knowing Leia, she had most likely kept the extent of their relationship to herself, refusing to breach their privacy. He didn't want her to later regret something she hadn't fully thought through. He was prepared, for her benefit anyway, to keep their affair a secret if that was what she desired.

In the confines of the narrow corridor, a crewmember stepped past them, trying not to stare too openly at Princess Organa and the man she was holding hands with.

Leia's eyebrows raised and her eyes widened brazenly. "It's all right for me. Is it all right for you?"

His concern melted into a warm smile. The princess really meant it; she did love him, despite his low social status and criminal record. And it looked like she didn't care who knew that she had fallen for a smuggler.

"All right? Princess, it's unbelievable."

"No," she corrected. "Having you here is unbelievable. This-us-is wonderful. And right." She held his eyes, speaking with the wisdom of a woman who had thought long and hard about her feelings. "Never doubt that, Han."

They had briefly discussed whatever relationship they may have during that long flight to Bespin; that incredible, love-filled flight. Of course they had not made any plans. They had not be in the position to consider a future, not with Han already compelled to return to Tatooine in order to pay off Jabba the Hutt. Instead they had joked about the possible problems that may arise if they did become a couple. The Alliance High Command would undoubtedly disapprove, as would the handful of remaining Alderaani citizens who were fiercely protective about maintaining the traditions of their former home world. He would not have been surprised if everyone in the Rebellion had, or soon had, an opinion on the suitability of a smuggler as a partner for a princess. It was reassuring to hear Leia did not hold the same fears he did.

Han's stomach chose that moment to audibly growl.

"Sounds like someone's hungry," Leia remarked with a smile and a playful prod to his stomach. "How about I give you a tour of the mess before we head back to my suite."

"Keep talkin' like that and I'll follow you to the end of the universe," he pledged.

Hand in hand, they headed off to the mess, enjoying the various reactions they received from the ship's company, the double takes, knowing grins and even frowns of disbelief. Too late to reconsider, Han thought, as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder with other crewmembers in a crowded turbolift. Gossip spread like wildfire throughout the Rebel forces. After one year, he guessed it would be well known that Vader had placed him in carbonite for a bounty hunter to transport him to a Huttese crime lord, and that just recently he had been rescued by a band that included Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia Organa. As he was now holding hands with the same princess, the rumor net would be working overtime. May have been a 'trial run' in the med center, but this is the real thing.

As soon as they entered the mess, Han felt even more conspicuous. As it was the middle of a shift, the dining hall was only occupied by a scattering of personnel there for a quick break. However, it seemed that almost every face turned towards them as they strolled over to a food dispenser. Han didn't recognize any of the faces, but he suspected that they had at least all heard about him-'the incredible carbonited man'.

"I must be the new guy in town," he muttered to Leia.

She tightened the grip on his hand and squeezed his arm. "An old friend who has returned." "Didn't realize I was missed that much."

"Your absence affected many," she told him solemnly. Then her eyes lit up. "Even General Dodonna managed a few complimentary remarks about you when they couldn't find a replacement freighter pilot with your level of skill."

The grin slid up the side of his face as he scanned the food dispenser's menu, but she caught it anyway. "That's 'cause he thought I wasn't coming back."

"Mm, possibly."

His eyebrows rose with more than a hint of mischief and he glanced at her. "Can't wait to see his face when I turn up at the first briefing."

Leia rolled her eyes. "I'm afraid you'll have to forestall that reunion for a while, Captain. Fortunately for the general, he's on another ship at present."

Han took a moment to consider her comment, his hand hovering above the selector touch pad as he turned towards her. "This isn't a command ship we're on then?" That seemed strange. Leia always traveled on the command ship, along with Rieekan, Dodonna and at least ten other senior officers. He wondered if she had 'demoted' herself to be with him.

The princess regarded him with a fond sadness, reminding herself that he didn't know anything about what had happened over the last year. Didn't know anything about what was going to happen very shortly. And would he be content to stay with her when he did find out? She felt certain he would, but still it would be reassuring to hear something close to a commitment from him. If not to the Rebellion then at least to her. At the same time Leia knew that she wasn't too certain herself that tackling the Empire's new battle station while it was still under construction was the best plan of attack. She had not taken part in devising this strategy, for she had been on a leave of absence to assist with Han's rescue when the decision had been made. This one, she knew, would make or break the Alliance.

"I'll explain it all after," she promised. "Back in my cabin where we can talk without being disturbed."

He grinned. "After 'what'?"

A slight blush colored her cheeks. "After you've had something to eat. You'll need it to keep your strength up."

The suggestive tone to her teasing was endearing and reminiscent of the explicit banter they had developed en route to Bespin. Hopefully my strength won't be the only thing that stays up, he thought bleakly. Or gets up.

For his meal, he selected a familiar Corellian dish, not the fiery cubes of meat his mouth watered for, but a less spicy casserole of ground meat and vegetables. Leia sat across from him at the table, content to sip on a cup of herbal tea and enjoy the simple pleasure of watching him eat, studying the way the muscles in his cheeks moved, and again marveling at the fact that he had been returned to her. She responded to the questions he asked before each mouthful, casual questions about which Rebels had safely made it off Hoth and to the rendezvous, and finer details about how they had planned his rescue.

The food was hot and tasty, and initially his stomach had no trouble with it. He was not even halfway through the bowl before a tightness lodged at the back of his throat. He swallowed gingerly, but the sensation did not change. Taking a hurried gulp from the beaker of water Leia had insisted he get, he was relieved to feel the tightness sink down into his stomach, where it seemed to churn across the top of the food. He placed his fork on the edge of the bowl and looked up at the princess. She noticed the slightly queasy look on his face.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded slowly and had another drink of water. "Think I'm full."

She glanced at the remaining stew. He hadn't had more than five or six mouthfuls, but she reasoned that as it was the first solid food he'd had since his rescue, it was probably all he could be expected to eat.

She reached across the table and touched the back of his hand. "Do you want to leave?"

Lips pressed together, Han shivered away the chill prickling the hair on the back of his neck. He swallowed and nodded, not trusting his voice or stomach to be steady. Leia returned the remains of his meal and the tray to the recycling hatch while he remained at the table, willing his hands not to shake.

Leia squelched her concern for him as she studied Han from behind. He was obviously not as 'back to normal' as either of them had initially thought he was. She considered whether to return him to the care of Dr Tuulavich, but knew he would rather have a leg amputated than spend another minute in the med center. Besides, if he was only experiencing a touch of nausea due to his body readjusting to solid food, there was probably not much the doctor could do for him, and he would only be occupying a bed that others could use. The doctor had given her anti-nausea medication for Han in case this situation arose. She decided to hold off giving him the capsules until they were alone; it wouldn't look good for Han if she were seen fussing over him in public. Then she wondered if he would be more comfortable back in his own bunk onboard the Falcon. In all honesty, she wanted him to return with her to her suite. Even if he wasn't well enough to make love, she ached at the thought of sharing a bed with him.

Sharing a bed with him again-their bed-for the first time in over a year. Snuggling up to his comforting warmth. Holding him, and being held.

He jumped slightly when she placed her hands on his shoulders.

"Sorry," he muttered, pressing his fingers against his forehead and fighting for control of his stomach.

Leia briefly kneaded the knotted muscles in his shoulders, leaned forward and tilted her head to better see his face.

"Ready?"

He stared into nothing for a moment, and she wondered if he had heard her. Then he turned towards her sharply, his response sudden and overly bright, "Yeah sure."

Easy there, flyboy. She gave him a reassuring smile, took his hand and led him from the mess. There was an expectant silence between them as they headed to the princess' suite. She frequently glanced at him as they walked along, almost as if checking to see he was still there. Han returned her inquisitive looks with bemused grins and comforting squeezes of her hand, at the same time trying to ignore the queasiness bubbling in his stomach.

With a combination of determination and stubbornness, Han decided he had no intention of allowing what had happened to him to affect him any longer. After the horrors of the carbonite, he had finally been reunited with the woman he loved, and appeared to have suffered no lasting physical problems. The memories, though, were still there, despite the two days of sedation. Just below the surface, threatening to force their way through to his immediate thoughts. Darkness. Cold. The unending suffocation. Slow and constant crushing. Trying to make sense of it all...

No. There was no way that damned carbonite was going to play a further part in his life. He wanted things back the way they had been. Before Vader and Fett. The way they had been during the flight to Bespin. The timelessness of that sub-space journey...discovering Leia and himself...finding someone to hold and care for...loving her, and being loved...

He had vivid recollections of making love to Leia; for him, it seemed only days ago that they had rolled and tumbled around that luxurious bed on Cloud City. Perhaps if he could replicate those blissful moments, the carbonite would get out of his head for good. As he'd once had sex with a broken collarbone, there was no way a little nausea was going to screw up their plans for tonight. So as with all things Han Solo didn't like to think about, he simply chose to ignore it. As they headed along the busy corridors, dodging the ship's crew, it occurred to Leia that

to the casual observer they must appear to be a strange couple: a princess leading a Corellian smuggler back to her cabin in order to have her 'way' with him.

Catching the gleam in her eyes, Han asked, "What's so funny?"

The princess unsuccessfully tried to keep her composure. "The way you're tagging along so obediently. I'm not used to it."

"You're my savior, Princess," he said openly, loud enough to cause a few heads to turn in their direction. "Whether you like it or not, I belong to you now."

Is that a commitment? she wondered. Or is he doing it for the benefit of the crowd?

"Oh, I like it. I'm just still getting use to it."

At the hatch to her cabin, Han hovered over her shoulder while she keyed in the security code, having enough sense to take note of the combination for future use. He followed her in, the door cycling shut behind them. For a moment they stood awkwardly in the entranceway, eyes not quite meeting and neither sure who should make the next move, before Han caught her in a loose embrace and pulled her close. Leia relaxed against him with a relieved sigh.

"Shouldn't I have carried you over the threshold?" he whispered into her hair.

She looked up at him quizzically. "Why's that?"

Belatedly realizing that must only have been an old Corellian bonding ritual, he shrugged and decided against explaining the significance of his comment, the spontaneity now gone.

"Corellian custom. I'll show you some other time. When I'm feeling-" He stopped, not wanting to ruin the moment any further.

Leia pulled away from him slightly, her face revealing compassion and understanding.

"We don't have to make love, you know."

His eyes held hers with an erotic intensity. "I want to make love to you."

She gave him a small smile and shook her head. "You're still not well."

"I'm fine."



"Sure you are," she agreed, removing the transparent container of anti-nausea medication from a pocket.

Han instinctively opened his mouth in protest when he recognized the capsules as being the same as Tuulavich had previously given him. "Leia-

"Han."

"I don't-

"Han, please." Her tone brooked no argument. "They will help."

He sighed deeply, almost in defeat, knowing she probably was right. And from the look on her face he could tell there was no way he would win this one.

Running a hand through his hair, he finally nodded resignedly. "All right. I'll have one."

She popped the lid, took his hand and tipped a capsule into his open palm. He rolled his eyes, but she continued watching him intently.

"Would you like some water?"

His smile was tight yet vaguely amused at her maternal actions. Without further complaint, he swallowed the capsule dry, then resumed his mock-pleasant smile.

"There!" he told her.

Leia's lips twitched in delight and she returned his childish remark. "There!"

The air between them was charged with a potent mixture of mirth and desire. Enjoying the interplay, Han poked his tongue out at her. Giggling, Leia pulled a face at him and returned the gesture. The breath left her in a gasp as he leaned down and took her tongue into his mouth, his own slipping slickly into hers. A small moan of release escaped from her lips, before she pushed her fingers through his hair and tugged him closer. His hands cradled her face with a tender ferocity, at once frightening and thrilling, his tongue filling her mouth as if searching for something lost.

The kiss deepened, taking on a desperate, almost frantic pace that had Leia drowning in emotions that threatened to overwhelm her. When it seemed she couldn't open herself enough for him, his lips moved across her cheek to her ear, his tongue tracing the folds, teeth nipping on her warm flesh. Fingers still clasped in his hair, she arched back as he made his way down to the exposed skin of her throat. His mouth was fast and furious against her neck, sucking and biting his way back up over her chin to her mouth again.

A moment of sanity settled over them and they parted, breathless, their bodies still melded together, gaze unwavering from the other.

"I missed you," she whispered, her voice trembling, aware of how inadequate it sounded.

The tears spilled over her lashes and down her cheeks, and Han held her more gently now, kissing her tears away with a tenderness that surprised him. Her eyelids closed under the gentle caress of his lips. He pressed his cheek to hers and moved his lips close to her ear.

"I love you, Leia Organa. Always know that," he pledged, recalling her words to him at the med center. "I love you."

She held onto him tightly, her head nestled between his neck and shoulder, answering him in the only way she could at that time. She breathed in his scent, allowing his warmth to spread through her like an elixir, nourishing, invigorating.

At the touch of his breath against her ear, her passion ignited again. She rubbed her cheek along the line of his jaw, her lips following. She felt more than heard the groan rumbling in his throat, and replied by mumbling his name into his skin.

Han, she sighed again to herself. Han. My Han. How many times over the last year had she awoken calling his name, sighing his name as she climaxed, her dreams about loving him the only relief she had known.

Their pace was less harried now as she slowly devoured his neck, savoring the taste of his skin. She felt his attempts to remove the Rebel uniform she now chose to wear, but with the distraction of Leia munching on his throat, he seemed to be having trouble with the fasteners. She slid her hands under the front of his jacket, pushing it back and off his shoulders where he shrugged it onto the floor.

Her teeth nibbled his ear lobe as she pressed her hands against his chest, her heart rate increasing as she found the erect points of his nipples. Oh, Han...just as she remembered.

"Let's get more comfortable," Leia suggested into his ear.

He nodded in dazed agreement as she took his hand and led him to the bunk. She was already undressing herself, removing her boots and socks, before he realized that was the next step to take.

He followed her lead, sitting on the edge in order to remove his own boots. She was quicker than him, and was down to her underwear by the time he had one sock off. In his defense though, watching her undress had preoccupied him. She

was about to slip off the formfitting cropped-top bra when she noticed he was still pulling the sock from his big toe.

"Can I help you?" she asked seductively.

The pulse was thumping in his neck. "Do I look like I need help?" He wanted her so bad, his whole body ached. The rush of adrenaline also seemed to have washed away the nausea.

She moved closer to him, a smile stretched across her face. "As a matter of fact, you do."

Eyes locked on his, her hand slid down the inside of his thigh and popped open the tie-down strap for his holster, then moved up to the belt buckle and released it. She slipped the gun-rig from his hips and draped it across the end of the bed like some trophy she had won. They grinned at each other with almost maniacal glee.

"I've always wanted to do that," she purred with satisfaction.

"I could tell," he agreed, pulling her into his lap.

Wrapping her legs around his hips, she commenced work on unfastening his shirt, at the same time allowing him to slip the bra top up and over her head.

"What other fantasies have you kept hidden from me, Princess?"

He felt her fingertips trace down his cheek and his gaze left the gently swaying mounds of her breasts.

"That's for me to know and for you to find out," she said softly. She wet her lips with her tongue and looked at him earnestly. "You will stay to find out, won't you, Han?"

He cupped her beautiful face in his palm. He knew what she wanted him to say, knew what she wanted to hear. Knew she deserved to hear it.

"I meant what I said it before, Leia. I belong to you. With you. It's taken me a while, but I think I've finally woken up to myself." He rested his forehead against hers. "I wanna stay here, with you. Be here, for you." He pulled away slightly so she could see the truth in his eyes. "If I get to spend the rest of my life waking up with you in my arms, I'll be a happy man."

The kiss they shared may have lacked their previous frenetic passion, but it was deeper, more mature, as if sealing a bond between them. They parted and she smiled at him affectionately, grateful to know that for at least whatever time they

had left, they would be together. Waking up with Han in my bed. Waking up being held and loved. She couldn't ask for more.

"Shall we get back to those fantasies?" she asked brazenly, taking up where she had left with removing his shirt.

He ran a hand down the curve of her shoulder, his senses overwhelmed with the sight sitting in his lap.

"Mine are all right here in front of me," he assured her.

Leia finished stripping the shirt from his arms and leaned forward against him, pushing him back onto her bed with her weight. Elbow resting on his chest, she brushed the hair from his forehead and licked her lips.

"Well I've got some catching up to do."

**end**

[Back To Index](#)