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Her Son's Legacy
by Irene Heron

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Well, here I am. Site of my greatest triumph, some say. An obscure and remote planetary system, forgotten and unvisited except by tourists and the occasional scholar. Unremarkable in many ways, except for this ragged cloud of debris and the ruins on the fourth moon.

Debris, hell, who am I kidding? They deserve better than to be called debris. All one million one hundred nine thousand and seventeen of them. Yeah, Luke, you really deserve a pat on the back for murdering over a million souls. And the funny thing is, I used to think I did a good thing here.

He was alone in the observation lounge, standing in front of the great crystalplex window which framed a view of the Yavin gas giant and the green moon beyond. The holographic re-enactment of the battle was over, the spectators dispersed. Somewhere beneath him, in the bowels of the cruise liner, passengers boarded landing shuttles that would take them to the moon, an optional excursion to visit the rebel base in its crumbling temple.

It needed to be done, I know that. If we hadn't stopped them twenty years ago, thoroughly and completely, history would've been different. That moon would be a cloud of debris along with every living thing on it, instead of the Death Star. Most likely other planets would have suffered Alderaan's fate. Palpatine would have gone unchecked and Vader would still exist. He shuddered involuntarily at the image evoked by his thoughts. Cruelties would be suffered by billions, repression would flourish and freedom would have vanished long ago. There would be no new republic, no Jedi. Entire species, like Wookiees and Mon Cals, would still be slaves.

Everyone I love so dearly - Han, Leia, Wedge, Chewie, Lando, even Artoo and Threepio - would be long dead. I'd be dead, too, blasted out of space by my own father.

I've always known in that respect it was the right thing to do. I just never understood how to reconcile myself to so many deaths. I grew up an orphan, empty and aching and lost, as though a 'vacancy' sign blinked inside me where my parents' love should have filled me. And yet I made thousands, if not millions, of orphans in just one moment.

Nor did I ever reconcile myself to the acclaim I received for this act of destruction. I'm not proud of what I did. Oh, sure, I was full of myself for a little while, smug that I had been the one to do it, that I had accomplished what skilled veterans couldn't. My conceit didn't last long, though. Within a few days the newsfeeds were full of the Disaster at Yavin. Criminal act of unspeakable proportions, they called it. Callous and ruthless murderers disguised as revolutionaries, parading under the banner of liberation . . .

Sometimes I still see that unbelievably long long list of names scrolling out. Took hours to run the entire list. An exploration and research station equipped with defensive weaponry only, they said. There was no mention of a fully equipped battlestation capable of obliterating planets. Not a whisper of Alderaan. Nothing about a small farm on Tatooine. Enlistments into the imperial forces were at an all-time high for weeks after. Everybody was eager to wage war against a monster - me. He was no longer alone. Luke glanced over as a woman entered the lounge and assumed a similar posture, standing quietly at the viewport, hands gripping the support rail. Like him, she stared at the contracting cloud of debris falling inexorably into the gas giant's gravity well. There was nothing remarkable about her appearance, average in size, in perhaps her late sixties or early seventies, hair color faded almost completely into white. The careworn face and gentle blue eyes reminded him of Beru; his aunt would now be around this woman's age had she survived. The woman's demeanor was sober, a mixture of pride and grief dulled by the passage of time. A single tear made its way down her wrinkled cheek, testament to her sorrow. Luke turned his face away, granting both of them privacy for their respective silent obeisance to the past.

At his slight movement she turned to him, as though aware of his presence for the first time. "My son died here," she said, evidently unashamed of exposing her wounded soul to his inspection. The confession did not surprise Luke. He had grown accustomed to such unexpected confidences during his tenure as a Jedi.

"I'm sorry," he replied, acknowledging her loss. Was this one of the grieving survivors he had created so long ago?

"My older son," she continued, apparently prodded by random compulsion to unburden herself to a sympathetic stranger. "He was nineteen."

"Tell me," Luke suggested, searching for the purpose in their meeting. The pain he sensed within her was echoed in his own heart.

"His name was Nederon, but we called him Neddy. He'd just graduated from Avenel Institute and enlisted in the navy. Oh, but he was handsome in his uniform and so proud of his first posting. Only the best were assigned to the space station." She looked squarely into Luke's eyes, courageous in her honesty and heartache. "Does it bother you, that he served the empire?"

"No," Luke replied softly, sorrow that she felt the need to apologize for a long-vanished past knotting in his throat. "In many ways, the empire's goals were noble. If your son valued those goals and worked to achieve them, then he followed his true path."

"Yes, he believed in the New Order, in the vision. He was a technician, not a soldier. I like to think that once Tarkin ordered the destruction of Alderaan Neddy would have realized not everyone was working toward the same goals, and followed his conscience. But of course he never had the opportunity."

Luke bowed his head. So many deaths noted against my name. How many Neddy's were on the Death Star? Men and women who trusted blindly, believing in the promise of order, prosperity and stability, and recognized the evil too late. How many innocents did I wrong?

"I grieve for your loss." So much pain from one single, prideful act. She nodded, accepting his tribute with grace. "We first learned of Neddy's death on the newsgrids. The official notification didn't come until days later. It was dreadful to think that my son's death had been senseless, a wanton act of indiscriminate violence. I desperately tried to find meaning in his death, but failed."

She shivered slightly, whether with the chill radiating from the large expanse of crystalplex, or from her memories, Luke couldn't be certain. "My husband covered his sorrow with anger, as men do. Vandis, my younger son, was angry, too. He wanted to fight, to avenge his brother's death, so he lied about his age when he enlisted. He was only 16."

Ah, Force. Stripped of her loved ones, punished in my stead.

"My husband did not survive the war. Neddy's death changed him, and the war changed him more. He believed in the New Order, you see, believed in Palpatine's vision and promises. When the truth became known, little by little, he grieved again for the violations of trust. Eventually he could no longer tolerate the breach of faith and retreated into madness."

This time Luke had no trouble interpreting her gesture of rubbing her arms to warm herself as a reaction against painfully intrusive memories. "And I, who cared little for ideology, lost everything - one son dead, another given over to anger and hate, and a husband who became another burden rather than a source of strength. The love which once sustained our family disappeared - vaporized." Her voice trembled, then steadied. "Just like Neddy."

Luke remained silent, stunned by her heart-felt recitation of cascading misfortunes, viewing the past through yet another perspective. Never occurred to me what a betrayal that must have been to the true believers, he admitted to himself.

Oh, Lady, you don't know how I wish you had been spared this excess of suffering. Back then, I didn't stop to consider the cost. Even today, I still don't know what I could have done differently.

After a brief pause, the woman resumed speaking, her voice low and rough with remembered distress. "Grief so intense cannot be borne alone. I found a focus for my pain, someone to blame, and that was the only way I survived. I nurtured my resentment, treasured my grief, until they owned me and became my reason for existence. My pain consumed me."

"Whom did you blame?" he asked, trying to breathe around the constriction of remorse in his chest, wishing with all his soul that he might ease her agony in some small fashion.

"Luke Skywalker, of course." She sounded surprised that he would ask such an obvious question.

"You justly blamed the one who caused your son's death." His voice became bitter with accumulated guilt. It's back to me. Luke Skywalker. Jedi Knight. Farmboy with the Force. Man with the stained soul. I caused your pain. I killed your son. It was I who started the entire chain of suffering, and yours is but one story of more than a million.

I hear their voices at night, my meditations are disturbed by their faces. She made a sound Luke might've called a snort from someone else, although

from her it became a statement of self-criticism. "I was so relieved when I could put a face and name to the source of my pain. It made my life so much easier, to blame him and only him. I could point my finger and say, 'There! He's the one who destroyed my family and ruined my life.' Oh, it was so convenient to blame him."

Now she shook her head and sighed, taking on a different attitude entirely. "It took me years to recognize my error."

Luke lifted his face to hers, disguising his tension with a rigidly controlled expression and carefully measured gestures. "Why do you say blaming... him was an error?"

For the first time she smiled gently. "Because it was." She studied his face carefully, as though committing it to memory. Did she recognize him, or was he merely vaguely familiar in the way of celebrity? He was 40 now, no longer that youthful rebel terrorist, and had lived quietly for some years, away from public scrutiny. He was well aware of the changes in his appearance due to the passage of time; intimately familiar with the creases and scars carved into flesh over the years. The eyes that daily stared out of the mirror at him had become old before their time, witness to too many injustices.

"Blame became my crutch, my reason for living. As long as I hid behind blame nothing could hurt me." Her touch against his hand was tentative, as though unsure how it would be received.

"I wasn't whole for a long time. Vandis returned from the war a man who had made peace with himself. He did what I couldn't, took all his pain inside himself and accepted it, and then let it go."

"That's very difficult to do," whispered Luke. "Vandis must be an extraordinary man."

"Extraordinary only in the sense that we are all unique in our own way. He's really quite an ordinary man, compared to... Luke Skywalker, for instance."

Luke looked hard at her, but the face was guileless, her eyes candid and sincere. Is that it, then? Is being, well, ordinary for lack of a better word, the key to the whole thing? Is it because I am Jedi that I cannot find peace? Is it because I feel the web of the Force and know that when it is touched in one place the entire web trembles?

Talked to Wedge about it once. Asked him if he'd ever questioned his part in the battle of Endor. 'Yeah', he said, 'sometimes I think about the

construction workers, cooks, janitors and whores who were on the station. Those, I regret. I don't regret the soldiers, politicians and bureaucrats. But it needed to be done, and I'm glad I was in the right place at the right time. And I'd do it again if I had to.'

Wedge has a clear conscience, but he's a soldier, a true warrior. His perspective is different from mine. I went to Lando, too, but Lando's a gambler. He learned to weigh risks and accept losses a long time ago. His conscience is also clear.

While I'm relieved they do not struggle with this issue, I also envy them. "How did you finally release your pain?" he asked.

"One day I saw myself through my grandson's eyes. I was telling him a story about Neddy and Vandis when they were children. It was a happy story, about some mischievous boyhood prank, but Sandor asked me why I always looked so angry when I spoke of Neddy. Only then did I see that with every thought and word my focus was on blaming you, not loving my son."

So she had recognized him after all.

"Tell me, Jedi, why are you burdened with such pain? It surprises me."
"How can you say that?" he demanded, amazed. "I was responsible for more than a million deaths and all the attendant suffering. You blamed me yourself!"

"And I admitted it was a misjudgment on my part, born of fear and weakness."

She straightened her posture, a mother about to deliver a harsh lesson to a wayward child. More than ever, she reminded Luke of his aunt, the loss surfacing with abrupt clarity after so many years. In resonant sympathy, perhaps, to this nameless woman's pain.

"When I finally claimed ownership of my emotions, my anger evaporated. I absolved you of responsibility, but you have not forgiven yourself, I see. Why do you still belabor yourself with guilt after so many years?"

He shook his head, stubbornly refusing to articulate his frailties. "I'm glad you found your own peace, but it's my fault that such a painful journey was necessary in the first place. Your forgiveness doesn't excuse my crime. If I haven't made peace with myself, perhaps it's because my sin was so much greater. A Jedi is not morally superior. Why should you forgive me when I can't forgive myself?"

Exasperation lined her face. "How can you not forgive yourself? Time has given me perspective. The station was a hideous weapon. It needed to be destroyed. History and plain common sense tells us Alderaan would not have been the only victim. Yes, millions died, but billions were saved in their place."

She paused, obviously choosing her words with great care. "Your achievements since then justify the deaths - restoration of personal freedoms; stability, peace, and equality; an honorable government; a new Jedi Order to defend and protect the weak - that is Neddy's bequest. Don't dishonor it with pointless self-mortification. I once cheapened my son's life by my refusal to accept the greater significance. I won't permit you to do the same."

Anger flashed in her eyes. Luke saw the woman she had once been, and still was, strong and determined, yet equally gracious and forgiving.

"I was selfish in holding on to my anger, for I didn't see how I hurt the ones I loved, living and dead. You make the same mistake by possessively clinging to your guilt. Obsession over quantity has blinded you, caused you to lose perspective. Your focus is flawed - turned inward rather than outward."

Luke turned abruptly, tearing his gaze away from those knowing eyes. He wondered what he'd become, that he no longer recognized himself yet a stranger could so clearly read his soul. I have been foolishly arrogant in assuming responsibility for events I can't control.

Somehow Wedge and Lando, this woman and her son, had learned what Luke never had. That grief, regret and guilt had their proper time, place and function, but to allow them expansion beyond a set boundary would consume him and diminish those he loved and honored. Leia had known that, for she had long ago released her guilt over Alderaan.

Is this what Han and Leia hoped I would learn, when they urged me to take this pilgrimage? That in the company of strangers I would regain perspective? My love says I live too much in the past, that my horizons have shrunk. My sister thinks I have lost my path.

The woman spoke briskly now. "You must stop doing penance. Regret for the waste is proper but you are wallowing in it, reducing all those lives to an excuse for humility. Do not defile my son's memory in this way! Allow me the comfort of thinking that his death served a great purpose." Luke winced under the unexpected attack dredged from their mutual suffering.

"Once I blamed you. Now I see in your life, in each wondrous accomplishment and every small act of compassion, the purpose in his death. The good you do on a daily basis is what validates my son's contribution. I fear our sacrifice will become meaningless if you continue to be crippled with guilt, for it clouds the purity of your vision." He'd heard similar statements from others, but none carried the weight of her words. Her stature as his victim lent credence to her argument. Yes, he had used that guilt to spur himself, used those deaths to good purpose, and yet selfishly buttressed his own fears beyond all reasonable measure. It was past time to surrender the truth.

"His death brought me no honor," he protested feebly, the lame indulgence of the answer striking him as both absurd and untrue. Twice he had injured this woman, once when he caused her son's death and again when he squandered her bereavement. The second injury was by far the greater. Would he choose to wound her yet a third time, by refusing her gift of truth? Her generosity of spirit exceeded his own.

"Honor?" she retorted sharply. "What is your honor compared to my son's life? What was your intent that day? Were you serving the greater good or selfish goals? If you served the greater good, then why are you so tormented? Who are you, that you can devalue my family's pain?"

Who am I? I am a man suddenly buoyant with renewed purpose, soaring free from smothering guilt. Lady, I am grateful for your insight. Thanks to you, my horizons have expanded and my path is before me. My sleep will no longer be disturbed by this particular nightmare. You have shown me the disservice I do to their memories and to those who loved them. I accept the challenge you offer. Who am I? I am not the same man I was an hour ago.

He knew she watched his face carefully as he considered her words, doubtlessly searching for a sign that he comprehended and accepted the magnanimous obligation of her son's legacy. When he nodded and smiled, discarding the crippling weight of guilt, she read surrender and acceptance in his eyes, and began to weep tears of relief and joy.

"Thank you," he said, drawing her into a close embrace. "You have helped restore my faith in myself."

The woman hugged him tightly. "Thank you, Luke Skywalker. You have restored my son to me."

End

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