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*MELT(DOWN) is the second of five pieces I wrote to flesh out the evolution of Han and Leia's relationship during the course of the trilogies. It takes place roughly six weeks after the first story I wrote, A PRINCESS AND A GUY LIKE HIM. It is a sequel of sorts, tying A PRINCESS... to the part in the beginning of Empire where Han announces his departure to General Rieekan and Leia. It is a much shorter piece than the last one, but in this case a lot happens in a small amount of time. Some time has passed after their adventure on Ord Mantell, and both Han and Leia have had some time to sort out their feelings...and come to their conclusions about what must be done with them. You do not need to read my first story in order to understand what is going on here, but if you do read both, I think it sheds some new light on what that argument in the South Passage was "really" all about...*

MELT(DOWN)

By Aquarius

PART ONE: LEIA

Oh, how she hated being cold.

Princess Leia Organa suppressed a shiver at the thought, feeling chilled to the bone despite her Rebel issue snow gear. As she moved through the supply depot taking her inventory, she wished dearly that there was a way to increase the temperature without melting the Hoth base to collapse.

It was during moments like this when Leia missed the warm breezes of Alderaan, especially at her family's vacation home by the ocean. It brought her a serenity she could find nowhere else, a heady feeling as the winds carried the fragrance of the water mixed with the indigenous flowers. It never got too hot during the day or too cold at night.

Leia remembered how as an adolescent she would walk the beach at night, feeling the warm wet sand in her toes as Alderaan's moons lit the water beside her. She'd dream of being with the love of her life there. The recollection almost brought a smile to her face, as she remembered the dizzy euphoria her daydreams of romance had brought her.

Wait...

Moons? What moons? The only things to light Alderaan's night skies were constellations and the orbiting communications arrays.

Leia found it disturbing at first that she was remembering her long-gone home in any way other than how it had actually been. After a moment, she let the guilt fade, reasoning that perhaps she had romanticized it a bit, brought on by the commingling of her memories and her daydreams with her miserable existence on Hoth.

Hoth was the anti-Alderaan. Instead of ethereal breezes there were blizzards. Where she craved sand, there was snow, snow, and more snow. As for the romance of a lifetime...

Leia put down the data pad and breathed a heavy sigh. Right now the only two men who showed any interest in her made a life of eternal celibacy look like a very attractive option.

*Not that it would change much...* she thought self-deprecatingly.

It had been six weeks since the incident on Ord Mantell, and her insides were just a big gelatinous mass of confusion.

Luke Skywalker, the young would-be Jedi Knight who had rescued her from the Death Star, had a huge crush on her and she knew it. Everybody knew it. Luke was a nice man and a good friend who possessed many of the qualities she would want in a man. At times she was bewildered by the fact that she didn't want anything more from him than his friendship, but she was aware that one could not force herself to feel things that were not there. Luke had never outright declared his feelings for her, but they were written all over his face. Leia was careful to return all the love and support of friendship that he gave her, and equally careful to never do anything to lead him to believe it could become more.

Where Luke failed to spark any serious emotions inside of her, Han Solo managed the opposite with almost nothing but unwelcome feelings. He was a man who loved to push her buttons, and he would push any one he could find. In this, he held some strange power over her, as at times she loved nothing more than pushing his back. Unbeknownst to the two of them, the average casual observer had already concluded simply that they would do anything for each other's attention.

It went further than the frustrations of a verbal power struggle, though. That had only been the beginning and that's what made Leia nervous. Slowly but surely she had begun to open herself to him, to let him really know her, something she hadn't dared to do with anyone since before the destruction of Alderaan. It was unknown to her whether she was more confused from her sudden desire to share, or the fact that it was Han she felt compelled to share with. Somehow she was finding herself to be relaxed and at ease with

him. He never laughed at her when she swore anyone else would. Her secrets were safe with him. He always listened and never offered any unsolicited advice, except for the occasional suggestion of a stiff drink or a sexual favor.

And that was yet another thorn in the quagmire. He'd always flirted with her in the nearly three years they'd known each other. He flirted with all women it seemed, and plenty of them saved him the trouble by throwing themselves at him. As distasteful as she found it, she supposed she couldn't really blame them. As he'd often boasted in the past, Han was a good-looking guy and he could actually be sweet when he wanted to. When he flirted with her, though, it was somehow different. In the beginning it seemed to be yet another way to rile her up, but it had evolved into more, especially since Ord Mantell. Something happened between them that night, Leia knew it, but she was unable (or unwilling?) to give it a name. She would never tell Han, but she'd often fondly relive their time at the dance club.

Leia barely admitted to herself that she had been toying with Han a bit as she danced in front of him. In that moment she didn't have a reason, other than to see if she could do it, maybe elicit some sort of reaction from him. She'd thought of it as a game. It wasn't long, though, before she realized that in doing so, not only did she wield a power over him similar to the one he had over her, but a part of her had ended up dancing *for* him. Leia did not want to face it, but she had almost lost complete control, had actually begun to *desire* him. *Him!* Han Solo! What began as a tease stirred something inside her that she had yet to be able to silence.

Over time, his flirtations had become sweeter and his sexual advances less distasteful, although she wouldn't let him know that. At first she thought she had merely become desensitized to them, but when she had seen the desire in his eyes through the strobe lights, she knew otherwise. Her suspicions seemed validated when he took her into his arms, and despite (or because of?) the obvious heat between them, he'd behaved like a complete gentleman the whole time.

To her surprise, the gentleman didn't pack up and go home after they made their hasty exit from the club, having been discovered by a bounty hunter who was intent on bringing Han to answer for his debt to Jabba the Hutt. Leia had fallen apart in front of Han as they were hidden away at the warehouse, and he had ultimately handled her outburst delicately and allowed her to retain her dignity.

Han had rattled her cage, though, with his assertions about her character. She did not want to admit it but he was right: she did hide behind her position and her cause to keep anyone from getting too close to her. She was even beginning to suspect that the rest of his suppositions were correct, about their battle of wills having more to do with her pushing him away than with any real dislike for him. It was becoming apparent to her that her loneliness and isolation had been of her own construction these days, not a result of her history and unique circumstances.

Han had ignited something inside her, it was true. Her entire life, deep down, Leia had craved a sense of adventure like his and his ability to be impulsive and act on his freedom of spirit. It was becoming a fire that she could not put out, and if she ignored it she feared her house would burn down around her.

Leia stared at her data pad, knowing she needed to get back to work but was unable to focus through the muddle of conflicting emotions. Things had been strange indeed since their return to Hoth. Was it just her, or did Solo seem to be around constantly, more so than usual? He always managed to find her in the mess hall, and he was finding more and more business in the command center. It was as though he was haunting her.

Not that she minded much lately. These days she was almost disappointed if she turned around and didn't see him standing there, watching her from across the room...

Which, of course, was why she felt compelled to avoid him.

*That's enough*, Leia told herself. It was disturbing to her, how much the Corellian pilot had been occupying her thoughts. There was only one way for her to get it out of her system.

Shaky but determined, the princess resolved to ask him to dine with her. Alone. She would tell him how she felt. She would not scare Han away by telling him that she loved him; she wasn't even sure if that's what this was, any way. Leia cared about him, yes, but love...? The feelings she was experiencing were already so unlikely, almost impossible; she was going to need some time and quite a bit of convincing before applying so strong a word to them.

Whatever was happening, be it infatuation, lust, friendship with a touch of sexual tension—any of a number of things—she felt a willingness to let nature take its course and let the situation come to its own conclusion, one way or another.

Leia looked at her chrono. She needed to hurry and finish her work in the supply depot. She was due for a shift in the command center in a couple of hours and she hoped to have time to grab a bite to eat, and maybe find Han and talk to him about dinner.

The princess picked up the pad, finding it easier to work now. Her problems with Han were far from being solved, but deciding on a course of action and having direction had freed her mind quite a bit. She was still a little nervous, and strangely excited, but she could think more clearly now and remain focused.

Leia found herself counting faster than she ever had before...

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PART TWO: HAN

Han swore the most vulgar string of profanity that had ever escaped his lips, it was just so damn cold. He didn't know what was worse: being chilled to his very core this way, or bringing up the recollection that the last time he really got to move around unfettered by goggles and subzero gear was a month and a half ago on Ord Mantell, constantly being chased by bounty hunters and hiding out with...*her*.

He shuddered as he ran the diagnostic on one of the new shield generators that would protect the Hoth base, provided he ever got it working. Whether he shook from the climate or from his frustration with a certain member of the fairer sex, it didn't matter; both were equally aggravating and seemed equally frigid at the moment.

What *was* the deal with Leia, any way? Changing tools and making adjustments, he pondered the subject for what must've been the millionth time. When they had first returned to the base, she was still a little irritated with him to be sure. Leia was understandably annoyed at becoming involved in his struggle to pay his debt to Jabba, having been taken hostage by bounty hunter Cypher Bos in the process. He also imagined that she was still stinging from having been pushed by him on certain personal matters.

Han's hand ached at the memory of Cypher's blaster pressed to Leia's temple. He had fractured it in two places in the process of using Bos's face to take out all of his anger and frustration over Leia's plight. The medical droid had declared his hand good as new a couple of weeks ago, but the extreme temperatures of the icy world often aggravated the injury. Leia had not been impressed by his display, and she avoided him for several days after the incident.

Gradually she warmed up, though. Leia had spotted Han in the mess hall, having difficulties with his tray since his hand was wrapped in an immobilizer. He'd seen her suppress a giggle before she came over to assist him.

She was so beautiful when she laughed.

He'd half expected her to just set him up at a table, help him open the packets on his tray and leave, but she instead surprised him by staying and talking until he'd finished. Han had never eaten so slowly in his life. Anything to make the moment last; he even vaguely recalled talking about her hair, just to keep her there longer.

Leia captivated him, it was true. He periodically thought about dancing with her on Ord Mantell, how it made his heart race to watch her, how his mind and body exploded when he felt her move against him. These days he settled for just being in the same room with her, hoping for a chance at small talk or an intellectual debate over lunch. She'd given him plenty of opportunities for both until recently. At first Han wondered if he'd committed some new transgression, real or imagined, but Luke had mentioned that he

hadn't seen much of the princess lately, either. She seemed to be sequestering herself from the both of them.

Luke. That was a complication Han was unsure about. He was an alright kid, that one. He was probably the first real friend Han had made since Chewbacca. Luke obviously had it bad for Leia, though, and the Corellian was uncertain as to how much of those feelings she returned. Before Ord Mantell, Luke and Leia would hang around together all the time, often talking quietly in a corner of the mess hall or engaging in some recreational pursuit in the base's common area. Han felt like a big brother to Luke; he was also envious of the attention Leia paid to him. He didn't want to hurt the kid, and if it were any other woman in question he'd simply bow out.

Leia. Han fidgeted with his tools as he considered her, the cold temporarily forgotten. Since the destruction of Alderaan, her home literally was wherever her Alliance cell was operating, and right now it happened to be this ill-begotten snowball. She couldn't really show her face much of anywhere, being wanted by the Empire with a slow and painful death waiting for her because of her activities with the Rebellion.

The Alliance had given her an honorary officer's rank, but she earned it every day and then some. Her skill of diplomacy was often used to negotiate for supplies or to recruit new members. Her gifts of organization and management had gotten her the position of Chief Operations Officer, in which Leia would spend her days doing everything from coordinating missions to regulating the flow of supplies and information; in reality it meant she was learning how to do virtually everything, filling in where needed. She was becoming quite the strategist, hanging around General Rieekan in the command center, and she was on her way to becoming a decent mechanic under Han's personal tutelage.

Leia had also become a rallying point for the troops, because of her status as royalty and what the Empire had done to her homeworld. Frequently the general sent her to give the troops their orders. Han wondered if Rieekan thought that being handed a death sentence was really that much more palatable coming from a beautiful woman than a battle-worn codger. The troops would do anything for their princess, though, that much was certain. She was their rock.

Begrudgingly, Han envied her strength of conviction and admired her sense of purpose. He felt strangely grounded and centered around her. Leia was a woman of courage who knew her place in the galaxy and which direction she was going. He considered that if he'd had those qualities when he was her age, he probably wouldn't have ended up a smuggler with a price on his head, indebted to one of the most powerful crime bosses in the galaxy.

And then he never would've met her...

Han zipped up his tool kit and put it in his pack. The sun was beginning to set, and the temperature was dropping. There was little more he could do here until morning. Better get himself and his tauntaun back to the base before they both froze solid.

At the last minute, Solo was overcome with either inspiration or frustration, and he punched the control panel with his good hand. Obediently the generator began to hum and the controls lit up. He shrugged. *Why the hell not?* he thought. After all, it worked on the *Falcon* all the time.

Han's mind was troubled the entire ride back. This whole business with Cypher...his newfound feelings for Leia...

She had rocked everything he'd ever thought/felt/believed about women and relationships; Han wasn't sure why, but he thought he might actually be considering *wanting* a relationship now. With *her*.

To his dismay, his pal Chewbacca had picked up on this, suggesting out of the blue one day that the princess would be an ideal mate for Solo; after all he should have a woman who could shoot and play cards as well as he can and, the Wookiee asserted, Han could use another Voice of Reason, since one in his life was obviously not enough. Han had neither confirmed nor denied Chewie's observations and simply told him to shut up.

But if he and Leia were to have any kind of future—assuming she would even entertain the idea of having one with him—he had some unfinished business to attend to first. He certainly wasn't going to get anywhere with her if she ended up getting killed because of his transgressions, and Cypher Bos had proven it. Chances were, though, there was no way he'd survive his trip to Jabba's place. The crime lord was the kind of guy to demand two hundred percent interest for the late payment and then kill him any way just for kicks. But maybe, just maybe, if Han could talk fast and sweet enough—

Han grinned at that thought. Apparently Leia wasn't the only diplomat on the base. For two such vastly different people, they'd been finding more and more things in common than they thought possible.

Solo and his tauntaun passed through the blast doors of the base. As Han dismounted, he knew he was going to be relying on his own special brand of diplomacy when he told Leia he would be leaving. Her reaction would tell him what he needed to know. No sense in fighting to come back to a woman who wouldn't even have him, right? He sure as hell wouldn't be coming back for the Alliance itself.

The smuggler shook his head. Such thoughts of self-sacrifice and settling down were so alien to him, he wondered if he ought to have his head examined.

Solo threw back his hood and removed his goggles. This was one conversation he was not looking forward to. *It can't be helped*, he thought, firming up his resolve. He was doing it more for her than for himself, whether she would ever realize that or not. Her face was now associated with his, and Han was unwilling to let anything further happen to her because of that fact. Even if Jabba killed him where he stood, Leia would be off the hook and that's what mattered.

*No sense putting it off*, he thought, shedding his parka. He took a deep breath and went to find the princess.

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### PART THREE: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Much later that evening, Han bumped into Leia outside the common room, literally.

“You should check your navigation sensors, flyboy,” she said through a small smile.

“Yeah,” Han said, not really having a comeback in him to continue their ritual banter. “Sorry, I was distracted. I’ve, uh...I’ve been looking for you.” *I’ve got a bad feeling about this*, he thought.

Leia was on pins and needles herself, trying not to shake with anticipation. *Please don’t let this be a mistake!* she begged some unnamed higher power. Her eyes sparkled in the dim light of the base’s night cycle. “I’ve been looking for you, too.”

Han couldn’t look at her, afraid his eyes would betray him.

Leia saw his distress. “Han, is something wrong?”

Solo peeked into the common room. Finding it empty, he pulled her in by the elbow. “I need to talk to you. I, uh...I wanted you to hear it from me before you had a chance to hear it from anyone else.”

Leia’s anticipation and excitement turned to anxiety and dread. “What are you talking about?”

Han took her hand into his and locked his eyes with hers. “Leia, I have to go.”

The princess was clearly stunned, perhaps for reasons other than those he may have guessed. “Go?”

Han could already feel her old walls building back up, brick by brick, forcefield by forcefield. This was, by no stretch of the imagination, going to be easy. “I gotta go pay Jabba. Now. The stakes have just gotten too high.”

“But why do you have to go?” she asked, her intended revelation to him forgotten. “I mean, I know you have to pay him, but why do *you* have to do it? We can just send a courier, and--”

“And your courier gets killed, and I get killed any way, for not coming to face him. It’s just not how these things are done, Leia.” Truthfully, he wished he could do it her way, but it just wasn’t possible.

Before Han could explain further, she retracted her hand and stood. “So you’re leaving the Alliance, just like that? Right when we need you the most?”

*Of course.* Solo wondered what else he should’ve expected from her. Rather than put her own feelings on the line, expose herself and her vulnerabilities, she was hiding behind the Rebellion again. He’d gotten to know her well enough by now that he could see it was her way of concealing personal aches, but he also knew that if she wasn’t ready to tell him how she felt, there would be no forcing her.

Or, maybe he was just telling himself this because he didn’t want to face the possibility that she really didn’t care.

He had to know.

“You know I was never in this for your Rebellion,” he began.

“That’s right,” she hissed. “You were in it for the money. Well if you came to me looking for severance pay, you’re out of luck.”

He jabbed a finger in her direction. “That’s not fair!” Leia turned to leave but Han grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back. “Things change, sweetheart, but I guess you can’t understand that.” His frustrations were only driving her further away, but right now he couldn’t help it.

“Let go of me,” the princess demanded, trying to wrest her arm away.

“Not until you start being honest and tell me how you feel.”

She narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin defiantly. “I feel like you’re wasting my time and you need to let go of me.”

“Something happened on Ord Mantell,” he blurted. He was so shocked at hearing his own statement he didn’t even time to put on his Sabaac face.

“Yes,” she said, disengaging herself from him. “You almost got me killed, several times.”

Han was at a loss. He’d never met so stubborn a woman before in his life.

Before he could speak again, Leia indicated the hand that had just released her. “You’re lucky I didn’t break the other one. Good night, Captain Solo. Don’t let the blast doors hit you on your way out.”

With that, she was gone.

Han winced at the loud *smack!* he heard coming from the hallway.

*Women!* Han fumed. Who needed them, any way?

With nothing else he could do about it, he took off in the opposite direction of the princess and headed for the *Falcon*. There was no way he was going to get any sleep now; he might as well use the time to get some repairs done so he could get the hell off Hoth as soon as possible.

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Leia almost broke her own hand, she had hit the wall so hard as she stalked away from the common room.

Now in the privacy of her own quarters, free to rant and rave and throw things as she saw fit, she merely stood there trembling, unsure of what to do next.

*I should’ve known better*, Leia reflected. Her thoughts were never clear when it came to the handsome smuggler, but this time even she could see that her anger was not at him, but at herself, for thinking for even one moment that she could trust him with her heart.

Deep down, she supposed she’d always known he’d have to leave. Somehow, she had irrationally thought he might change his mind. For her.

*Oh, grow up!* she admonished herself, blowing a stray lock of hair out of her face. She would just have to accept that her original instincts were correct: they were too different, there was no way he could be interested in her as anything more than a diversion...and like a slipmoth to the flame she was drawn to him, compelled to be warmed by him even though she knew she would burn alive.

Frustrated, she flopped onto her cot. There was no use getting changed for bed. She knew she would not sleep tonight.

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The next day Han and Luke had ventured out on tauntaun to survey the perimeter and place more sentry markers. It was getting to be about time to head back, but Luke said something about a meteor he wanted to check out.

Whatever. Han was cold as hell and the sooner he could blast off this rock, the sooner he could get warm again. Chewie should've been just about finished with the repairs they started last night. All he had to do was inform the general of their departure and they were out of there.

Han made his way to the command center once back to the base. He was again filled with a sense of anxiety and dread, not because of the conversations he would have to have with the General Rieekan about sensor markers or about leaving the Alliance, but because he knew *she* would be there.

Han had caught the look Leia shot him after he entered the room. It was angry. It was hateful. It was disappointed.

But it was not indifferent. She cared enough to be mad, Han reasoned, which meant she *cared*.

Hope and anticipation found new life as Han finished saying goodbye to the general. *Guess I'd better go talk to her...*

"I guess this is it, Your Highness," he said with a smile, the one that had worn her down before...

AND WE ALL KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT...

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