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Whither Thou Goest
by Michelle Slaughter

Leia Organa, the princess of Alderaan, slumped to the floor of her cell and allowed its coldness to seep through her skin and relieve some of the ache that had settled all over her body. Pain coursed throughout each and every nerve ending within her now, and the numbing effect the cold floor had was nothing less than a divine gift to her.

She was finished, and she knew it. Vader had used her up. His pain droid, the pressure points, the fire knives, the electro-jabbers...all these things had helped the Dark Lord accomplish his purpose. There was nothing left in her. Her strength was gone. So she simply lay on the floor, bruised and burned, her hands still shaking from the large amounts of the mind-weakening chemicals--among others--the droid had pumped into her, just thankful that it was all over at last. Vader could do nothing else to her. She was done. And now, she would die.

Of that particular fact she was certain. She would, indeed, die this night. But it did not matter. The Alliance was safe, and that was all she cared about. Her death was completely unimportant to her. Many had died before her. Many more would die yet. But freedom was, to her mind, worth the price. She would rather die than live as a slave to the empire's will. Her life in exchange for the safety of the Alliance--and therefore, the galaxy--was

a more than fair price by Leia's reasoning, and in this small way she would be free from the Empire's tyranny forever.

This did not mean, of course, that there were no regrets for the princess of Alderaan. She regretted deeply the fact that there was so much she could have done, or should have done, to help the Alliance along. Other people that she could have reached in the Senate with a little extra effort, whose minds she could have changed. And she regretted the moments of joy she lost to her sense of duty, the men she dismissed so casually in the face of her responsibility to her people. She regretted that she did not have one last chance to speak with her parents, to assure them of her love for them both. Would they ever know what happened? Had the Empire already given them some plausible tale to explain her death? Or was Vader planning to use the news of Leia's "arrest" to coerce Bail into telling them everything he knew in order to keep her safe? Did the Imperials even suspect Bail?

Too many questions, Leia's mind decided. *Relax. It's all over now. There's nothing more you can do here. Your job is finished. You're done.*

Yes, it was done. The end of the whole nightmare had come at last. Relief flooded through Leia's body relaxing all her muscles and numbing her mind against any further speculations. There would be no more pain. No more torture. No needles or mind probes or drugs or...

It's done with, her mind told her again. *No need to dwell on it.*

An ebony cloak hem swirled darkly around polished black boots as they stepped into the princess's line of vision.

His.

Leia closed her eyes briefly, willing them to vanish, to leave her to her death in peace. But then she opened her eyes and almost laughed aloud. What did she have to fear? The owner of those boots could not hurt her any longer. She was beyond his reach now, and there was nothing he could do about that. She was safe now. She had no reason to be afraid. She was simply unable to be afraid now.

Black gloves partially covered in white armor seized the young woman's upper arms and hauled her upright so she might face her tormentor, the Dark Lord of the Sith. Whatever psychological effect Vader had hoped this would bring about, however, proved useless. The girl could barely keep her eyes open, much less focus them on the menacing figure before her.

Vader's breath mask leaned in close to her face when he spoke. "Death is not an option, your highness," he rasped deeply. "You will not be allowed to slip away from me that easily."

Leia nearly smiled as she croaked, "Don't be so certain, Lord Vader."

"Give me the location of the main rebel base and I may be persuaded to consider letting you die. If not..." He trailed off, the silence that followed his words filled with meaning.

But Leia refused to give in. Not now. Her stubborn Organa pride had taken her this far, and she would let it continue to work for her. She shook her head weakly and told Vader, "That matter is out of your hands. You can't stop it from happening."

"Do not allow the pain to fool you into thinking so, princess," Vader responded coolly. "I have the knowledge and the compunction to keep you alive for quite some time. Save yourself any further pain and tell me where to find your rebel cohorts."

Vader looked pointedly to the open cell door, and Leia found herself following his gaze. Another pair of stormtroopers were guiding in a medical droid.

Leia eyed the droid only a moment before she turned her attention to Vader once more. She straightened herself as much as she could, managing somehow to summon her most regal gaze and bearing, her voice cool and calm as she said to him, "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm a member of the Imperial Senate and I was going home to Alderaan on a diplomatic mission."

Vader could not have been more disgusted. He had heard this phrase a dozen times over as he tortured this girl, and he was tired of it. How much longer would she continue to play this game knowing, as she surely did, that she could not win? She knew she would not last much longer, and certainly she held no delusions that she would last forever. Did she truly think that she could hold out until the rebels discovered some way to attack the battle station? Or did she truly believe she would die before she gave him any useful information? While it was true that her resolve and resistance were amazing to him, he knew she would give in to him eventually. Eventually, they all did.

"You are merely being stubborn, princess," Vader said accusingly.

Leia did manage a smile this time. "It's in my nature," she croaked, thinking that her parents would agree.

Vader stopped himself before he shook his head in frustration and straightened to his most intimidating bearing instead. "I can keep you alive for years, princess," he told her darkly, the voice issuing from his mask even more menacing than normal. "I can make you scream a thousand times over before you finally achieve death. Tell me where to find the rebels and spare yourself that torture."

Leia would have laughed if she had enough strength left in her to do so. Scream a thousand times? Not likely. There was not that much energy in her.

"Very dramatic, my lord," she rasped, "but to no avail. Your speeches are for nothing. You are wasting your time."

"We shall see," came the all-too-predictable answer.

Vader motioned to the stormtroopers, who then dumped Leia onto the metal slab that passed for a cot in an unceremonious fashion. Vader commanded the troopers to remain with Leia and make certain that the medical treatment was completed. As he turned to leave, he told Leia over his shoulder, "We are not done yet, princess. Not by far. Rest well and heal yourself. We have much to talk about, and there are so many more things I can show you."

With a sweep of his cloak, he disappeared down the corridor and the door slammed down behind him.

The med droid injected Leia with yet another chemical and she felt darkness closing in on her.

It doesn't matter, she told herself again. She fully believed that Vader was wrong and that she would die before the hour was up, much less the day. She believed this darkness was her final release, and she welcomed it. Every moment she lived was a moment of danger for the Alliance, a moment in which she might crack and give Vader some vital piece of information. She had managed to remain strong through the torture so far because she had to be, but she was not certain that she could continue to do so. She prayed for death over the last few hours. She would have begged for it if she had not thought it might give Vader some measure of enjoyment. Now, death was coming. She felt it.

But it was of no consequence. By now, General Kenobi and the R2 unit Leia placed the tapes in would have found each other and would be on their way to Alderaan. With any luck, they would be there already. >From there, it would be up to the rebels and Leia's father to retrieve the information and find some useful way to apply it to the destruction of this monstrosity of a space station. The rest--making sure that Vader did not learn the main base's location--was up to her.

Leia was determined to do whatever she could to keep Vader from learning anything about the rebels from her. She would endure whatever torture he put her through, but she would not, for any reason, betray the Alliance for which she, and her father before her, had worked so hard. She would not allow those lives to be ended by her own hand.

I won't let you down, Papa. I won't betray the Alliance. I swear it!

The thought brought a fresh surge of emotion to her, a poignant wanting to tell her father that no matter what happened, no matter what the empire said, she did nothing to aid them in their search for the rebels. But she realized, in this moment of wanting to speak with her father again, that he would already know that, that he would never believe any ill said about his daughter, so she quickly released her desire and fell into the darkness...

"All is ready, sir," Motti reported dutifully.

Grand Moff Tarkin smiled thinly as he turned to Vader. "The time has come," he said, his voice laced with a practiced superiority. "Now we will take the first step towards the ultimate goal of crushing the rebels once and for all."

Vader's voice was coldly quiet as he asked, "What makes you think this scheme will work? The girl has said nothing so far, and it is doubtful that she will at all."

"Simply because she has resisted your pain-inducing methods does not mean she will never speak," Tarkin responded. "You said yourself that her mind has probably been conditioned so. But there is something else you said that gave me *this* particular idea."

"And that was?" Vader prompted.

Tarkin watched the viewscreen with relish. "That it is her hope that the tapes can be used against us that makes her resistance so strong. If we threaten that hope, I believe she will break," he answered. "Threatening her home will threaten that hope, for where else would she send the tapes than to some trusted contact on her own homeworld? Perhaps she has even sent them to her father. Bail Organa is not quite the pacifist everyone believes he is."

"The princess will never consciously betray the Rebellion. You will be wasting your time. Suppose she does not believe your trick?" Vader countered.

"It is of no consequence," Tarkin answered glibly. "Besides, she will not take such a risk. She does not dare." He turned to Vader at last and said in his most commanding tone, "Bring her up. Escort her personally. I would rather she not have the opportunity to get herself killed before she and I have a chance to speak with each other."

Vader stood a moment more, the eyes behind his mask trained completely on Tarkin, then he finally inclined his head slightly and left the observation deck to fetch the princess.

Tarkin smiled as he watched the dark one go. It was not necessary for Vader to know everything immediately, but it was certain that the threat to Alderaan would not be empty. It was a bold action he was taking, considering that he was doing it without asking the emperor first, but he did not think his ruler would disapprove.

Alderaan was a hotbed of dissension for all its "peaceful" trappings. Bail Organa had not played host to dozens of delegates from newly annexed worlds to help make the transitions of power easier for them. Tarkin had it on good authority that what Bail was doing was counseling those diplomats and leaders, not to accept Imperial rule, but to *pretend* to accept it. He was telling them to be patient, that the Rebellion would free them. And, though Tarkin had no specific proof or anyone's word on the matter, he strongly believed that the royal family was funding many of the Rebellion's expenses, also. The Emperor would be well rid of Alderaan. It would make a perfect test target, and a wonderful tool of coercion, as well.

It was fitting, after all the trouble her father had caused Tarkin all those years ago, that Leia Organa would know one last torture before she died. And she would die. There was no doubt about that. Tarkin had already signed her execution order. But she would die knowing more pain than any other living being. Tarkin himself would see to that. It pleased him to no end.

Leia's strength surprised her. She was still alive, for one thing (Mattheu, the prince of Garon IV and a long-time friend, might have said she was simply too stubborn to die); and she was moving better now, though her hands still shook. She fought for control over that, but it was a battle she was steadily losing, though she had managed to make it less noticeable by curling her hands into fists. She kept her eyes forward as she walked, her gaze firm and her bearing as regal as she could manage.

Leia would not allow these men to have even the slightest pleasure by seeing her shoulders slump or her eyes glaze with tears at her pain. She knew

it would be all too easy to just collapse on the deckplates with the anguish she still felt, so she refused. She was, after all, a daughter of House Organa. She represented all her family members, past and present, and she could not dishonor the family or its name by taking the easy way out of a difficult situation. So she held her chin high, held the guards in a haughty gaze, and drew on the strength of her family's ancestors. She might not share their blood, but she was raised to share their pride. She would be strong.

Flanked by two guards with Vader leading the way, Leia wondered what was to come next. She imagined at first that she was being taken to be executed, but she quickly thought better of it. Vader would, she believed, follow through on his promise to keep her alive until he had the information he wanted from her. She had no idea, then, what all of this was about, but she knew that the Imperials could not possibly cause her any more pain than they already had. Anything else would simply seem like child's play.

Eventually, Vader led her to a large room streaked with linear lights and which held a wide, curved viewscreen at the end of the room. Leia took little notice of it, however and did not, thusly, see the blue and green gem of a world edging its way toward the middle of the screen.

Her attention was, instead, turned completely on a man who met her halfway across the floor. He was a thin man with what Leia could only call a hatchet face. She knew him all too well: Grand Moff Tarkin, governor of many outlying Imperial systems and, according to the Empire, a military genius. He was the living entity which personified, in just one man, everything that was the Imperial war machine at its coldest, harshest best.

And Leia despised him. This man had no scruples, no remorse. This man had been responsible for the Ghormann Massacre, and about a dozen others besides.

So, when Leia stepped up even with him, she gave him her tightest, coldest smile and inclined her head just a fraction as she snapped, "Governor Tarkin. I should have expected to find you holding Vader's leash. I recognized your foul stench when I was brought on board."

Tarkin smiled tightly, clearly unimpressed with Leia's bravery. "Charming to the last," he said in a tone which implied he was anything but charmed. He took her chin between thumb and forefinger, squeezing slightly as he continued. "You don't know how difficult I found it to sign the order to terminate your life," he said, clearly lying as his grip grew harder.

Leia twisted her chin out of his grasp, her soft brown eyes matching his flinty gray ones measure for measure. Her throat burned from lack of food or drink in twenty-four hours, a part of Vader's measures to wear her down, but

Leia was not about to back down and be silent. Not now. Not in front of this man.

Setting her jaw and lifting her chin in indignation, she retorted by saying, "I'm surprised you had the courage to take the responsibility yourself."

Tarkin sighed sorrowfully, telling her, "I am a dedicated man and the pleasures I reserve for myself are few. Of course, had you cooperated with us..." He trailed off, looking down on her with a condescending smile on his thin lips. "Lord Vader informs me you have been most resistant to our traditional forms of inquiry."

"Torture, you mean," Leia countered. She was feeling shaky again, but she attributed that to the drugs. Still, she wanted this whole thing to be over with. Tarkin seemed to be testing her strength, and she was not certain she was up to the challenge.

The Grand Moff simply shrugged off Leia's remark and turned away from her. He took only a couple of steps forward before he raised his voice for all to hear, though he addressed Leia alone.

"Princess Leia, before your execution, I would like you to be my guest at a special ceremony that will make this battle station fully operational. At the same time, it will usher in a new era of Imperial technical supremacy. This station," he said proudly, "is the final link in the new-forged Imperial chain which will bind the systems of the Empire together once and for all."

Fitting he should use the imagery of a chain, Leia thought as she watched him posture. *He's like some preening guu'ra bird, trying to prove he rules the roost.*

"Your petty Alliance will no longer be of any concern to us," he finished, stepping in front of her again.

Leia fixed Tarkin with a look of unadulterated contempt. When she spoke, it was with haughty defiance in a voice which was crisp and sharp. "Force will not keep the Empire together," she said. "Force has never kept anything together for very long. The more you tighten your grip, the more star systems will slip through your fingers." She gave him a measuring look before she said, "You're a foolish man, governor, and foolish men often choke to death on their own delusions."

The passion in Leia's voice told all present that this was no rehearsed speech. Her years on the Senate floor showed clearly, and she noted this with some pride, glad at last that Vader had not let her die on the floor of her

cell. It was better this way. She would die with dignity, a martyr to the cause.

Leia stared at Tarkin intently. He was going to kill her anyway, so there was absolutely no reason for her not to let him know exactly what she thought of him. Though he would pretend otherwise, Tarkin would remember Leia long after she was gone. In that final hour when the Alliance would claim their triumph over him and his precious empire, Leia's words would come back to haunt Tarkin, she knew. He would remember, and for how ever long he lived after that, he would regret.

Tarkin smiled down at her again, a smile without any true mirth to it. Looking half-amused, he said coldly, "It will be interesting to see what manner of passing Lord Vader has in mind for you. I'm certain it will be worthy of you. And of him."

Leia only smiled back, wishing this were finally over. She did not know how much more of this irritating man she could take.

"Once we demonstrate the power of this battle station," Tarkin continued, "no one will dare oppose the Emperor... not even the Senate. Before you leave us," he said, taking a few steps away from her again, "I want you to witness, firsthand, the power of this station. In a way, you have determined the choice of the planet which will be destroyed first."

He turned back to her now, staring down at her hard, willing her to flinch before his stony gaze. "Since you are reluctant to provide us with the location of the main rebel base, I have chosen to test this station's destructive power on your home planet of Alderaan." He turned to regard the viewscreen where Alderaan hung suspended in space, a small, true smile on his lips now.

Waves of shock rippled through Leia, spreading like fire through a dry, grassy plain. She felt as if she had been hit in the face with a lead glove. He could not mean it! Alderaan...a military target? It wasn't possible. Alderaan had no standing armies, no weapons, not even a planetary shield. It was unthinkable that the military should try to destroy such a world.

"No!" Leia gasped. "Alderaan is peaceful! We have no weapons. You can't possibly--"

Tarkin cut her off by turning sharply, his eyes glittering cruelly and his hard voice and manner showing the pride he took in this new position of power. He had held Leia's life in his hand, but it was meaningless since she did not seem to care if she lived. Now, he held Alderaan's life--the entire planet's, and he had Leia terrified. He felt empowered now, and he reveled in it.

"You prefer another target, a military target? Then name the system!" he demanded quickly. He moved in close to her, all hard war machine now, and Leia quickly backed up a step involuntarily.

But there was nowhere to go. Vader towered over her from behind, unmoving... unyielding. There was no retreat, and no possible way for Leia to win this scenario.

Unrelenting, Tarkin continued through a tight jaw, giving the impression of a man who was straining to keep himself under control. "I grow tired of asking this, so it will be the last time," he bit out. "Where is the rebel base?"

Tarkin's eyes stabbed through Leia with icy resolve and she knew in that moment that if this was a bluff, it was what her father would call "a damn fine one."

Her father, and all those other people on Alderaan, were all that Leia could think of at the moment. Family, friends, innocents...she could not allow them to die! But if she turned over the rebels now, all the galaxy would suffer. How happy would her father be with her, then? Would he prefer to live under Imperial suffocation, or would he rather die fighting for freedom?

Bail Organa despised war. He despised *this* war, though he supported the Rebellion in every sense of the word. He had pleaded, argued, and fought with the other senators for change, but he had done it non-violently. And when the war became inevitable, he still voted against almost every military proposal and pre-emptive strike Garm Bel Iblis presented to him and Mon Mothma.

Bail had been stunned into silence, and then outrage, when his daughter announced her plans to fight with the Rebellion rather than simply support and aid it. To Bail's mind, it was perfectly fine for him to risk his own life for the Rebellion, but quite another for Leia to do so. He loved his daughter, and he did everything in his power to protect her from harm, to keep her from having to witness the kind of horrors he had seen during the Clone Wars. And though he was proud of her for taking a stand against the Empire, he had wanted her involvement to remain diplomatic; nothing more than running aid and supplies to rebel forces under the guise of political missions. That alone was dangerous enough, because diplomatic immunity would not save her if she were ever caught.

Leia, however, stood her ground with her father--it was the first time she had ever truly defied him--and showed him that she was correct about what she could do, and what it would take for the Rebellion to win.

He, in turn, showed her that he was right about the horrors of war, a fact she discovered on her own during the battle of Kalidar. Though the Alliance

prevailed, the fighting had been on the ground, up close and personal, and it had been bloody. There was lightyears of difference between such a battle and a fight taking place between ships in the vacuum of space. It was a hard lesson, and Leia came away from the battle with scars which surpassed any of the physical ones she gained.

Just as Bail had warned her. He tried so hard to save her then. She had to try just as hard to save him now.

Leia was caught, and she knew it. She had to choose between her home and the Rebellion now. Her decision would not affect her future in the slightest, but it would affect the lives of billions of other people. It came down to which choice was for the greater good, and what Leia could live with in her own heart until she was executed.

It all passed through her mind in a matter of desperate seconds while she sought some way to turn the situation around. There had to be something she could do! Then the announcement was made that they had come within approximately six planetary diameters of Alderaan, anti-gravity range, and that did what all of Vader's machines had failed to do. All hope seeped out of Leia's body, and her heart filled with fear.

A thousand thoughts assaulted her at once. Her head was spinning as she desperately tried to figure out some way to stop this monster who stood in front of her from destroying her homeworld and the billions of innocent lives on the surface. All that came to her, however, was the accusing thought, *I brought them to this. This is all my fault. What have I done?*

Then, rising suddenly from the depths of her mind, there came a daring idea. While she stood there, her frightened eyes fixed on the planet she could see just above Tarkin's shoulder, she caught the idea and held fast to it, for it was the only thing that could save her people--her family. Even before she had the chance to think it through more fully, before she knew what she was doing, she blurted out, "Dantooine."

She tore her eyes from her home, glancing sideways at Tarkin, then she dropped her gaze quickly and bowed her head. "They're on Dantooine," she said. She put a shaky edge on her voice, not a very difficult task at the moment, and remembered in time to slump her shoulders. There was no haughtiness in her stance, no defiance. She projected defeat as thoroughly as she knew how, and she thanked her mother silently for seeing to it that Leia took a few acting classes in her youth.

Though Leia knew the game she was playing was dangerous, Tarkin seemed satisfied. He believed what he saw in her at the moment, and that pleased him.

The Grand Moff smiled down at her bowed head like some quiescent piranha, and Leia knew in that moment that she would kill him if she were given the chance, and that thought sustained her for the time being. Though she felt weak when she was first led into this room, she was made stronger by the knowledge that somehow, some way, Tarkin would die...if not by her hand, then in her name. She had too many friends in the Alliance for her revenge to go unrealized.

"There, you see Lord Vader," Tarkin said politely. "She can be reasonable. One needs only to frame the question properly to elicit the desired response."

So, Leia thought sourly, *it's to be abject humiliation now.* She sighed inwardly, resolving to let Tarkin have his fun. As long as Alderaan was safe, that was all that mattered to her.

Tarkin turned back to the other officers. "Continue with the operation," he said. "You may fire when ready."

He said it so casually, it took a full half a second for Leia to fully realize what he had said. Her head snapped up in a mixture of horror and disbelief as pure anger swept through her.

"What?" she shouted.

"You're far too trusting," Tarkin said, giving her that smile all over again. "Dantooine is too remote to make an effective demonstration. For reports of our power to spread rapidly throughout the Empire, we require a world more centrally located. We will proceed with the destruction of Alderaan as planned. But don't worry," he reassured her. "We will deal with your rebel friends soon enough."

"No!" Leia exclaimed viciously. "You have what you wanted. You said..."

"The only words which have meaning are the last ones spoken," Tarkin said cuttingly.

"No," Leia said through clenched teeth, and she tried to move forward to get to Tarkin, to stop him somehow. But Vader was there to hold her back, one powerful hand clamping down on her shoulder and pulling her back against him so she could not even turn away from the view before her.

Then it happened. Leia could swear she actually felt the station's power gathering beneath her feet, like some great beast inhaling deeply in preparation for attack. Then, like the Dahnashi dragons her father used to

tell her stories about when she was a child, the beast exhaled. It breathed not fire, but a green beam of coherent energy which reached out to touch Alderaan.

It took only a moment, but it felt like twelve eternities to Leia as she watched that wild, barely harnessed energy make contact with her homeworld, and seconds later it was all over. The princess stared in shocked horror, looking out to where her home had once been. All that remained were a few glowing chunks of stone, dust, and wild energy.

And the utter darkness of space.

Alderaan was gone. Destroyed. Obliterated by Tarkin's whim, his quest for power. Leia's world had been wiped from the slate that was the galaxy forever more.

The princess was numb. She could not move or speak. She could not even scream or cry for the home, family, and groups of friends whose lives had been snuffed out so suddenly. She stood as a carbonite woman, frozen forever in helpless despair. Where was her strength now? Her confidence, her much vaunted courage? Her hope?

From somewhere deep inside her heart, rage began to boil up. In the anger that took over, Leia lunged for Tarkin. This time, Vader was not fast enough to catch her. She reached for Tarkin's throat, her fingers hooked like the talons of a she-hawk ready to snatch up and devour her prey. Briefly, she locked them around the Grand Moff's neck.

But only briefly. No sooner did she reach Tarkin than a guard quickly pulled her away from him, and she did no more than leave small, bloody welts on the governor's neck just inside his collar. While Tarkin howled in outrage and stumbled backward, Leia twisted neatly in the guard's grip and raked her nails down his face, nearly taking out his eye in the process.

(Never had she fought in such a manner, but she had been trained to use whatever weapons were at her disposal. Harlan Dryvers had said to her when he trained her, "You aren't hampered by the male ego that says you have to be macho and fight fair, princess. So fight dirty. These," he said, holding up her hand and indicating her nails, "Don't have to be just for decoration, you know. Use them. Bite, kick, scratch...do whatever it takes for you to get away from your opponents.")

The guard was in a great deal of pain now, and he made the mistake of letting Leia go to put his hands up to his bleeding face.

"Hold her!" Tarkin shouted, motioning to other guards nearby. They, it seemed, were reluctant to approach the princess.

Four other guards finally converged on the princess and, after receiving a few injuries themselves, they managed to subdue the young woman and see to it that her hands were bound behind her back since she was able to do so much damage with them bound in front of her. They would not make the mistake of underestimating her again.

"Take her back down to her cell," Tarkin ordered as he came to stand in front of her. "She may await her execution in more comfort there," he said sardonically.

Leia stared up at him with eyes that were hard and cold, and they made something equally hard and cold settle in the pit of Tarkin's stomach. There was, Tarkin decided, something dangerous about this woman, and it would have made him feel just the slightest bit uneasy if he had not known that she would not live another twenty four hours.

Leia said nothing. There was no need; her eyes spoke volumes. The hatred in them, a hatred that the princess made no attempt to hide, burned through to the very depths of Tarkin's soul.

When the guards finally led Leia away, Tarkin turned once more to Vader, but the Dark Lord paid the Grand Moff no heed. He stood motionless, staring out the viewport into the empty space where Alderaan had once floated.

"I must go and contact the Emperor," was all he said. Then he turned and strode from the room, his cloak billowing behind him.

Vader was feeling disturbed. He had felt the Alderaanians die, and he also felt that this sudden mass death caused an imbalance in the Force. No matter which side Vader served, he knew the balance had to be maintained, for he knew that neither side could exist without the other. He needed the Emperor to allay his fears, and then he could carry on his work.

Alone in her cell, emotionally and physically drained, Leia Organa, last of her House, slid down the wall to sit on the floor. Her hands were sorely bruised, for there was not a centimeter of the cells walls that she had not covered, not beaten upon with all the strength in her body and all the feeling in her soul.

Her initial terror at the threat of Alderaan's destruction had been replaced with complete shock when the act was actually carried out. Anger had been all that was left to her when the guards shoved her roughly back into her cell. Her despair and anger were too great for her small form, and she sought something to take it all out on. She wanted to find someone or something and make it hurt as much as she was hurting. As the cell was the only thing available to her, she had turned her emotions loose upon the walls, the bunk, and the door, cursing Tarkin's and Vader's souls--if they had any--to the deepest, darkest pits she knew of.

Crouched now on the floor, Leia was overtaken by a grief so deeply felt that there were no words, no sounds, and no tears that could ever begin to express it. She put her head into her hands, wishing for some kind of release. She had cared nothing for her own life so long as the mission for the Alliance succeeded. But when Tarkin destroyed Alderaan, he destroyed all chances for that success. Kenobi would have reached Alderaan by now if the R2 unit had found him. That meant the tapes were gone now...along with Leia's home and any hope the Rebellion had for continuing their fight. Without the tapes, there was no hope of finding a weakness to the Death Star. The Alliance would be helpless against such power. The galaxy would be at the Empire's mercy.

I have failed, Leia thought despairingly. *I couldn't deliver the tapes. I couldn't save Alderaan. I failed them all.*

It would have been so much easier if she had just been allowed to die, she reasoned. If Vader hadn't brought in the medical droid...

She almost *had* died. She truly was that close. The torture had been almost too much to handle. Vader never would know how close he came to extracting the information he wanted from her. But no matter what physical torture he had put her through, it was nothing next to this emotional torture. Faces floated before her when she closed her eyes--her mother, her father, distant relatives and old childhood friends. They rose around her like the ghosts they had become and swirled through her mind, sad, pained faces reflecting the anguish she felt, wanting to know why she had not saved them.

She had no way to help them, and she could not ignore them, escape them. She could not escape them because memories of them had once been her escape. In times when the Rebellion seemed a lost cause and the days were too long and harsh, Leia would think back to better days at home. She would remember long strolls in the garden with her mother, or nights discussing politics with her father. She remembered long days of freedom when she would run or ride forever across Alderaan's green landscapes, and even longer days of study under master tutors like Arn Horada, Odahn LaDolse, Harlan Dryvers, and Dame Barbara Denali.

To Leia, all these things had been part of what she called "home." They were everything the word had meant to her, and those memories only made the pain worse now.

Somewhere deep inside herself, Leia heard the voice of her other self, the child part of her. It was a part of herself that she had never set aside, but had kept closely guarded, instead...off in a deep part of herself where the child could be protected and sheltered. She thought it an important thing to do considering how quickly she had grown up. Leia drew down into herself now to cradle and comfort that child who cried the tears Leia could not. To try to shield her from the misery...to hide with her.

Vader's broken me, Leia realized suddenly. *Already, he's broken me.*

Broken indeed. Leia felt as if she were already dead. It was no comfort to her that this was the way most martyrs die. And she would become a martyr, she was sure. The Alliance would honor her memory, making her name a rally cry for some, and a war cry for others, but it simply was no comfort to her.

Bereft of any further emotion, Leia sat with her child-self and waited to die. Some time later, she was not exactly certain how long, she crawled up on the bunk to try to get some of the sleep she had been deprived of in the last day and a half, and she lay down, exhausted, hoping this entire nightmare would be over soon.

* * *

Leia stood to the side, gathering the shreds of her courage around her--or, failing that, hoping she could at least summon her vaunted stubbornness--as she breathed deeply, and wondered just what she thought she was doing. She had requested this small moment of time with the thought that she might somehow be able to do something helpful or at least comforting with it. But now...now, she was uncertain.

What if I fail? she wondered despondently. She looked to the place where the Alderaanians of Yavin Base had gathered to hear their princess speak. It was Leia's intention to pull her people together, to try to help them through their mourning. A pain this monumental could crush the people's will to live, much less fight, all too easily. They needed something to believe in right now, some measure of hope to hold on to in this dimly dark time. If that hope was not strong and righteous, however, they would only destroy themselves.

Leia was too afraid, however, that she might not be able to do what she planned, that she would be unable to provide the necessary words and needed inspiration her people were so desperately looking for at the moment. The possibility of failure had a strong grip on Leia. Vader's tortures had been psychological as well as physical, and he had planted many doubts in her mind. Though she managed to conquer many of those doubts, the idea that she was not a capable or inspiring leader was the one which seemed to hang over her like some dark cloud, and it made her fear that her people would not see her as someone to rely upon or follow.

It was important to her because Leia knew what the right hope could do for a person. In retrospect, she realized that only the mention of Kenobi's name and that the fact that he was on the station could have ever made her rise from her bunk and dare to try to escape. Only the hope that the data tapes were still intact, and her own sense of responsibility to see them safely delivered, gave her a reason to go on fighting. If Luke had never mentioned the old general's name or the tapes, he would not have gotten Leia to leave her cell.

It was Leia's childhood friend and one-time aide, Lisa Toraquian, who suggested Leia use these same feelings of hope and responsibility to speak to Alderaan's children, now its orphans. But the uncertainty held, and Leia decided that she would rather endure Vader's tortures all over again than fail her fellow Alderaanians in their most broken-hearted moment.

"Your highness." A technician touched her shoulder lightly to get her attention. She broke her reverie and turned to face him. "We're ready when you are," he said.

Leia nodded in response. The techs had gone to a lot of trouble to tap into the galactic holonet to give Leia access to her people all across the galaxy, but her time would be limited. She must be brief and not advertise to the Empire that she was still among the rebels on Yavin IV. It had only been some three hours since the destruction of the Death Star, and the rebels were beginning the evacuation of their temple base.

Mon Mothma had already sent a message to Leia, telling her to get the evacuation under way as soon as possible, and also begging the princess to take the first available transport and join her and the other Rebel leaders in the relative safety of space aboard the command ship near Calamari. Mothma was feeling a particular responsibility for Leia's safety. Mon Mothma had, after all, been the first person to convince Leia that open war was the rebellion's only recourse. She was not certain that Bail Organa had ever forgiven her for that, though he never made the slightest indication that he thought his old friend and rival was, in any way, responsible for Leia's choice. But Mothma felt responsible, and she thought she owed it to Bail to see his daughter safe.

Leia sent a message back to the Alliance's leader telling Mon Mothma that she preferred to stay with her cell and see the evacuation through personally. Her tone, though polite, had been such as to imply that she would not debate the issue further.

The technician waited with his colleagues for Leia to step onto the holopad while the gathered survivors of Alderaan assembled in front of it. Luke, Han, and Wedge stood off to the side somewhere with General Dodonna. Wherever she was in the galaxy, Winter, one of Leia's best friends, would probably be watching as well. And then there was Lisa, the third party in the "spirit-sister" triangle formed by herself, Winter, and the princess.

A Zingali by blood and birth, Lisa had lived her entire life on Alderaan where her family served Leia's mother's family. The Taraquins and the Oberons were inseparable, living like one large family rather than two smaller ones. After the Massacre of Zingal, Marlana Oberon Organa had protected and loved Lisa and her siblings just as she had her own daughter. Marlana had also played a sort of mother to Winter, as well, since Winter's father never remarried after his wife's death. Considering that, Leia thought it was no surprise--or should not have been--that she and the other two girls were so close. It made her feel more secure to know that one of them was present to support her in this endeavor now.

Lisa gave the princess an encouraging nod and Leia took one last deep breath before she nodded to the techs, quickly smoothing her hands over her fatigues. She had decided to forego the white robes and elaborate hairstyle in favor of her well-used uniform and a simple, single braid. She wanted her people to see that she was ready to fight for them with more than just mere words.

When one of the techs signaled her that the connection had been made, Leia stepped onto the pad and spoke with as much strength and calm as she ever had, which surprised her more than anyone.

"My people," she began, "I greet you in this time of sorrow with a heavy heart, but with the hope that I may be able to alleviate your grief as well as mine. The Empire has said nothing on the matter as yet, but their Death Star has been destroyed by the brave beings who make up the Alliance's ranks and took to the stars in what some said was a vain effort to engage the enemy. The Empire will not be able to destroy any more star systems with that weapon. Though we Alderaanians have been avenged in part by this, the Empire is far from being destroyed completely. I have little doubt, and a great amount of fear, that the Imperials will begin another project such as this one in the future, but I also believe that we can overcome it.

"My people, we must come together if we are to overcome these future obstacles. We must not give in to our grief, nor must any one of us try to win this war alone. I urge each of you to reach for the hands of your families, your countrymen, your fellow Alderaanians, and stand together as one people. Speak with one another. Support each other in this grievous time for us, and know that I am with you all spiritually, emotionally, and--if the need arises--financially. I promise you that I shall, by whatever means possible to me, see to your well-being. On the honor of my family, I swear this to you."

Leia glanced to the side and saw one tech signal that time was almost up, and she nodded fractionally in return. She returned her attention to her audience.

"My people," she continued, "we owe much to the Alliance, and I ask you now to do something in return for the brave-hearted beings that make up its numbers. I ask you to spread the word of our cause, to speak out against the Empire's atrocities. I ask you to tell the galaxy of the injustices which are done every day in the Emperor's name, and tell the galaxy of the heart and courage that these resolute fighters of the Alliance hold within themselves."

She could not help sending a glance in the general direction of Luke, Han, and Wedge where they stood with the general. And she could not help but think of all those pilots who should have been there with them, pilots who were missing. So many gone... Their absence inspired her next words.

"But most of all, tell them that we can not do it alone. We need the support of every being that would live free.

"And so, my people, I come to the last thing I must ask of you. I ask that any of you who believe our in cause, and who are willing and able to help, come to the Alliance and lend your support. What I ask has great risks and will undoubtedly prove to be quite dangerous, and, as such, I have no right to ask it of you. But, I do not ask this for myself or for the Alliance. I ask for you, the people of Alderaan, and all others who have suffered under Palpatine's New Order. The Emperor and his empire must be held responsible for their crimes, and they must be made to pay for those crimes. They have paid a small price for the destruction of our world, but I will not rest until they have paid with all that they have--until the empire has been destroyed and all peoples of the galaxy can live in freedom once more. Alderaan *will* be avenged in that one day, this galaxy will be free.

"With love, my people, I must leave you now. Know that I will not let you go unprotected. I will do whatever I can to keep you all safe. Until next we meet, your former princess, Leia Organa." With this last, she inclined her head to her audience in a gesture of respect.

The techs quickly cut the signal and Leia stepped off the pad, acutely aware of the silence all around her. As she looked at the saddened faces gathered near, she was struck by the same thought she'd had aboard the Death Star; I am responsible for this. I am the cause of their pain.

Lisa stepped up beside her and said quietly, "Your words, as always, were from the heart." She smiled gently. "Don't worry, Leia. The people of Alderaan know that you are with them, that you grieve with them."

"But is that enough?" she asked quietly. "Have I given them any hope for the future?" Without saying anything more, the princess left for her own quarters.

"Lisa, we have a lot to do," Leia protested half-angrily. "What is this all about?"

"Just calm down and bear with me," the young Zingali woman replied smoothly, leading Leia by the arm down yet another corridor. "It's a surprise."

"I'm not up for any more surprises today, Lisa," the princess argued grimly. She was anxious to be away from Yavin IV as quickly as possible, but after the afternoon's celebration, no one had been moving particularly fast this evening.

On top of it all, there was the pilots' party tonight as well. Leia agreed to it because Dodonna had made the point of telling her specifically that the men had to blow off some steam after all the tension that they had been through the day before during the Death Star battle. After checking with Lisa to make certain there were no immediate Imperial troop movements towards Yavin, Leia had agreed.

Lisa was good for that sort of thing. Like a fair number of her race, Lisa had many telepathic abilities, most of which were still unknown, even to her. And, as yet, the girl was still untrained. Despite her lack of training, there was a power to be reckoned with inside Lisa. It made her a valuable ally and friend to Leia (which was exactly why Lisa's mother had chosen her to serve the princess, instead of one of her "mind blind" daughters), and it made her an even greater ally for the Alliance. Of course, with her lack of training, it took a great deal out of Lisa for her to learn anything from the Imperials at such long distances. She had sat in meditation all day, even missing the medal ceremony, in order to pick up any stray thoughts from the Imperial commanders.

And, until she received an answer, everyone was ordered to go about the business of evacuating the base as planned, and checking over the new pilots who were sent as reinforcements and replacements.

But Lisa had come through for the soldiers. There was, she informed them, to be no movement against Yavin IV. Still reeling from the destruction of the Death Star, the Imperial forces were planning to blockade the system within a week, but no sooner. They figured the rebels thought they were safe and would conveniently stay put for a while. The Imperials wanted to mass a large fleet for the blockade, and they also seemed to be waiting for something...something big, Lisa thought. It was going to be a longer wait than the Imperials had originally planned.

So, everyone looked to Leia for permission to hold their party. Citing the psychological reasons to herself once more, Leia consented to the free-for-all that passed for a quiet pilots' party. Luke had asked if she were going to attend, but Leia politely told him that was not. She did not tell him why, however.

Besides the fact that she was far from being in anything even resembling a party mood, Leia had other plans. She was bound and determined that it was time for her to try to hold a mourning rite for her parents. After the medal ceremony, she returned to her quarters and diligently removed every pin from her long braids, brushed her hair, and replaited the entire mass into a single long braid. She no sooner sat down for the ceremony, knife in hand, than Lisa buzzed her door.

The Zingali girl had planned something. There was simply no telling what she had up her sleeve, and Leia was not certain she really wanted to find out. But she followed her friend, nonetheless.

"Why don't you just tell me what you're up..." Leia started, but she trailed off as they entered the Massassi temple's throne room. There were no lights, but Leia could see clearly in the darkness of the night thanks to what looked like hundreds of candles. Behind each was a smiling face that looked on her kindly.

And then, softly, voices rose as one in gentle song.

"Whither thou goest, I will go;
I will stay with thee, follow thee close.
Whither thou goest, I'll follow thee;
I will protect thee, trust in me.

"Whither thou goest, then take me;
I will be loyal, and stay with thee.

Whither thou goest, I will go;
I'll follow thee closely, protect thy soul.

"Whither thou goest to lay thy head,
I will stand guard beside thy bed;
Guard against winds thy burning love's light.
I will protect thee, all through the night.

"Whither thou goest, what people are thine,
I shall go with thee, and make them as mine.
Whither thou goest, I will go;
I'll follow thee closely, protect thy soul.
I'll follow thee closely, protect thy soul."

Leia's voice caught in her throat and tears stung her eyes. The song was as ancient as any Alderaan had ever had, and well-known among its people.

Unbidden, a line from Leia's favorite play, "The Tragedy of Valkeria," came to mind, and she said it aloud without thinking.

"All these yet live'."

Lisa nodded beside her. "I've received over two hundred transmissions just since these people arrived," she said. "More than two hundred transmissions from other Alderaanians who heard your speech and are coming to help the Alliance."

"We wish you to know," said a tall, older man as he stepped forward, "that we now stand together as you asked. But princess, your family has always been at the center of Alderaanian life. We want you to stand with us, of course, but as our princess...not as our *former* princess."

"Our circle is not complete without you," said a woman beside him who looked like she could have been his wife.

Leia felt slightly embarrassed. Though she had always done her best not to sully the family name (excepting her childhood, of course, during which time she had been rather rough-and-tumble, and more prone to climb trees than study her lessons), the princess did not feel worthy of the admiration that seemed to flow from these people.

"Thank you," she said, the two small words seeming to be all that she could manage. She reached a hand out to the woman and said again, "Thank you."

The elder woman squeezed the princess's hand until she saw that Leia regained her composure, smiling all the while.

"May I ask your name?" Leia inquired.

The woman bowed her head formally and said, "My name is Tamra Skye, your highness. This," she said with a gesture that indicated the tall man who had spoken first, "is my husband, Trent."

Trent Skye executed a formal bow from the waist.

One by one, the survivors introduced themselves to her. A sixteen year old girl named Maya who boasted of her piloting skills, and her uncle, Alexander, who apologized for his niece's precociousness; a scientist named Brendon Shehan and his wife and infant son; a trader named Glynnna; an Imperial lieutenant named Damon Ter who was absent without leave, having deserted the Navy during his mission when he learned what the empire had done to his home. Though he had torn all Imperial insignia from his uniform, he was still deeply ashamed that he "should appear before my princess in the uniform of her enemies, and the murderers of our people."

Leia took both his hands in hers. "Thank you for coming, Damon. Your help will be greatly appreciated if you choose to remain with the Alliance."

"Thank you, highness," he said, his deep voice resonating pleasantly. "It is my intention to stay and fight."

Leia smiled and squeezed his hands slightly before she continued on. As she made her way around the room, the doubts Vader left planted in her mind soon faded to nothingness, and Leia was pulled in, surrounded completely, by the love of her people.

The temple throne room was completely quiet now, and dark by comparison. There was still another hour before dawn, and Leia sat completely motionless enjoying the darkness, listening to the forest outside the walls of the temple and reveling in the sounds of it...the sounds of life. She had found life again, found it in the dust of what had been death. Something in her was slowly beginning to heal. Meeting with the other Alderaanians had set the idea back in her heart that she was a capable leader, and that made her feel that she could go on leading, trying to win this war. When that happened, when the war was finally over and the Empire toppled, perhaps the pain of losing

everything else would not be quite so unbearable. Perhaps then, there would be no more nightmares of that horrible night when she was forced to see her home obliterated.

The healing had begun. It would be slow, no doubt, but it had begun.

"I thought you'd still be here," Lisa said from the other end of the room when the lift doors opened. She stepped out and quickly crossed the floor in that incredibly silent way that only Zingali could manage.

"I was just thinking," Leia replied off-handedly.

Lisa climbed the stairs of the dais and seated herself on the top step beside Leia, then asked, "About what?"

"Tonight, mostly," the princess answered. "Or maybe I should say last night," she amended with a smile, remembering the hour. She cast a sidelong glance at her friend and said, "When you want to prove a point, you really go to extremes do you?"

"Me?" Lisa asked, raising her hands in protest. "I had nothing whatsoever to do with this. Tamra and Trent were the ringleaders. If you feel wanted again, thank them, not me." She leaned back on her elbows and looked up at the stars through the skylight. "It was beautiful though, wasn't it?" she said.

Leia nodded. It had, indeed, been beautiful, the lights from the candles throwing a golden glow over everything. And it had certainly made her feel wanted. The real joy of the meeting had come from being able to talk to those in attendance, in coming to know them in some small way. By the time the candles had burned low, each and every person had been able to speak with their princess and had, at some point in the evening, offered his or her services. Poets and politicians, scientists and songwriters, carpenters and cartographers, playwrights and pilots...all had offered their services.

Each was eager to learn some new skill that would allow them to better serve the Alliance. Each had come to lend whatever support they could, and to personally let Leia know that they supported her, as well.

"I had to turn back a lot of people requesting to attend," Lisa said. "They were more than a day away and I know you want the base cleared within the next fourteen hours. So I sent them off to whichever contacts were closest to them. But they all left these for you," she said. She fished around inside her trousers pocket and finally produced a data card.

"What's this?" Leia asked as she took it.

"Messages of love and support, basically," Lisa said.

Leia shook her head as she looked at the card. "I didn't think the speech was quite so good."

"One of your best," Lisa said solemnly. "Like I said, the words were from the heart. That means a lot, you know. It means everything, in fact. It always has." She smiled a knowing smile and said, "Of course, it isn't the one that lives above all others in my memory."

"Which one is?" Leia asked. "My 'Shove Off' speech to Andros after our engagement fell though? Or was it the 'You And The Bantha You Rode In On' speech I gave him?"

"No," Lisa laughed. "Although, that was a good one," she said, chuckling at the memory. "No. The one I find most memorable was... well, you haven't said it yet."

"Excuse me?"

"I saw it in a vision," she explained.

"What did I say?" Leia asked curiously.

Lisa pushed back her wavy dark hair and her amethyst eyes took on that faraway look she always got when she spoke of or saw one of her visions. "It will be another couple of years before this happens, I think, but...I saw you sitting in what looked like a hut, and there were all these--I don't know what to call them, but they looked like small Zingali bears. They were sitting all around. And you were wearing this primitive-looking dress. You looked rather like the ancient Deianerans your mother is descended from."

Leia smiled. Sitting here in the gigantic temple throne room in her best white gown, the scene Lisa described was extremely hard to imagine.

"Commander Skywalker was there," Lisa continued, already using Luke's new rank like he'd always had it. "And Captain Solo was there, too. In fact, you were sitting next to him, with your arm through his."

"I'm certain," Leia snorted.

"You might be surprised," Lisa countered. "Who knows what can happen in a couple of years? Anyway, everyone was making speeches, then they all looked at you, and you said, 'Do it for the trees.' And that was all you said."

Even in what little available light there was, Lisa could see that Leia looked completely puzzled. " 'Do it for the trees'? What does that mean?"

"Don't look at me," the Zingali woman said. "It was your speech. Whatever you meant by it, the creatures understood your meaning perfectly."

Lisa watched as the princess chuckled quietly, shaking her head. "What's so funny?" the younger woman asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Leia answered with a laugh. "Maybe it's the idea that someday in my future I'll be making speeches to little bears while sitting next to Han Solo. Maybe it's that 'Do it for the trees' will be the most memorable speech I've made in what's already a long career of speech-making. Maybe," she said, with a sideways glance at her friend, "it's that I actually believe everything you tell me when, for all I know, you could just be pulling my leg."

Lisa gave her a mock frown and pretended to be offended.

"Or maybe..." She sighed, her heart feeling the true depth of it. "Maybe it's the fact that, up until a few hours ago, I could understand why Valkeria decided to walk out into the sea and let the waves swallow her up at the end of the play. I understood, because I felt like she must have."

"Do you compare yourself with Valkeria the Mad, now?"

"I don't know," Leia answered. "I think I did. But once I saw all those people... Lisa, you don't know what their support means to me."

"Yes I do," Lisa told her. "Believe me, I do." She turned to look at the princess and asked, "You will be getting some rest before you help out with evacuation, won't you?"

It sounded less like a question and more like a mother's reprimand. "Yes," Leia told her. "But there's something else I have to do first."

Lisa watched the princess toy with her single braid, and she unconsciously rubbed at the bandage on her arm which covered her own ritual Mourning Scar, earned days before when Lisa first learned of Alderaan's destruction and the death of her Second Family.

"I understand," she said.

There was silence between them for a long moment. Only the calls of the forest's denizens and the soft whispers of the early morning breezes penetrated the quiet. When Lisa spoke again at last, she did so softly, so she would not disturb the tranquillity.

"It will all be over some day, *imoto,* and you will be happy again," she half-whispered, using the Zingali word which translated as "sister." "I can promise you that."

Leia felt another sigh rise within her, but she fought it down. Without looking at her lifelong friend she asked, "Are you sure? Can you really tell, Lisa?"

Lisa stared at some fixed spot above her and answered, "I've seen it. My goddess has showed it to me, and I tend to believe the things She shows me."

"It's good to have that kind of faith," Leia said. She clasped Lisa's hand and said, "Thank Her for me, will you?"

"For?"

Leia smiled. "For seeing to it that we Oberons met the Taraquins. For blessing us with that meeting, even if we are a bunch of non-believers," she said.

"You're assuming," Lisa said as she squeezed Leia's hand, "that I haven't thanked Her for that already." She smiled and said, "I thanked Her long ago, as all my mothers before me did. But, like them, I thanked Her for my own benefit."

Leia smiled in return, then released her friend's hand and rose to descend the steps of the dais. "Get some rest, Lisa. You need it as much as I do," she said over her shoulder as she started down the steps.

"Not even close," Lisa lied glibly. "Meditative trances are just like getting a long nap."

"Liar."

"Nice way to talk to a friend, princess."

Even in the darkness, Lisa could see Leia's smile. When the lift doors closed, Lisa sighed in relief. It looked like the princess was going to be all right.

Mother of Zingal, she thought, let her be all right.

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EPILOGUE

Dawn was coming in quickly. Leia did not notice, however. Her mind was elsewhere as she sat on the edge of the small bed in her quarters, a vibroknife in her lap and two black ribbons in her hands. Her fingers easily tied the ribbons around her braid, roughly halfway down from the nape of her neck, one ribbon above the other.

Since adults on Alderaan tended to wear their hair long, it was traditional that an Alderaanian in mourning cut half of his or her hair off. Occasionally, that person might keep his or her hair at that shortened length for the rest of their lives if the grief came from a particularly tragic circumstance. The holocaust of Alderaan, as it was already being called, certainly qualified as the kind of tragedy that would keep many Alderaanians' hair shorter for the rest of their lives. But it was not to be so for Leia. She had promised her father long ago that she would not follow this custom.

"Your hair is too beautiful to keep shortened, daughter," he'd said warmly when he tried to wrangle that promise from her. "So much like your mother's. It would be a shame to shorten it."

"You think Mother wouldn't keep her hair short if something ever happened to you?" Leia asked.

Bail packed his pipe nonchalantly and said, as calmly as if he were ordering dinner, "I've threatened to haunt her for the rest of her life if she ever does."

At the time, Leia had laughed genuinely.

At the time, Leia had been completely unable to ever imagine Bail as being dead. He and Marlena would, it seemed, live forever. Their love was too strong, their spirits too kind, for either of them to be snatched away by death.

And Leia had never thought she would not get the chance to say goodbye, that they would be taken from her before she could tell them how much she loved them both.

You were pretty naive, sister, said that all-too-familiar voice in her head...the one that always pointed out to her when she was wrong. *For somebody who went so far at so young an age, you were still pretty naive.*

Only, Leia argued with herself, *where Mother and Papa were concerned. I...I thought there would be more time. There should have been more time!*

She bowed her head, letting the single tear fall onto her white gown. There was supposed to have been more time, but Tarkin had taken that all away from her. And now, all she could see were the missed opportunities of the last few months...all the times when she had said, "Thank you, Mother, but I'm afraid I'm just too busy right now," or "I'd love to, Papa, but this Felissi situation has me completely tied up for the next three weeks."

When there had been time, she was too involved in other matters. Now, there was no time. There was no home to go to, no mother's warm arms to hold her and soothe away the tears of a broken heart, no father's rumbling baritone to tell her it would all work out. Everything and everyone she had loved so much was gone.

And I can't even think of appropriate words now, she thought despairingly.

She pulled her braid around to the front and positioned the knife blade between the two ribbons, but she did not cut. She could think of nothing to say, no words to tell her parents what she was feeling now. At last, she said the only thing that seemed to make any sense to her.

"I love you both. And I will not forget what happened. Somehow, I will make it right, I promise."

She pulled the knife through her braid with sure precision, neatly slicing it in half. She set the thick half-braid in her lap, then set the vibroknife across it, thinking about what she had just said. She had been simple, direct, informal. It was the way she always talked to her parents in the past, and it seemed appropriate now. There was no sense in being stiff and formal with people who knew her so well.

Leia looked down at her hands and was surprised to see her fingers had unbraided her plait of hair, rebraiding it in two separate plaits...one, she realized, for each of her parents. She tied them off with other ribbons and thought about what to do with them both for now. Normally, she would have placed the braids with her parents' bodies before they were cremated, but that was impossible now. Perhaps someday, when this war was all over, she'd see if she could not bring herself to return to the Alderaan system and place her braids within the asteroid field created by the fragments of her world. She put them both away, packing them in a crate with her uniforms, and placed the vibroknife beside the bed on a small table.

But she could not help but wonder at her vow to "make it right." Could she? Was there any way for her to accomplish such a task?

The voice came back to her, encouraging this time. *If there is, you'll find it. Count on that.*

Yes, she told herself. *If there is a way, I'll find it. For them, I will find a way.*

Without bothering to remove the ceremony gown she'd worn all day, Leia finally lay down on her small bed and closed her eyes. She dreamed that night of golden stars which flickered warmly and seemed to be singing, and she believed them when they told her it would be all right. They believed in her, and they would follow her...and that made her feel safer, stronger.

And that night, she rested peacefully.

Lisa Taraquin gently pulled herself out of the bond, left Leia's mind. She would never have made such an invasion normally, but she could not help her feelings of worry over her friend. Leia was a part of House Taraquin, Clan Tristan, and had been since she was ten. She had become part of the Clan at Lisa's request, and that made the Zingali woman Responsible for her. That, Lisa decided, gave her certain privileges.

As she lay down on her own bed, Lisa said quietly, "Thank you, All Mother, for watching over her. Keep her safe."

She had no doubt her prayers were heard. But she wondered what the future would bring. She would just have to trust it to the Goddess's judgment, and Leia's strength of spirit. Between those two things, she knew somehow that it would all work out in the end. With Leia leading, the Alliance would prevail. Lisa did not even have to ask the Goddess to make it so. Leia would do that for Her, she knew.

Half asleep, Lisa smiled.

END

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