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Although I started writing Star Wars fanfic again due to my dissatisfaction with the novelists' vision of Han and Leia's future, I felt that I must first understand where these characters had been in order to competently take them forward. This story takes place after A New Hope and before the beginning of The Empire Strikes Back. It is the first of five pieces I wrote that take place during the trilogy, for the purposes of character development. This story actually started out as a vignette, a conversation over a game of cards to let us in on the details of Han and Leia's lives preceding A New Hope. As I began to write, however, I realized it would take more than a few pages to accomplish what I wanted to my satisfaction, and I started to have more and more fun as the possibilities opened up.

Every time Gemini and I watch Empire, there always seem to be more questions than answers. The communication between Han and Leia—both verbal and nonverbal—seems to indicate that there is much more going on than meets the eye; this story lays the foundation and is the beginning of “why” things unfolded the way they did.

As stated on the “About Us” page of this site, I've mostly dumped anything associated with the Star Wars Expanded Universe, except for where it suited me. After all, why reinvent the wheel if I don't have to? So I borrowed the idea of the character of Cypher Bos and the Expanded Universe interpretation of what Ord Mantell is like, but put my own twists on them; to me, minor details, really, because the real story is in Han and Leia.

That said, if you were looking for tons of action, or a lot of information on Luke and Chewbacca's end of things, you're looking in the wrong place; their little side trip, while it has huge storyline potential, was strictly a means to get Han and Leia alone and allow the first real stirrings of attraction to develop. I know that it seems kind of unfair that I plunk you down in the middle of the action, with only a brief summary of how they got there and why, but I'm sure you'll get over it as you read (wink). The potential for a full-blown ensemble story is there, and I may choose to further develop it toward those ends at another time, but for now, don't hold your breath.

Also, I feel it fair to warn you that you may not feel any real closure at the end of this story, and you may have to wait for my second piece to be posted in order to get it

Enjoy, and please post your feedback to the Yahoo group, or email me.

A PRINCESS AND A GUY LIKE HIM

By Aquarius

“Just what were you thinking back there?” Leia panted, pressing her back as flat to the wall as she could. “Running into that casino with your blaster! You were--”

“--trying not to get killed,” Han spat back, finishing for her. As if he didn’t know that it was illegal to bring a blaster into a casino! Right now, he had half a mind to...! No, no time for that now. He’d had a bad feeling about this mission to Ord Mantell, and now he knew why. Cypher Bos was going to get him dead or alive.

“We should try for the spaceport,” Leia said, her chest heaving from the exertion of flight. “If we can get off this pl--”

A blaster bolt scorched the wall between them and cut her short. Han grabbed her arm and they ran another direction.

They found themselves in a back alley of the plaza they had just been shopping in only moments before.

So much for time to relax.

Han, Luke, Chewbacca, and Leia had come to Ord Mantell to gather intelligence on Imperial activities, and funds to supply the new secret Rebel base on Hoth. Leia’s family had owned a large shipping company located on the Worlport continent, before it had been seized by the Empire, and the Organas had various accounts and holdings with the Ord Mantell banks.

Leia’s plan had been to use the planet’s lenient banking laws and relative lack of Imperial interference to their advantage. Rebel intelligence had reported that her family’s former company was shipping a huge cash tribute to Coruscant. The princess still had a few master codes to the banking computers, and the idea was to transfer the money to a different account, which would be then picked up by another Rebel operative posing as a guard for an armored transport service.

It had seemed that the plan might fail at the beginning. Before arriving at Ord Mantell, the four had received a distress signal from a nearby resistance cell. They had been attacked not by the Empire, but by a highly contagious respiratory infection which would kill if left untreated. No one in that pocket of resistance could leave to acquire the necessary medicines, for fear of spreading the contagion, so someone was going to have to make a drop. The *Millennium Falcon* was the nearest Alliance-friendly vessel, and time was running out.

Leia insisted that Han and Chewbacca procure the necessary supplies from a nearby black market source, and run them to the ailing Rebels while she and Luke complete the mission. Han had protested, on the grounds that it would leave Luke and Leia out of contact for a day and a half. He suggested a compromise: he would allow Chewbacca to take Luke and the *Falcon* on the mercy mission. That way, the smuggler explained, he

could keep an eye on the princess himself. Han had been doing that a lot lately, as though he was her self-appointed chief of security.

“And any way,” he had told them all, “if anything, it’s a criminal mind she’s going to need the most if she hits a snag.”

The princess had almost needed that help, too; unfortunately, that criminal mind was also why they were in trouble now.

Han and Leia had pulled off the money transfer almost without a hitch. There was a nerve-racking moment when they were unsure if Leia’s codes would still work, but the computer had apparently just been running slow. Ord Mantell had an implied if not strict don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy, so no one seemed to notice that this computer was being used by two individuals who were wanted by the Empire for collaboration with the Rebel Alliance.

Han had just talked himself into the idea that they had earned themselves a vacation day when bounty hunter Cypher Bos spotted them shopping just outside the resort district.

Leia was feeling somewhat claustrophobic with Han shielding her with his own body, pressing her even closer to the wall.

“Back off, so I can shoot!” she demanded.

“Stay back!”

It was always the same between them: two very strong-willed individuals with entirely different ideas on how to handle things.

“Try that door,” he snapped. “See if it opens.”

Leia reached behind her and fumbled for the switch. No luck.

“Okay, scoot to the next one,” he said, shooting back occasionally. This was not good. Not only was the bounty hunter after him over his debt to Jabba, but the Worlport authorities would soon be showing up. At that point, they would be unable to ignore Han and Leia’s presence on their world, and they would surely be turned over to the Empire.

They shuffled together as one to the next back door. Locked again.

They repeated the process two more times before the pair found a door that would open. From the aroma that assaulted them instantly it had to be a restaurant of some sort. They slipped in, Han locking the door behind them. He grabbed Leia’s free hand and they made their way through the kitchen.

To the princess, it all looked like a whirlwind, Han was pulling her along so fast. She was vaguely aware of Han's "excuse me's" and "pardon us's" and "coming throughs" as they bumped into cooks and wait staff of varying species, most of which seemed indifferent, as though this sort of thing happened all the time.

They pushed through a door into the dining area. Some of the patrons seemed a little less unflappable than the kitchen staff. One diner swore at Han in Low Corellian when the smuggler bumped into his table. Han answered with a hand gesture that Leia didn't quite see, and was pretty sure she didn't want to.

After what seemed an eternity, they finally broke through the restaurant's exit. Still holding her hand, Han pulled her to the right and they tore down the sidewalk.

"Where are we going?" Leia asked after a while, even more short of breath than before. She was getting a bit worried. The buildings in this section of town were not looking as well-maintained, there were few efforts at city beautification, and the characters in the street were looking shadier and shadier.

"Trust me." He could almost *hear* her eyes rolling as the words left his mouth. "It'll be easier to hide here."

"It all looks so seedy," she complained, "and dangerous."

Han turned his head to look at her just long enough to say, "Maybe you'd rather take your chances with the Worlport authorities? Or the bounty hunter?"

The princess opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced her with an upraised finger. "Less talking. More running."

They increased their speed and turned left. If Leia had thought she was in a bad part of town before, she had a rude awakening when they turned the corner. This was very obviously Worlport's red light district.

Han's eyes lit up and they slowed down. "Ah, perfect!"

Leia turned her head to see what he was looking at, and her face fell. "I can't go in *there!*" she objected.

They were standing in front of one of the most run-down motels Leia had ever seen. She had heard about places like this but did not believe in them until now.

"Why not?" Han's irritation was really showing now.

She gave him an incredulous look, as though the answer should've been so obvious. Han then followed her gaze to a group of prostitutes who were standing in front of the other end of the motel.

Han grunted his disgust as he pulled her back around the corner, out of sight of any passers by. He stooped to the ground and grabbed the edge of her green brocade dress and examined it closely.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes widened in panic as she saw his hands pull apart the seam, making a long slit more than halfway up her thigh.

“I’m making it look like I’m about to get my money’s worth,” he said, going to work on the other side.

Her panic turned to complete distaste as she registered the implication. “If you think for one moment that I--”

“--wanna live?” Han interrupted, again turning her own statement around on her. “You need to get off your little pedestal, Your Holiness, and start thinking about survival. Nobody gives a damn about your courtly image here.” He punctuated the statement by removing some of the pins from her hair and tousling it a bit.

Leia was infuriated, but she wasn’t sure if it was because of the indignities she was suffering, or because Han was right.

They turned the corner. She took a deep breath, centered herself, and looked at him shrewdly. Leia’s sudden change in attitude was beginning to worry her companion. She helped herself to the contents of his front pants pocket and pulled out a couple of credits.

“What...?” he asked, confused.

“We should at least look like we’re negotiating a price, if that’s how it’s going to be.” She dug into his other pocket and pulled out some more credits. Leia looked sadly into the contents of her hands. “Unfortunately, it looks like you don’t have quite enough for me, do you?” she declared loudly.

He made a show of taking one of the credit notes back from her. “At least leave me enough money for the room, sweetheart. They charge by the hour, you know.”

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After all of that running, Leia had been looking forward to collapsing onto the bed for just a moment...

Until she saw the condition of the room. She was unsure if the dingy bedclothes bothered her more, or the unidentifiable smell that sort of reminded her of the pilots’ locker room on Hoth.

“This place is disgusting.” The disbelief in her voice radiated through the room.

“It’s not so bad,” said Han, making sure the lock was secured. “I’ve been in worse.”

“I don’t see how,” Leia commented. She busied herself with looking at the entertainment console. After a moment she made a musical selection and sat dejectedly at the room’s small table. The number was up-tempo, and a little abstract for Han’s taste, but really not that bad.

“You like this stuff?” he asked. She only regarded him with a withering stare. “Not that I’m saying there’s anything wrong with it,” he went on, pulling up the chair across from her. “I’m just surprised. People dance to this.”

“I like lots of things,” she told him, then changed the subject. “So what’s our plan now, flyboy?”

Han shrugged. “Hide.”

The princess didn’t know whether to be amused or irritated. Where the smuggler was concerned, irritation was often the path of least resistance. “I’m glad you were here to think of that,” she said, all sarcasm. “Can we come up with a real plan, please?”

Solo surprised her by not arguing further. “Well, the way I figure it, we should stay here at least a few hours. Let the heat die down a bit so the locals lose interest. Better to have just one person looking for us than twenty.”

“And then...?”

“Then we find some disguises and move.”

They were quiet for a moment, awkwardly looking at anything but each other. Leia distracted herself by examining her nails; Han traced invisible patterns on the table.

The pilot finally moved. Leia had been so engrossed in her thoughts she was startled. She saw him pull a deck of Sabaac cards out of his vest pocket.

“How can you think of playing cards at a time like this?”

He shrugged off her reproach. “Nothing else to do but kill time. Come on, what do you say? I’ll teach you how to play.”

Leia made a face. “I don’t think I could. But thanks.”

“Seriously. You got any better ideas? Come on.” He deliberately caught the gaze she was trying to avert. “It might be fun.”

“Well...”

Han took that as acceptance and began shuffling the cards. “Great. Hey--” He stopped short. “You got any money? That isn’t mine, I mean?”

She produced the credit notes she had taken from him outside and tossed them onto the surface in front of him. Then she reached into her pouch and pulled out a sizable wad of local cash. “Is this enough?”

Han had to choke down his surprise and excitement. It wasn’t often he came across an opponent so naïve, ripe for the picking. He tried to play it cool. “Yeah, I guess so... We don’t have a randomizer, but there’s another way to play without one.”

They anted up, and Han began explaining the rules and the various hands as he continued shuffling and dealing the cards.

Leia gave him a dubious look. “So this Idiot’s Array is tough to get?”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s how you won the *Millennium Falcon*?”

Han straightened and smiled his lopsided smile, obviously swelling with pride. “Yeah.”

“That figures,” she replied flatly.

Han’s face fell, and he tried to hide his disappointment in failing to impress her by examining his cards.

Leia took some out of her hand and slid them across the table. “I’ll take three.”

Han dealt her the cards, still undecided about his own. “So,” he began almost distractedly, “just what does a Princess of the Royal Court of Alderaan do for fun if she doesn’t play cards?” He discarded one and took another.

“Who has time for fun?” she answered, rearranging her hand. Satisfied, she threw another credit into the pot.

“Seriously,” Han insisted, vaguely intrigued now. “There has to be something. Hobbies?” He raised his eyebrows suggestively. “Boyfriends?”

“Seriously,” she maintained, trying to ignore his assertion. He matched her bet as she continued. “I trained all my life to be a diplomat and to become a member of the Senate, so I could try to effect change. When I found out about my father’s activities with the Alliance, I dedicated my life to furthering his work against greed and oppression and

fascism, so no, I had no fun, no hobbies, and no,” she bit, “boyfriends.” She threw another two credits into the pot.

“I’m almost sorry I asked,” he muttered from behind his cards, seeing her bet and raising another.

“Well now you know.” She hoped that this would close the subject, but it didn’t.

“No I don’t, “ he pressed, “because you haven’t told me why you haven’t had to beat all the boys of nobility off with a stick. But I guess with a great personality like yours, it shouldn’t be such a big mystery, should it?”

Leia was at the edge of losing her temper, but she was unwilling to give her companion the satisfaction. She resigned herself to give him the details he was after, if only to shut him up finally. “I had more than my share of suitors, hotshot. The few who weren’t just after my money were either lacking in intellect, or they—“ She stopped, suddenly realizing she’d gone further than she’d meant to.

“I call,” she said weakly, regarding the pot.

Han wasn’t having it. He leaned in closer. “Come on. They were what, Princess?”

She looked away, resigned and embarrassed. “They were all hands.”

Han started to laugh, despite the pained look on her face. Not wanting to cause her any undue distress, he recovered by telling her that he saw how that could be annoying.

He put his cards on the table. “Full Sabaac.”

Leia had no idea what had been in her hand any more. She put the cards down, still in a turmoil over revealing so much of herself. *Damn him!* She was a diplomat, as she’d just reiterated to him moments before. So what was it about him that he cracked right through her so easily? She’d definitely have to be more careful.

“Hey, you came pretty close,” Han said encouragingly, looking at the cards she put down, mercifully letting her off the hook from their conversation. He slid the money to his side of the table. “That was pretty good, for your first time. Your deal.”

Leia picked up the cards and started shuffling them absently. “Tell me,” she began, trying to lead further away from the unpleasantness of a moment ago. “I’ve been curious. Just how does a hotshot pilot like you come to be a smuggler?”

“The hours sounded good,” he said offhandedly as he picked up the hand she had dealt.

The princess spread her own cards out in her hand. “That’s not fair,” she said, the diplomat in her regaining control of the situation. She appealed to his sense of fair play. “I told you something about myself. What can it hurt?”

Han wouldn’t look at her. “When I was a boy, my career advisor said it was the only thing I would be qualified for.” He threw down his discard. “One.”

Leia obliged him. “I read your file,” she blurted. She watched him stop breathing almost imperceptibly then start again.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He threw a random amount of money into the pot.

She wouldn’t back down. “Your Imperial file. How do you go from being the hottest pilot at the Academy to running illegal shipments of spice across the galaxy and end up with a price on your head? How does a guy like you end up at the Academy in the first place?”

He shot her an exasperated look. “I got into some trouble as a kid. My old man gave me the choice of bailing me out and sending me to the Academy, or letting me go to prison. Some choice, huh?”

“What kind of trouble?” she prodded, matching his bet.

Han threw another credit into the pot. *Doesn’t this woman ever give up?* he wondered. “I got caught stealing speeders and selling the parts.”

It was her turn to laugh. “And why would you ever do a thing like that?” she asked incredulously.

“Pocket cash,” he answered shortly.

“Why did you leave the Academy?”

“It wasn’t so much me leaving as it was we mutually agreed that I shouldn’t come back.” Clearly his frustration was boiling to the surface. “I don’t like talking about it.”

Leia gave him that. “So after the Academy...? How did you get into smuggling?”

He let out a deep breath. “I needed a little more than pocket cash, and some of my old contacts fixed me up with running some errands. That’s pretty much it.” He finally really looked at his cards for the first time and saw garbage. “Fold.”

Leia smiled and grabbed the money from the center of the table. “This game is easier than I thought.”

Han rolled his eyes and picked up the deck. "So about those grabby suitors..."

She anted up. "In your dreams, flyboy."

"What?" he said innocently. "I'm fascinated now. Just what is Her Highness looking for in a man?"

Leia threw away her discards. "Nothing. Two."

Han pushed a couple of cards her way. "Oh, come on."

"Really. To say I was looking for something in a man would imply that I'm looking for a man at all. I'm not."

Han looked genuinely surprised. "So you're looking for a woman! Now I understand why you won't give a good-looking guy like me the time of day."

Leia almost blew, his arrogance too much to take. "I'm not looking for anyone, Captain Solo. And even if I were, it would be none of your business!"

"Hey, look, I'm sorry," he said, his voice conciliatory. "I didn't mean to overstep my boundaries."

Leia visibly relaxed and studied her cards. Her expression looked as though she was almost ready to forgive him. Almost.

"But since I did," he continued, giving her a suggestive leer, "*do* you like girls?"

He didn't see it coming, but the stinging in his cheek told him he'd just been slapped harder than he'd ever been slapped before. After the initial shock wore off, he burst out laughing. This was the first time he'd ever pushed her that hard.

"I'm glad you think it's funny," she said tightly.

"You're right," he said, sobering. "I should've known better. But you can't think you have me believing that you're a complete prude. I know all about girls like you."

"Girls like me?"

"Yeah. You act so uptight and refined and repressed on the outside, but inside, you're wilder than the girls who advertise."

She just stared at him, expressionless.

"Come on," he said softly. "Admit it. You feel it."

The princess leaned in closer, a huskiness in her voice that wasn't there before. "You're absolutely right. I *do* feel it, all the time." She straightened, her aristocratic air back in place. "Just not for you."

For Han, the conversation had just taken an interesting turn. "Who said anything about me?"

"No one," she said defiantly.

"No, not no one. You did. But that's okay. It's nice to know you're thinking of me." He threw some more money into the pot.

"Why do you have to do that?" she asked quietly.

"Do what?"

"Act like a savage." She matched his bet again.

"Don't put this all on me, Your Worship. You could be nicer, too. In fact, the nicer I try to be to you, the more hostile you get with me and I'm getting tired of it."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off.

"No. No. I think it's high time you started behaving like a human being towards me." He looked down at his hand and spread his cards out on the table. "Full Sabaac!" he spat. He moved to grab the pot, but she put a hand on his arm to stop him.

"And I think it's time for you to stop making assumptions about me." She fanned her cards out on the table. "Idiot's Array." She reached around him and took the pot.

Han looked down and realized that he was now left with exactly two credits, and Leia had a pile that probably wouldn't fit into her pouch. It wasn't like him to not pay attention to his betting that way. His confusion cleared and he regarded her suspiciously. "Hey, how come I feel like I've been hustled?"

She smiled coyly at him. "Because you have."

"But you said you didn't know how to play..."

"No, Captain. You assumed you had to teach me how to play. And that's why assumptions can be dangerous."

Stunned, Han began to laugh harder than he had in a very long time. The princess was full of surprises, and some of them were proving to be good ones.

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They had conversed quietly for a while longer, without the cards to hide behind. The pair discussed relatively neutral topics like art, music, and philosophy, continuing to surprise one another: he, occasionally at her tastes and her sometimes well-grounded point of view; she, that he even had an opinion at all on such matters. It seemed for the moment that there was an unspoken truce in place. One would almost dare say they had learned to enjoy one another's company, or at least make the best of it.

Although neither voiced it, it had occurred to both how strange it was that until now, they hadn't really gotten to know each other at all in the last few years, even though they had spent plenty of time in close proximity. Of course, this was also the first time that neither Luke nor Chewbacca had been around to serve as a buffer for their strong wills and intense personalities.

Han glanced at the chrono and stretched. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting hungry."

"What do you suggest?" she asked.

"Well, we're going to need some different clothes any way. I was thinking I'd go out and get us some, and grab something to eat on my way back."

"And leave me here all alone?" she asked incredulously.

"You'll have your blaster," he said reassuringly. "Besides, over an hour ago you would've loved it if I went out and got my ass shot off."

"You know that's not true," she said with feigned impatience.

"Bet me," he challenged, then became facetious. "Oh, that's right. I can't take that bet. I don't have any money any more."

Leia was disappointed that the conversation seemed to be going that way again. She reached into her pouch and handed over his credits, and then some. "I never intended to keep your money. Besides, you're going to need some for clothes and food."

He snatched it from her hand and headed for the door.

"Wait!" she said hastily and gave him more bills.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"I need some makeup."

"What?"

“I need makeup,” she repeated.

“I heard you,” he said. “And I think you’re really funny.”

She pleaded with him. “I left all my things behind where we were staying. You want me to be disguised, don’t you?”

She had a point and he hated it. “Alright,” he conceded and made for the door again.

“And a hair brush.”

Han stopped, slowly turned back toward her again, irritation beginning to creep up his spinal column and move toward his brain. “A hair brush,” he repeated.

Leia nodded, aware she was treading into dangerous territory. “And some styling aids.”

“Styling aids? Absolutely, Your High Maintenanceness! Would you like me to find you an entourage of stylists and makeup artists, too? Or would it just be easier if I had them move the salon here?”

She shook her head and said quietly, “Just get it for me, please.”

Han reached over and snagged a couple more bills from her, muttering to himself the whole way to the exit. “Styling aids...makeup...the only royal thing about her is the pain in my--”

“Be careful!” she called out after him, ignoring his complaints.

Leia sighed, finding it mercifully quiet when the door slid shut behind him. With that, she grabbed her blaster and headed toward the ‘fresher for a shower.

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A short time later, Han returned as she just finished getting cleaned up.

“Leia, I have your stuff,” he called out. His attitude seemed to have turned around completely in the time he was gone, and the use of her first name instead of some irreverent misuse of her title was not lost on her.

The princess opened the ‘fresher door slightly and extended her arm.

Grinning to himself, Han held the bag just out of her reach.

Sensing his motive, she strained to get her arm to stretch just that much further. Successful, she grabbed the package from him and her arm made a hasty retreat back into the ‘fresher.

Still smiling, he mentally did a countdown as he began unpacking their dinner and setting the little table.

Three.

Two.

One.

BOOM!!

The ‘fresher door opened and he was greeted with a full view of what he had only tried to get a glimpse of earlier: Leia’s hair was bound up by a towel, and she had another one wrapped around her body as securely as she could. Clutched in her hand was a bundle of red, the outfit he’d purchased for her.

“Very funny,” she said. “Where’s the rest of it?”

“Where’s the rest of what?” he asked innocently.

She gave him a disapproving glare. “Don’t get cute. It doesn’t suit you.”

Han put a hand to his chest in a mock gesture of pain.

“Where’s the rest of it?” Leia demanded again.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” he insisted. “That’s your costume, and we’re goin’ to the ball.”

The smuggler couldn’t help his amusement as she opened her mouth, probably to say something insulting, and then thought better of it as she disappeared back into the ‘fresher.

“And hurry it up in there,” he called out to her. “Your dinner’s getting cold and I still have to get cleaned up, too.”

He was answered only with an angry clattering and slamming of the various womanly tonics and potions he had wanted no knowledge of, yet had been forced to procure.

Sometimes he really loved being what she called a “savage.”

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After what seemed to be an eternity, the ‘fresher door opened. “This is stupid,” he heard her say from inside. “I don’t want to come out.”

Han threw the last of his dinner cartons into the recycler. “Aw, come on. It can’t be that bad. Besides, you’ve got to let me in there sometime.”

He had purchased the outfit, but he was not prepared for what he saw. He admitted to himself that he had been purposeful in his selection, and his motives had not entirely been centered on their anonymity. He was annoyed and wanted to see her squirm. He was curious and he wanted to see her as a regular woman.

Solo was not expecting to be left breathless. His face slowly evolved into the most charming smile Leia had ever seen.

She was a vision in crimson and skin. Han could see from the deep, plunging neckline and the cutout stomach that not only did she have a nice figure, she was also very well-defined.

He motioned for her to turn around and she self-consciously complied. The panels framing the cutout back and the low-riding pants hugged every curve in just the right way.

Her hair was much simpler than Han was accustomed so seeing it, and he had to admit to himself that he liked it. She had most of the front and sides pulled up away from her face to form a cluster of curls at the crown, the rest cascading down in waves past her shoulders. Her makeup was heavier than usual, which was fine for now, but he found himself missing her customarily subtle paint job.

“I look silly,” she said.

“You look beautiful,” Han corrected when he found his voice.

He watched a flush of color crawl up her neck and spread over her face as she averted her eyes. Han didn’t think he’d ever known her to be so shy, but then this was the first time he’d ever seen Leia so completely stripped of her Senatorial persona.

He grabbed her hand and pressed his lips to it. He felt her stiffen but she didn’t quite pull back. “Seriously,” he went on, “you really class it up.”

With a wink he moved into the ‘fresher, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

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Leia picked at her dinner while she waited, but she was too jittery to eat much of anything. It was bad enough to be hiding from a bounty hunter, but oddly, that wasn't what seemed to be bothering her.

Instead, she found herself mentally replaying what had transpired between Han and herself in the last few minutes before he left her to get cleaned up. What *was* that, any way? She chided herself. He had her blushing like a schoolgirl and that was just not acceptable.

The clothes he'd brought her to wear weren't even bothering her as much as she thought they would at first. Leia liked to think that she was comfortable in her own skin; it was just that she was not accustomed to showing so *much* of that skin to everyone, let alone that scoundrel Han. Despite his flattering comments at the end, she was sure that his choice was meant to be some kind of sick joke, so she resolved to wear it with her head held high in spite of him.

Still, something about the attention he gave her felt different somehow. Different from how he had treated her before, different from other men...different from Luke. It set off something inside her that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Luke was infatuated with her, she was sure of that, the way he followed her around and the way he looked at her. There was a gentle innocence about the guy that she couldn't help but adore, but it failed to stir any romantic feelings inside her. He was a nice man, and were they to become a couple it would be a virtual fairy tale, but her affections for him just didn't go that way. They were more those she'd feel for a best friend, or a little brother.

She wasn't sure if Han even liked her or not. When he flirted with her she didn't know what it was all for. Sometimes it seemed to be just for the sake of pushing her buttons, to get a reaction, and she'd swear, to keep her arguing just so she'd stay in the room longer. Other times it seemed gentle and almost sweet, and to be quite honest, those times made her more nervous than when he would just make a full-on pass at her. Sometimes he would make her absolutely tingle when he talked to her, like just now, no matter how hard she tried to push those feelings down. It was a curious sensation, but...

But she was a leader of the Rebel Alliance and had no time to pursue a personal relationship. Besides, why would she want one with a common criminal any way?

Well, not common, she amended. And maybe not a criminal any more. After Han and Luke had rescued her from Vader's clutches on the Death Star, the smuggler had claimed that he was going to just take his reward money and leave. It looked as though the Alliance would never see Han Solo or Chewbacca again, but they had returned for the last moments of the Battle of Yavin, their timely assistance making a difference for Luke, enabling him to deliver the final devastating blow to the Death Star.

Han had been around ever since. At first he had made noises about wanting to be well-compensated for his trouble, but over time his prices had gone down and the number of complimentary services he'd thrown in had increased, especially when it came to ferrying Leia around, she'd noticed.

At first she'd wondered if he really did have a social conscience in there somewhere, but these days she suspected it had more to do with—

Her reverie was interrupted when the 'fresher door opened and she heard Solo whistling to himself. She purposely avoided looking in his direction when he came out, staring instead at the cold bits in the take-away container in front of her.

Leia wasn't able to avoid him forever, though.

"So what do you think, Your Highness? Do I clean up pretty good or what?"

"Amazing what happens when you use a comb." She winced internally the moment it was out of her mouth. She had only intended to tease him a little, but she worried that her words had come out more harshly than she meant out of habit. After a couple of years of verbal tug-of-war with the man, it was hard to remember the fragile time-out that was in place for the moment.

"Careful," Han cautioned, "or I'll take back all the nice things I said about you." His somewhat playful tone let her know she hadn't really offended him.

Leia became a little alarmed when she saw him start to shove their clothes into the recycler. "What are you doing?"

He held up the dress he'd torn in the street. "You didn't really want this back, did you?" Unable to resist saying something suggestive, he gave her a pondering look. "Unless you wanted to save it as a reminder of our first night alone together..."

"Burn it," she said before he could go any further. Something compelled her to watch him closely to make sure her underwear also made it into the recycler.

Satisfied, Leia picked up her blaster pistol and debated what to do with it. She watched Han as he slung on his holster and checked his gun for readiness. She could see his muscles move beneath the soft fabric of the deep blue shirt he wore, and the black trousers that now lacked the Corellian blood stripe.

She had to admit, he did look handsome. For Han.

Stop that! Leia mentally corrected herself. What was the harm in acknowledging that she found him attractive? He was, after all, a good-looking man, despite his big ego and occasional lack of manners. It wasn't like she was going to *tell* him that.

She studied his face for a moment, just trying to figure out how it was he could make that easy going lopsided smile that she found so charming. Her eyes worked their way down to his chin and landed on that scar for what had to be the millionth time. One of these days she would have to—

“Princess, are you alright?”

What? Damn! He’d caught her staring! On top of it, he’d been talking and she hadn’t heard a word he said.

“Fine,” she answered quickly. “I was just wondering where I was going to put my blaster. I don’t think my holster will stay on. This fabric is slippery.” She hoped she’d played it off well enough, but that sideways grin returned and told her she probably hadn’t.

Grinning, he grabbed her blaster and tucked it into the front of his pants. “We’ll just leave it here, for safekeeping.” Instead of harassing her for her indiscretion, he merely repeated himself. “I was saying that we should be okay with our blasters as long as we don’t go into any casinos. And another thing: we’re just Han and Leia tonight. Titles will get us into trouble.”

Leia nodded. “So where are we going?”

“I know a good hiding place not far from here.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small silver object encrusted with blue stones of some sort. “Here.”

She took it. “A compact?” Why was he being so nice?

“So you can check behind our backs, but look like you’re checking that pretty face of yours,” he explained.

“You sure think of everything,” she said dryly. The princess shook her head and dropped the portable mirror into her pouch with the rest of her makeup. She was somewhat miffed at her own presumption that Han would be giving her a gift for its own sake...yet part of her mind stayed focused on the fact that he had just said she was pretty. It pleased Leia in a way she hadn’t felt before.

“Ready?” he asked, offering his arm.

She took it hesitantly and nodded. Regardless of their destination, she was glad to be leaving that small, dark, filthy room.

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All of Leia's senses were overwhelmed as they walked through the door.

It was dim and somewhat smoky. In front of them were tables and booths where humans and others sat as couples or groups, talking and laughing with their drinks in front of them. To the left was a huge bar with various beings crowded around it.

Beyond it all was an enormous dance floor, dark except for the occasional strobe of white light or flash of color caught in one of the giant mirrors. Leia swore that even through the smoke she could smell the sweat of dozens of species as they all seemed to pulsate as one to the driving *thud!* of the music. She saw all sorts of hands and tentacles and other appendages waving in the air, as though the dancers were reaching out to touch something she could not quite see.

For a fleeting moment, she wondered if she could touch it, too, if she joined them.

Han steered her toward the bar. Leia couldn't hear what he ordered, and she almost dropped the drink he handed her, as she had not taken her eyes off the dance floor for more than a few seconds at a time.

The pilot followed her gaze and looked back at her. Where he expected to see disgust and condescension, he saw instead wonder and amazement.

"Here, drink up," he said.

She took a sip. At first it was cool and fruity, but it gave a warm glow to her stomach as the alcohol went to work. It was quite pleasant, all and all.

Leia noticed Han had something different in his glass. Probably some kind of ale you could chew, she guessed. "What is that?"

"Water," he answered.

She regarded him suspiciously. "Water? And you gave me--?"

"A drink that you need," Han finished for her. "Sweetheart, you're always so uptight and you're going to blow our cover if you don't relax a bit, have some fun."

Leia looked at her glass with a newfound resentment. "How can you think of fun at a time like this? We're supposed to be hiding."

"You're right. And we're hiding. Nothing wrong with having some fun while we're at it, is there?"

Han touched her chin and tipped her face up towards him. *Such brown eyes*, he thought as he locked his with hers. He saw fear in them, but of what he wasn't sure yet. "Look, I

hardly ever drink much as a rule. I'm a pilot—I can't go into space all liquored up. I just want to stay clear-headed in case we need to get out of here fast."

She looked down at her glass apprehensively.

"Hey, you won't get messed up," he assured her. "I promise. I won't get you drunk and take advantage of you or anything. Unless you ask nice, that is."

Leia bit back the retort that formed on her lips, instead chasing it down with a swallow from her glass.

"Atta girl," Han said, surveying the room. Leia resumed her people-watching, eyes again transfixed onto the dance floor.

After a moment Solo sensed her almost trance-like state. "Anything wrong?" he asked her. Maybe that drink *was* too strong. A tiny thing like her could be a real lightweight.

She shook her head. "They're just so full of life," she answered distantly.

"Come on, sweetheart," Han said, disbelief crawling into his voice. "They had dancing on Alderaan."

Leia disagreed. "Not like this. Not at court functions and Senatorial balls. This..." She sighed, searching for words. "This is alive and passionate."

Han looked into the crowd and truth be told, he really had no idea what she was talking about. Normally he didn't like places like this but if the princess saw passion there, so be it. She was actually starting to loosen up and right now, for some reason, she could get him to go along with just about anything.

Her glass was almost empty. He took it from her hand and put it on an abandoned table nearby. He grabbed her slender fingers into his and began to lead her away.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

Han nodded toward the dance floor. "Out there."

"You like to dance?" She felt an odd mixture of hope and amazement.

"Nah," he answered simply. "I like not getting killed, though. We'll have better luck getting lost in the crowd out there than in here."

Leia couldn't understand why but she was a little disappointed that this was not yet another attempt to make a move on her. *Assuming the others are all real*, she told herself.

Curiosity had the better of her, though, and she followed him deeper, deeper into the crowd. At the moment she felt like she'd follow him anywhere. Leia didn't know why, nor did she care.

Satisfied that they were sufficiently buried, Han stepped around to face her. For a moment it looked like the shy and uncertain Leia was going to come back, but with a breath she looked around her, closed her eyes, and began to move to the music.

Solo watched her with great interest. Leia's motions were tentative and self-conscious at first, but at that moment the music changed and he could tell that she liked it better. Her feet followed the pulsing rhythm but her body rode the delicate and ethereal melody.

Han began to wonder where she learned to move like that, but he reasoned that she must have had some sort of formal training at the palace. Plus, there was the HoloNet. The princess had grown up sheltered, to be sure, but it wasn't like she'd been living under a rock her whole life. He imagined she had to have seen the Popular Entertainment Channels at some point.

He could see Leia reach deeply into herself and slowly let go. She surprised Han by moving with a sensuality he never before imagined her to be capable of. Right now he guessed she could bring sensuality to a funeral march.

No normal human male ever really liked to go dancing, Han had been heard to say on a few occasions. The only times he ever went willingly were to pursue a lady, and to enjoy watching her.

But watching Leia now was a revelation for him. Before today, he would've described her many different ways: bossy, bullheaded, sassy, cute, brave, idealistic, brilliant, stubborn...the list went on.

Now he was faced with considering adjectives like sexy, desirable, delicious, and just plain, well...*damn!* As he watched her stomach muscles flex and her buttocks shift, he wondered if she knew she was torturing him. At just the right point in the music Leia moved her arms with a flourish and arched her back, and Han couldn't help but notice how perfectly the soft red fabric clung to her breasts. Seemingly unaware of his observations she smiled at him through half-opened eyes.

Ouch! Han briefly wondered if the princess had similarly wrecked all those "suitors" she had mentioned earlier.

He had found women desirable before, that was no secret, but this was the first time he could recall being tormented by a woman who was simply being, well, herself. And it was more than simply the lust of wanting to get next to that nice body and that pretty face. No, now that he thought about it, she'd had his attention ever since she told him, "Into the garbage chute, flyboy!"

Better slow down, partner, he told himself. This had been his idea, and as much as it pained him to take his eyes off the princess even for a moment, he needed to pay more attention to their surroundings. Now he became aware that Leia was on the receiving end of appreciative stares from almost every male in sight. Han began to feel territorial and a flash of--jealousy? Nah, that couldn't be it--ran through him because he knew all too well the thoughts behind those predatory looks.

Time to reel her in a bit, he decided. He moved in closer to her, and he felt her shiver almost imperceptibly as he put one hand on her shoulder and another on her waist, their bodies now touching.

When Leia looked up at him questioningly, he leaned down so his lips could make contact with her ear. There was that shiver again! "Having fun?" he asked her.

"Don't laugh," she said over the music, "but I've always wanted to do this."

Han could tell, but he didn't say so. "I won't laugh. But I think this is going to work better if we look more like we're on a date."

Han expected a fight, but instead she turned her back toward him and relaxed into him. The hand that had been on her waist was now spread over the bare flesh of her stomach, and she matched his rhythm. He could feel that Leia's breathing was somewhat labored. They weren't moving very fast, so he suspected it had very little to do with dancing. He briefly caught the fragrance of her hair and he swore that she would be able to feel his heart threatening to pound right out of his chest. Come to think of it, he was having a little trouble catching his breath, too.

It would be so easy for him to get lost in her now. He marveled at how perfectly her body fit into his despite their height difference, how it felt to have her move against him, how his fingers tingled as he ran them over her stomach and hips and arms and shoulders.

As he reflected on how much he liked this carefree and trusting Leia, he caught something out of the corner of his eye. Someone, a violet-skinned Twi'lek, was watching them with way too much interest. Han wasn't sure, but that tentacled cranium looked familiar...yes; Solo had noticed him earlier in the day, when Leia was looking at jewelry through one of the shop windows.

He leaned down to speak into her ear again. "We gotta move."

At first she dreamily opened her eyes, but the seriousness of his voice and expression woke her right up. Their spell broken, he felt her spine straighten and her body tense up when she, too, recognized their audience of one.

So much for that, thought Han. He said, "Don't look like you know we're being watched. Just relax, and we're going to dance our way to the back door, got it?"

She answered with a small nod.

“It’s going to be okay,” he assured her. “It’s crowded enough maybe we can lose him. When we get to the door, grab your blaster and run like hell, alright?”

Leia nodded again.

“Okay, here we go.” He steered Leia through the crowd towards the exit, trying to look as nonchalant as possible.

It wasn’t working. The Twi’lek in question disengaged from his dance partner and drew his blaster to follow.

“Bantha shit!” Han spat under his breath. Leia’s mind echoed his sentiment as she drew her blaster from Han’s waistband. Han had his out, too. They dropped any pretense of subtlety as he grabbed Leia’s hand and they ran for the door. There were screams and patrons scattered as a laser bolt slammed into one of the giant mirrors, shattering it to pieces.

Leia made no effort to hide her disgust. “Innocent people are going to get hurt!”

“I don’t think he cares, Leia.” He palmed the release for the emergency exit. The door slid open, alarms sounded, and the emergency lights came up in the club. Two more blaster bolts flew out the door past them. Han returned fire, finally having a clear shot.

Leia tried to scan the crowd for casualties, but it was just too chaotic for her to see anything.

“Come on!” Han barked, pulling her through to the alley. The emergency doors were supposed to stay open to let fleeing patrons out, but Han shot the release and the door slid shut. “That ought to buy us time.”

As they tore down the alley, Leia asked, “Who was that guy? Someone else wants you dead?”

“One of Cypher’s goons, I guess,” he answered testily. “Does it really matter?”

The alley spit them out into the street and they went left. Leia was about to suggest that they slow down, that they looked more conspicuous by running and dodging people, but part of her wanted to be as far away from that club as possible, so she just followed his lead.

They dodged right and kept going. “I think there’s some old warehouses up this way,” Han told her.

“You *think*?”

“They were here before they expanded the industrial district to the west,” he said. “It’s been a long time, but they were still there the last time I was here.”

Leia wasn’t sure she had much faith in his memory, but at that point she didn’t have much of a choice. Her legs were much shorter than Han’s but still she kept up, pressing on and matching his stride. She had shown him way too many moments of weakness lately, and she wasn’t about to add another one to the list now.

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“See?” Han said several moments later as he shot yet another lock to keep a door closed behind them. “I told you we’d be safe here.”

Leia rolled her eyes. “Great, flyboy. Now how are we going to get out when Luke and Chewie come back for us?”

Han gave half a shrug. “I’ll shoot it again.”

The princess gave him her *Of course, I should’ve known, you’re an idiot!* look as she nodded, collapsing onto a dusty palette. It was marginally better than lying on the floor, but that wasn’t saying much. “How much longer, any way?”

Han looked at his chrono as he sat down next to her. “They should be in communications range in about four hours. Getting tired of my company already? I thought we were just starting to have fun...”

Leia didn’t answer him. She crossed her arms and looked away. Han realized that there may be more to her body language than irritation when she shuddered.

“Cold?”

She shot him an icy look. “This getup you made me wear isn’t exactly insulated, if you haven’t noticed.”

So this is how it’s going to be, he thought. He’d seen some tarps in the corner when they came in. It was hard to see in the dim and dusty warehouse, the only light coming from street lamps and signs through a couple of high-up windows. “Come on, Princess. I thought we were getting along.”

“We were,” she agreed, “but then I remembered that you’re the reason I’m almost getting killed today.”

Han didn’t buy it. There had to be more to it than that. He suspected it had more to do with what had been transpiring between them all night, and there was only one thing to

do about it. “Yeah, well that’s not the only thing you almost got today, sweetheart,” he said with a leer.

Leia looked shocked and appalled, but her voice remained even as he came over with the tarps. “Why do you always have to ruin everything by making it sexual?”

He flashed her a charming smile after eyeing her up and down. “Why do *you*?” There was the briefest of pauses that told him his message had been received.

Predictably, she backpedaled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Han held the tarps back from her. “Normally I’d agree with you, but I’m not goin’ for it this time, sister. Admit it, you like me. I want to like you. I was *starting* to like you. You’re not so bad when you let a person in.”

“Give me that,” she indicated the tarp.

“Derailing the conversation? That’s a good one, Senator. Did you learn that in diplomat school?” He was not about to let her off that easily.

Outraged, she turned her back to him.

He dropped one of the tarps next to her and paced away. “You think you’re the only one who understands what it’s like being lonely and isolated?” he pushed. “I know you lost a lot, but--”

Leia abruptly stood and stalked over to him, standing as closely to nose to nose as their height difference would allow. “I lost my family,” she hissed. “I lost all of my friends. I lost my career. I lost my property and my money. I lost an *entire planet*!” Her voice quaked but she would not give him the satisfaction of tears. “What could you possibly know about loss, Captain Solo?”

Han stood his ground. “At least you had those things to lose. Some people don’t have parents or jobs or money in the first place.”

“I know there are those—“

Solo jabbed a finger in her direction. “You know what your problem is? You think you’re better than everybody else. You look down your nose at me because I look out for myself, but you’re the one always walking around acting like you don’t need anybody. You don’t let anybody in. You don’t let anybody get close, because feelings are just too damn inconvenient. *You’re exactly like me*, and that’s gotta be pissing you off!”

“I’m nothing like you!” she countered.

“Oh, that’s right. It’s different because you do it for the Alliance. You’re a living martyr.” Han shook his head. “You look pretty arrogant up there on that pedestal of personal suffering.”

Leia’s voice was hoarse with her struggle for control. “Personal suffering...! Let me tell you about suffering, flyboy. Do you think I was napping that whole time I was in my cell on the Death Star?”

Han had never considered what she might’ve endured then, mostly because he already knew what the Imperials could do to a pretty young girl like her, and he didn’t want to imagine her that way.

“They tortured me,” she pressed on. “They shot me full of drugs, shocked my nervous system...they even kicked me. And I never told them anything, about the Alliance, or about my father.” She took a deep shuddering breath and a tear escaped the corner of her eye. “They threatened me. They were going to destroy Alderaan if I didn’t tell them where our base was. I lied to them. I had to tell them something. They showed me Alderaan on that screen and all I could think of were my father and my friends and all those innocent people...”

There it was: the hell that Leia clung to for protection. Her reason for living and her reason for wanting to die. This is what continued to drive her, both in the Alliance and personally: the compassionate desire for no one to suffer the same fate, the primal need to make the Empire pay. She pulled her tarp tightly around her, as if to compensate for how naked she felt in front of him now.

“I had no idea they made you watch...” Han felt like he was going to be sick.

Leia turned her tear stained face up toward him to meet his gaze. “I failed them, Han. I failed them all.”

Han felt so inadequate. He was sure she normally would’ve wanted someone like Luke around for a moment like this. He wanted to reach out to her, to hold her, but to be honest she ran so hot and cold these days Han couldn’t be sure of the right thing to do, and he knew that she was just too damn proud to give him a hint.

He settled for putting his hands reassuringly on her shoulders. “You haven’t failed anyone. How could you think that? You did everything you could.”

“It wasn’t enough,” she insisted. “And they paid for it.”

Han drew her in closer. The more she talked, the more he was convinced that he was the first person in three years to hear any of this. Leia’s arms encircled him and she sobbed into his chest.

“They’re all gone...” was all she could say.

Han stroked her hair gently. After a moment he said, “You asked about me and the academy before.”

Her tears slowed a little, curiosity piqued.

“If you think I’m a savage,” he said quietly, “you would’ve loved my old man. He was a real dirtbag. After my mom died he couldn’t even keep it together to get a job. He was too busy being drunk to notice anything I did, until the authorities showed up on our doorstep. I was stealing speeders and selling parts, mostly to buy food or to keep our life from getting repossessed. This was all before I was sixteen.” He stopped, not sure of where this was coming from or why. Maybe he wanted to remind Leia that she’d had a good life until then, or maybe it was just time to get some things off his chest, too.

Leia listened intently, not disengaging from him.

“We hit some real hard times, and I got picked up for underage gambling. They found some spice when they searched me. I was just trying to make enough money to get off that rock and get away from him. They were going to put me in prison; I guess they had enough of me by then. My old man didn’t want to lose his meal ticket so he pleaded with them to let me go to the Academy, that I could learn discipline there and stay out of trouble.” He snorted.

“That’s terrible,” Leia said, rubbing his back reassuringly.

“Yeah,” Han agreed. “Anyhow, what I’m trying to say is don’t sell yourself short, but don’t give yourself too much credit either.”

She looked up at him in confusion, unsure of what to say.

“I mean you’re tough,” Han told her. “Most people I know would spill their guts without much more than a direct question. They wouldn’t even be able to go one round with an Imperial torture drone. I gotta respect you for that. But you think you’re so tough that you can handle it alone. I had to, but you don’t. And you take on all kinds of troubles to keep from taking on your own.”

Leia started to argue but Han stopped her.

“I see what you do,” he said. “The pep talks with the pilots and ground troops. Every time Luke feels homesick you’re there. But you, you never unload on anyone. Until now.”

This was so awkward, but Leia had to admit that parts of it felt so right.

In all seriousness, Han said, “Leia, any time you want to talk about this...”

“I can’t--”

“You just did.”

That gave her pause to think. Han was right. Who else would she talk to? Everyone had problems of their own. Luke was a sweet boy who lost his family, too, but even though they were the same age he was just too young to understand much of what she carried.

Han, on the other hand, was a little older and had been around the galaxy. He’d seen much, and apparently experienced more than her narrow view of his lifestyle as a criminal had allowed her to imagine. She was pleasantly surprised to find that her optimistic side had been right all along: he did have a soul in there somewhere.

As though Han could pick up on her train of thought, he put on a slightly harder air, tempered with a bit of modesty. “Because, you know, it’ll save you the trouble of having to start over and tell someone else, I mean.”

Why is it so hard for you to just tell someone you care? she thought, but at the moment she didn’t have the strength to belabor the point.

Instead, she put a hand on the side of his head and drew his face down to meet hers. She planted a soft, warm kiss on his cheek. “Thanks, flyboy.”

He gave her a reassuring squeeze as he pondered how good that side of his face felt.

“Maybe someday you’ll stop giving yourself too much credit, too,” she said, “and tell me about your mother.”

“Someday,” Han said.

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Somehow, Leia had found enough peace to fall asleep in Han’s arms. Occasionally she’d mumble or stir. He would simply squeeze her, whisper that it was okay, that he had her and she was safe, and slowly dreams would take her again.

He had wondered before what it would be like to hold her as she slept, although the circumstances he’d originally imagined were far different from this. Oddly, he didn’t mind. He suddenly felt so protective as her deceptively slight frame clung to him.

Her lips had parted slightly in her sleep, and for a moment Han almost considered stealing a kiss from them--

“Han, do you copy?”

Solo's body jumped, his reverie broken by Luke's voice over the comlink. He pulled it out of his pocket. "I'm here, Luke. We were beginning to wonder if we were being stood up."

Leia sat up and stretched sleepily, her eyes squinting at the morning sun now coming through the windows. Han knew he should be coming up with an escape route, but all he could think of was how he missed her warmth next to him.

"We're at the spaceport," Luke reported. "Landing pad seven-A."

"It may take us a while, but we'll be there. We've had some company off and on."

Solo heard Chewie howl in the background as Luke said, "So we've heard. Should we come get you?"

"No," Han decided. "We made it this far, and I don't want to leave the *Falcon* unprotected if I can help it. We'll be okay. Just keep the engines on standby, will you? We're gonna want to get out of here quick."

"Copy that, Han. See you when you get here."

Han stood, then helped Leia up. "Ready?"

She nodded and watched as he drew his blaster and shot the door's control panel. Obediently, it slid aside to let them out.

Han stuck his arm out to keep her back as he checked the street for trouble. Finding none, he motioned for her to follow him.

They made their way through a maze of streets and alleyways, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Luckily the old warehouse was only about a fifteen minute walk from the spaceport and they didn't have far to go. As had become their custom, Han held Leia's hand, ensuring they wouldn't get separated and offering support.

Just about five minutes shy of their destination they hit a roadblock.

"Well, well, Solo," Cypher Bos crooned as he stepped in front of them, cutting them off. He was a somewhat heavysset human with shaggy dishwater hair, and teeth that matched.

Han glanced furiously around, looking for a way out. Every time he turned he saw one of Cypher's associates, including the Twi'lek from the club. "Hi there," Han said with a smile and a wave when he recognized their would-be assassin.

The bounty hunter recaptured Han's attention as he went on. "It's about time you showed up." He waved his blaster at Leia as a Rodian and the Twi'lek relieved them of

their weapons. “Who’s your lovely companion? I’ve seen her often but I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure...”

Han’s mind was racing. He didn’t like their odds, being outnumbered seven to two. There had to be something he could do. Time for some fast talking.

“I can explain everything, Cypher. I was heading for Jabba’s place to pay him, when this lovely lady asked me to give her a ride. Since it was on the way I thought what the hell, and--”

Solo was quieted by the barrel of Cypher’s blaster pressed to his nose.

“Save it,” the bounty hunter sneered. “Jabba doesn’t care and neither do I, as long as I get paid.”

“That’s a lovely thought,” Han said. “And here’s one for you.”

Before Cypher could react, Han punched him in the face and grabbed the bounty hunter’s blaster. Bos went reeling and Han spun to check on Leia. He saw her deliver the meanest right hook he’d ever seen to the Rodian’s face before being grabbed from behind by the Twi’lek.

Han freed her by slamming the butt end of his blaster into the henchman’s skull, right between the tentacles. Her assailant went down and didn’t move.

“You alright?” he asked her as Cypher stood and his squad converged on them. “Where’d you learn to hit like that?”

She spared him her most hateful look. “You’re next if we get out of this. What’s the matter with you? You could’ve--” Her face changed to a startled expression and before he knew it, she was pushing him down. A laser came sailing through where their heads had been. Han took aim, but the princess was already returning fire.

“What do we do now, genius?” she spat.

Solo honestly had no idea. He had been willing to take his chances in hand-to-hand combat, but this had evolved into a firefight, and a whole new set of complications to go with it.

Han fired a couple more shots and downed Cypher’s pal to the right. This opened up a small alleyway and a new hope for survival. “Over here!” he shouted to Leia.

They started backing up, ducking behind garbage bins and into recessed doorways, firing whenever clear shots between panicked bystanders permitted.

The bounty hunters' fire became more concentrated. While Han and Leia now enjoyed the advantage of cover, they were hindered by the confined space.

He saw Leia shooting ferociously across from him, retaliation for the blaster bolt that had almost hit her. It bothered him that he had dragged her into his fight. It would've been one thing to be in this situation alone, but he wasn't alone, was he? Reluctantly, he decided it was time to call for reinforcements.

"Luke! Chewie!" he barked into the comlink. "We could use some help down here."

"We're almost there," Luke answered. "We can see the fire exchange from here."

Han squeezed off a couple of shots. "The Force tell you we were in trouble?" he asked, half teasing and half not.

"That," the young Jedi admitted, "and the fact that Chewie knew better than to leave you alone with Bos running around out there."

Another blast landed between him and Leia, too close for comfort. "Well hurry up, will you?"

"We're coming up behind them now."

True to Luke's word, the fire directed at Han and Leia reduced as Cypher and his gang had new targets to worry about. The pair began to venture from their cover in the hopes of gradually making their way over to Luke and Chewbacca.

"Aw, hell!" Han exclaimed after a moment. The strategy of making Cypher's men fight on two fronts had been working at first, but they wised up and scattered.

Han could see that Luke had brandished his lightsaber and was deflecting blaster bolts furiously. His pal Chewie had picked up one of Cypher's goons and was throttling him with his large, furry hands.

Gotta love Chewie, Han thought as he picked off a human comrade of Cypher's. He heard a bloodcurdling scream from behind; Luke had probably gotten his assailant with his lightsaber.

Something was niggling at the back of Solo's mind, though. *Where's Cypher?*

Han spun in a panic. *Where's Leia?!*

"*Han!*" Leia's call cut him like a knife as he turned toward the direction of her voice.

"Leia!" He almost choked when he saw that Cypher had a hold of her. The bounty hunter had found another blaster, and he had it pressed to her temple.

Luke was already approaching, circling behind Bos. He had probably sensed Leia's danger through the Force. Sometimes that intangible connection between the two of them was an annoyance to Han, but in this case he welcomed Skywalker's help and didn't begrudge the boy his concern.

Chewbacca had moved on to another henchman and made short work of him, throwing him against the wall and knocking him out. Picking up on Han's rage, the Wookiee scrambled to help.

"Solo!" Cypher shouted. "You and your friends need to give up. Come with me and the girl doesn't get hurt."

"Let her go and I'll think about it." By now Chewbacca was at his side, howling angrily.

"And lose my insurance?" Bos laughed. "Try again."

By now Luke had positioned himself behind the bounty hunter and Leia. If Cypher took notice of his presence, he was too occupied with Han to care.

"If she so much as breaks a fingernail you're a dead man!" Han threatened. Only Leia's eyes betrayed the fear she felt, and he mentally cursed himself for putting her in that position. He was out of options. He didn't know how he was going to get her out of this.

Cypher was startled by the *snap-hiss* of Luke reigniting his lightsaber. The bounty hunter turned, dragging the princess with him.

"Let her go, Cypher," Luke said as evenly as he could, despite how much Leia's plight tore at his heart.

Leia gasped shakily as Bos pressed his blaster more firmly into her head. "Back off!" her captor demanded.

Chewbacca broke from Han's side, the three now surrounding Cypher, blasters pointed at him and lightsaber ready to strike.

"You don't have to do this, Cypher," Han pleaded. "I have the money. I'll come with you. Just let her go."

Bos turned back toward Han. Before he could taunt the smuggler further, Chewbacca rushed up and grabbed Cypher's weapon by the barrel. Leia shrieked as the blaster discharged wildly into the air.

Skywalker made a flying leap, grabbed the princess, and ran. The Wookiee wrestled the bounty hunter's weapon away, and Han started to beat Cypher with abandon.

“This’ll teach you to point a weapon at a woman!” Han said through gritted teeth as Cypher went down. But Han couldn’t stop there. He kneeled on Cypher’s stomach, picked him up by the front of the shirt, and continued his blunt-force rearrangement of the bounty hunter’s face, his eyes wild.

Chewbacca growled at Han to stop. Bos was clearly unconscious, maybe even on his way to being dead.

Luke and Leia edged closer. “Uh, Han...?” Skywalker said tentatively. “Han, I think you got him, okay?”

Solo turned a deaf ear to his friend and continued to pulverize Bos.

Luke looked at Leia, at a loss.

“Han,” she pleaded, “that’s enough. We have to go.” When it appeared he was going to ignore her, too, she moved to stop him, placing hands on his shoulders, but he shrugged her off.

Solo stopped his assault only long enough to say, “He’s going to regret doing that to you.” With that he began to beat Cypher’s head against the ground, tired of punching.

Leia didn’t give up. “I’m sure he already does. Stop that! I’m alright.”

Chewbacca had enough. He stepped in and pulled his best friend kicking and swearing off the bounty hunter. The Wookiee emphatically barked something at Han, and the man finally relaxed, looking almost entirely deflated.

Whether Han wanted to admit it or not, his friend was right. Although he had reason to be angry at Cypher for taking Leia hostage, he was not going to absolve himself of his own guilt for getting her into this mess by beating Bos to death.

Numb from adrenaline withdrawal, Solo was grateful that Luke and Leia didn’t understand Chewie’s language. This could’ve gotten even more embarrassing than it already was.

Leia came up and took his bruised and bloodied hand into hers, examining it for broken bones.

“Are you alright?” he asked her hoarsely.

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

He winced as her thumb found a tender spot just above the wrist. “You mad at me?”

She didn’t answer him.

“You still want to hit me?” he asked her.

Leia finally met his gaze. “I think your testosterone-inspired display hurt you way more than I could. You’re going to be paying for this one for a couple of weeks at least. Wiggle your fingers for me.”

Slowly, painfully, he complied. “Were you at least a little impressed?”

Han doubted it was a coincidence that at that moment, she found another tender spot to squeeze on. “Ow!”

She shot him a mildly amused look before turning to face Luke and Chewbacca. Chewie had his head tilted in curious observation. He knew it was only a matter of time before these two either got closer or killed each other.

Luke’s expression was one of barely concealed alarm mixed with the confusion of being left out of a private joke, which then turned to embarrassment as he feared being transparent to the princess.

“He’ll live, as long as he keeps his mouth shut for a while,” Leia informed them. “I’m ready to go.”

She turned toward the spaceport and began walking. The others followed. Luke scrambled to catch up to Leia as Chewbacca began to lecture Han on the finer points of paying one’s debts and pursuing women.

“Ah, shut up, you hairball,” Han was heard to say when Luke reached Leia’s side.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the ex-farm boy asked. “That was pretty scary.”

She gave him a reassuring smile. “I’m fine. That wasn’t the worst situation I’ve ever been in, you know.”

“I know,” he said.

Leia was uncomfortably aware of the fact he was staring at her, and he jumped like a startled womprat when she caught him.

“Uh, I see you went shopping,” he said timidly.

Confusion spread over her face. “What?”

Skywalker pointed to the revealing pantsuit she still wore.

Leia looked down and was almost startled to see her own navel. She'd practically forgotten. "Oh. Yeah," she said, not really wanting to discuss it, distressed from the attention it was drawing from him.

"It's, um, pretty," Luke stammered. "I like the color."

Bless him for being so sweetly clueless, Leia thought. "Thanks." She didn't want to hurt him, but she didn't have the patience for Luke's wide-eyed adulation at the moment. "So how did the supply drop go? Were you able to get all the supplies?" Never had she so desperately wanted to change a subject, aside from when Han was grilling her about her personal life.

But that was a whole different matter, one she didn't want to get started on again.

"Well, we almost lost the hyperdrive again, but Artoo was able to..."

Just beyond the spaceport, Leia could see the *Millennium Falcon* resting on its landing pad in the distance. She was begrudgingly grateful to see the old rust bucket. The sooner she got there, the sooner she could lock herself up in her temporary quarters, change into some real clothes, and escape the madness these men brought her...

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