

The Last Prophecy

By Julie Van Dore – August 2005

Part I

Norgarra, a mid-sized planet, not far from the core, had gone unexplored for millennia. Because its axis of rotation was oriented like a spoke coming out of its sun, it had been assumed that conditions there, extremely hot on the hemisphere that faced its sun and extremely cold on the other, were prohibitive for the sustaining of life, let alone intelligent life. However, life did live there. The planet was mostly water, surrounding a multitude of archipelagos, and this water changing from ice to liquid to steam, followed plumes of heat originating from the planet's core and created currents. A very slim "ring" surrounded the planet, where the sun was constantly in twilight, where the water was liquid and the land was neither too cold nor too hot to be inhabitable.

Two intelligent species inhabited this world; it was unclear if they had evolved from a common ancestor or if their origins were entirely separate. The first, the Ronalla, had evolved on the colder edge of the habitable "ring" and they were accustomed to ice and darkness. They had thick fur and their limbs could retract into their bodies for warmth.

The second, the Ornal, had evolved on the hotter edge of the ring, and they were accustomed to heat, steam and bright light. They were hairless and very dark skinned and their long limbs could stretch to absorb water and dissipate heat.

As each species developed technology and mastered their element, they grew in population, discovering each other near the midpoint of the planet's ring. Both vied for space and influence, and the religion of each demanded the destruction of the other. For many generations, battles were fought for the planet's limited resources: land space and usable water. The Ronalla would trick the Ornal soldiers into conditions of cold where they froze to death, and the Ornal would drag the Ronalla to the steaming islands where they would suffocate in their thick fur.

The Galactic Republic gained awareness of this world, but chose to not interfere. It was one of the tenets of the Old Republic to not insinuate itself in the affairs of non-members; such meddling rarely helped the planet in question and often made relations worse.

But then two things happened. When the Ornal and the Ronalla discovered hyperdrive transport, and realized that they could travel to other worlds similar to their preferred habitats, they wanted to become members of the Republic to become full citizens. At the same time, brthdeium was discovered under the surface of the planet. Brthdeium was an ideal metal for space-going craft because of its lightness and stability of structure in both extremely cold and hot environments. The Galactic Corporations wanted to mine brthdeium from Norgarra. However another of the Republic's tenets was that the inhabitants of a planet must benefit from their own planet's

resources; another party could not come and exploit those resources with no compensation. Norgarra's inclusion in the Republic would facilitate the development of its economy to the financial benefit of the Norgarrans and the Corporations.

So there were multiple efforts to join the Ornal and the Ronalla in the Republic. Debate lasted for many years, as many members were dismayed by the two species' dedication to the destruction of the other. Further, many feared that membership would lead to mass immigration to their own planets, which was highly unpopular.

Slowly, in time, the Ornal and the Ronalla ceased hostilities. Each developed technologies to make more of their planet habitable, often under the surface of the water or ice. They began mining and then informal trade with other nonmembers. As they learned of other planets and other beliefs (and saw evidence of the Force, even among a few of themselves) the more educated of them stopped believing in the old religions, regarding those beliefs as quaint, historical, social artifacts. Ornal and Ronalla began cooperating to mine brthdeium, and rather than hating each other for their differences, they began to appreciate the strengths and abilities of each species. At last, to much fanfare and celebration, they became full members of the Galactic Republic, encouraging and strengthening the same rules that had excluded them for some time.

Like other systems, they too had become complacent by the time Senator Palpatine was elected Chancellor of the Senate. Although alarmed at the trade disputes they were largely unaffected, since brthdeium was so highly valued. When Palpatine announced the creation of the Empire, they applauded, since they hoped that stability would increase sales of their exports.

However, in short order, the Emperor showed little patience for negotiating the price of brthdeium, which was needed in prodigious quantities for his Death Star. While this project was officially a secret, too many suppliers and contractors were aware that something was in the works, since so many resources were being channeled to such a huge effort.

Agents of the Empire infiltrated Norgarra; popular performers ridiculed and demonized the intelligentsia and the old religions came roaring back to life. Seeds of hate were replanted and each species remembered that they despised the other. Battles were fought, often over entirely inconsequential disputes; extremism became prevalent. Civil War broke out, and the two species ceased cooperation. This enabled the Empire to mine the Brthdeium itself, without having to compensate the Norgarrans. A few Norgarrans joined the Alliance, even though they had little hope of convincing the majority of the Ornal or the Ronalla to see that their true enemy was the Empire. These few could only hope that with the defeat of the Empire, their planet would once again see peace.

Leia opened her eyes. A morning breeze rustled the pines outside the room and a bird, or some other animal, whistled and called. Another animal, probably an insect made a krrrch krrrch krrrch noise, krrrch-ing and

pausing, calling out, sending messages to its fellow krrrrch-ers. The morning sunlight filtered into the room, made of branches woven ingeniously together, high up in a tree in Endor, where she and Han slept. She listened to his slow, measured breathing and she matched her own breaths to his. The Ewoks had prepared this room for them, somehow knowing they would be together, after the long hours of celebration.

She reached out with her feelings, (this was becoming easier and easier) stretching towards Luke. She found him, like Han, deep in a dreamless sleep in another Ewok-prepared tree room, sleeping alone.

Could she feel others? She breathed deeply and lowered her eyelids, reaching out. The families of Ewoks, the Alliance Pilots and the landing team, Lando, and Chewbacca; most slept deeply or were beginning to stir, shaking heads made fuzzy by Ewok beer, returning to tasks made habitual by long duty. She saw a strange bluish glow: Artoo Detoo humming quietly to himself doing some internal maintenance. Threepio sat nearby in shutdown mode.

She stretched further, feeling the life of Endor: the animals, the birds, and, emitting an intoxicating flow of the Force, the great trees, many hundreds of years old.

In this moment, she was happy. Happy listening to Han's deep breathing, happy listening and feeling Endor, happy feeling the breezes play across her face.

She wanted to keep this moment of happiness - and why could she not? They had succeeded, defeated the Emperor and Vader, destroyed the Death Star, and restored freedom to the galaxy. Why could she not keep this happiness for the rest of her life?

A vivid memory appeared to her: her father, Bail (who had loved her and cared for her, who had taught her how to be an ambassador and a senator, who had always encouraged her following her best instincts) her father conversing with - whom? Another Senator who had later died on his home planet defending a precious spring from exploitation by the Empire. Bail saying: even if the Emperor is defeated, will we have peace? He and his minions have played favorites in many systems, have taken control of resources in others, have re-awakened ancient hostilities when it suited them. If the Emperor falls, the Galaxy will be plunged into Chaos.

Chaos. No, she did not want this intruding on her drowsy morning.

Han stirred beside her. She deliberately turned her thoughts to Han and their night of lovemaking. She smiled to herself: the Alderaanian royalty would be appalled at her, sharing her bed with this smuggler turned general. And, from what she knew, the Order of Jedi Knights would be appalled at Luke, drinking the Ewok's beer and singing with the pilots. (Why had he laughingly tried to stop them when they composed a verse about his destroying Vader and the Emperor? "No, no, no!" he had laughed, "That's not how it happened!") They had composed long verses about Lando flying *towards* the Imperial fleet in the heat of battle to draw away the fire of the Death Star.

The Imperial Fleet. It had not disappeared with the Emperor. There were still Imperial Admirals and Generals with their own ships, their own protectorates, their own established lines of influence. They would not easily surrender to the Alliance. Not to mention the various legions of Storm Troopers, many of whom were rumored to be clones, with an allegiance to the Emperor encoded into their genetic material.

Chaos.

No, not now, not yet. She tuned out all but the krrrcher bugs, and rolled over, curling up to Han. He stirred, opened his eyes, and smiled a sly, mischievous smile. "Good Morning Princess", he said sleepily. "General Solo", she replied, and then frowned.

She felt the approach of Mne Mna, the maternal Ewok who had welcomed her in this village, who had brushed out her long hair oooh-ing and aaah-ing. Mne Mna was bringing warm cups of the clear, green tea the Ewoks favored and was followed by one of the team commanders.

Leia turned to Han: "Commander Leikin is coming," she said. He looked at her, and frowned (although whether at the Commander's early morning approach or at Leia's strengthening senses she couldn't tell), nodded, pushed out of bed and pulled on some clothes.

Mne Mna came into the room, hooting quietly; Leia smiled at her. Commander Leikin called from outside: "General Solo."

Han lent over and kissed her on the forehead and then exited, saying, "Yes, Commander, what's the latest?"

"Sir, several of the stormtroopers have escaped. We tracked them and found that they had left the planet in small shuttles toward the fleet."

"Well," replied Han, "We weren't prepared for keeping prisoners of war on this mission. What about those who have been more cooperative? Have we had new information from them?"

"No sir, just what they said before about being ordered here by the Emperor directly, on very short notice. We are awaiting orders on them. Also Admiral Ackbar and Mon Mothma have requested to speak with Senator Organa."

Ackbar and Mothma. Leia stirred and sat up in bed. Mne Mna served her tea and began to re-dress Leia's wound. The Ewok had brought a paste of some kind and applied it after cleaning the burn. "It will scar", Leia thought to herself, and realized she didn't care. The paste was soothing and Mne Mna expertly rewrapped her arm. Then the Ewok began to brush her hair, nimbly forming braids despite her short, stubby fingers. Her ministrations reminded Leia of a nurse she had had as a girl, as a Princess, on Alderaan.

Princess. She was still called Princess. Princess of what? Princess and Senator of a planet not just destroyed but pulverized, annihilated. Member of a body, the Senate, which the Emperor had officially disbanded.

No, she was no princess, no daughter of a Queen. She was a daughter of a Monster and of... who? "Very beautiful, but very sad", she had said to Luke, who had seemed profoundly sad at not being able to recall his mother. Leia could picture her mother, but she had no idea who she was. Had Bail or the Queen known?

Leia again shook away these thoughts, focusing instead on the moment, focusing on Mne Mna offering her fresh clothing, focusing on the clear tea, focusing on Han's conversation with Leikin.

"How about Commander Skywalker, is he up yet?"

Leikin responded by laughing. "If he is a Jedi, I'm surprised at how much he drank last night! Last I hear sir, he was still sleeping it off!"

Leia smiled and reached out again, thinking of the lewd songs the pilots had begun singing, songs which degenerated into disparaging tunes regarding the Emperor's private parts.

It had been one of those moments when spontaneous laughter rang out. One of the moments when everything made sense, when every person, every creature had its place in the universe.

Luke was waking, not far away, also being served the green tea, which cleared the head.

"Luke, Brother," Leia called.

"Good morning, Little Sister." came the response. *"Somehow I sense there is no rest for the weary."*

His words came to her as clear as if he were standing next to her.

"True." she replied.

The planet Ommpe had an entirely different resource: a fruit that grew prodigiously. Amoots could be made into any number of sauces, soups and drinks. If one could be obtained fresh, it was delicious to eat right off the vine; this delight was unknown to most though, since it did not travel well in a fresh state. If fermented it could be made into a light and gently intoxicating wine.

Many had tried to export the vines to grow on other planets, or to shorten its growing season, or to produce larger crops. These efforts invariably failed, whether because there was something in the soil or in the wavelength of Ommpe's sun, or perhaps even in the spit of the beetles that cared for the seeds during the five standard years they must be kept in darkness to create a fertile vine.

The beetles themselves were an interesting life form, having a life-span almost four times as long as a human. For three-quarters of their lives they were beetles, caring instinctively for the Amoot plants, and reproducing. If they lived long enough however, they would go into a dormant state for several years and emerge as intelligent, tall, willowy creatures. The adult Ommpians had joined the Republic long ago and were fairly active in the affairs of the galaxy. The Amoot crop bought them a substantial trade advantage. The governing Ommpian bodies were never entirely enthusiastic in the efforts to increase the Amoot crop, which would have decreased the price.

The Emperor himself had a distinct fondness for Amoot wine, and purchased large amounts of it. However, the Ommpians, who were a peaceful species, were appalled at the Emperor's treatment of many worlds and tried to use their influence to mitigate his exploitation. They threatened to cease exportation of the wine.

The Emperor sent Vader to Ommpe to "negotiate a favorable outcome", which greatly annoyed Vader; a Sith Lord was being sent out to procure wine and sauce? After listening to the arguments of the adult Ommpians, he came to a rapid decision. He and a team of stormtroopers murdered as many of the adults as they could find, leaving the beetles to care for the seeds and the vines. Vader left a contingent there to kill any beetle that went into a dormant state. In this way, the Emperor was guaranteed his supply of Amoot wine, without the troubling protestations of the Ommpians.

A few adults had escaped though, and, in hiding, cared for a few beetles. They kept hidden until the death of the Emperor, despairing about their inability to do anything about the exploitation of their precious Amoot plants and their beetle cousins.

The holographic images of Mothma and Ackbar from the ships above showed them to be at least as concerned about the future than they had been before the Battle of Endor. Mothma's insistence especially, given that she was usually so reserved, convinced Han of the seriousness of their intent.

"We must go to Coruscant quickly." Mothma was saying. "We must establish an Interim Authority of the New Galactic Republic and Senate. We cannot underestimate the will of the Imperial Generals and Governors who will each struggle to maintain control and expand their influence."

Ackbar continued: "Leia, as the representative of Alderaan, and Luke as the Jedi who destroyed the Emperor, will carry the moral and popular authority to thwart the remaining Imperials. Further, they will give hope to the peoples of the galaxy that their future under the New Galactic Senate will be better than their lives under the Empire." Luke started at hearing these words, and he seemed ill at ease. He replied, "I cannot take sole credit for the death of Vader and the Emperor. Lando and the pilots, Han and the ground team, so many others contributed at least as much as me. Lando and the pilots destroyed the Death Star and they should be recognized for that."

"We have already discussed General Calrissian's role for the coming weeks. We will need him to be a spokesman for the image of the transition from military to civilian rule."

Han heard Leia say, not loudly enough to be transmitted, "Are we sure he wants this role?" Han glanced at her, and then turned back to Ackbar.

"What about the prisoners?" he asked. "Some troopers have escaped and returned to the fleet, taking several of their transports. "What shall we do with those who remain?"

Ackbar's response was immediate. "Bring as many as you can to Coruscant. We will reunite them with their families to gain credibility."

"Give us a few hours Admiral," said Han, frowning, "We need to make some repairs and ready the prisoners."

Captain Vanaros of the Imperial Class Star Destroyer, the *Silver Scythe*, was somewhat perplexed. His ship had been on patrol on the Outer Rim when the call came to group at Endor. It had arrived just as the battle began, and Vanaros saw with his own eyes the massive Super Star Destroyer *Executor* plunge into the Death Star, before it had imploded. Now he was unsure of whether to continue the mission he had left or to await further orders.

Although Captain Vanaros' career had been distinguished, and he was highly regarded as a very competent captain, he deliberately kept a low profile, not expecting further promotion or commands. He had been born on the world of Guar, whose guara mining operations were the largest in the galaxy. Guara, because of its very high burning temperature, was ideal for the processing of brthdeium and so was required in large amounts by the Galactic Corporations and then the Empire. Vanaros was the fourth and youngest son of a miner and his wife, a couple who unquestioningly worked hard to provide for their sons. Although much of the mining process was automated, it still required the intervention of live beings to extract the highly flammable guara, and the work was dangerous and deadly. Even if a miner survived the day-to-day mining operations, he could still expect to contract one of several conditions of the lungs, liver or kidney that would disable him and take his life at an early age. Vanaros had vivid memories of his mother staying up all night to care for his father's various ailments. He remembered being disappointed in himself for his disgust at the fluids, mucus and blood that his father's failing body produced.

The Vanaros couple had encouraged their sons to further their education and leave Guar, but the three older boys had little ambition and the firm belief of many teenagers that some outstanding opportunity would materialize, recognize their outstanding talents and take them away with little effort on their part. When this did not happen, and they became miners like their father, they blamed everyone but themselves, including their hardworking parents.

Vanaros, the youngest, was different, and he had the highly unusual ability to learn from the mistakes of others. He watched his brothers' various schemes and debaucheries, and determined that he would not follow them. He studied hard, was accepted at the Galactic Military Academy and had achieved the status of Captain at a relatively young age. He was not present when his father died, and he did not keep in touch with his brothers. He paid for a modest living for his mother, and responded to her missives dutifully, without describing his missions or work in detail. Not only would she fear for his life, (being killed in battle was the least risk: if he failed at a mission which had Lord Vader's attention, the Dark Lord would take his life without hesitation) but she would be saddened at many of his assignments, which frequently involved making the lives of miners and workers in other places more miserable than they already were. Quotas needed to be increased, and inadequate workers needed to be retired or eliminated, with little concern for their livelihood and that of their families.

Which was what he had been doing when the call came to come to Endor: overseeing factory upgrades where stormtrooper armor was manufactured, and sending the workers on a forced migration to camps in one of the more desolate planets in the system.

Now, many of the escaped stormtroopers were on his ship, and rumors were flying that the war was over, the Empire had been defeated and that they could return to their home systems, to their families. Worse, there were rumors that some new authority had enough reserves to give each soldier real property on a planet of their choice, education and a sum of money with which to restart their lives. Vanaros highly doubted this could be possible.

There had been no orders from the Emperor, from Vader or even from Piett, recently made Admiral. Vanaros, quite certain that these three were dead, was unsure whom he should be taking orders from, if even enough of the Empire survived for him to receive any orders.

At last the chief navigator approached: "What are your orders, sir?" and on an impulse Vanaros replied: "Chart a course to Coruscant Commander. I will be in my quarters." and with that, he left the bridge.

"I am not sure I like this idea of releasing the prisoners," said Han. "They might go back to their families, but they might also retain some allegiance to various Imperial commanders, or become mercenaries for whatever factions are still fighting it out."

Luke, Han and Leia were taking a last walk on a footpath in the woods of Endor. Lando and some Alliance mechanics were making some quick, patchy repairs to the Falcon; others were readying the shuttles and ships they had come down on. Threepio and others were processing the prisoners, gathering names and ranks.

"I am sure that Ackbar is already bringing together family members to make a public showing of their reunion. It will be a first step towards gaining credibility," said Leia.

Han just grunted, knowing that soldiers and politicians would never agree on these matters. They walked a bit further and then he changed the subject. "So how did you two figure out you are brother and sister?" he asked.

Luke looked at him blankly, suddenly realizing so much had happened that Han knew nothing about. He was aware of a slight wariness in Han, but chose to overlook it. Leia was absorbed in the trees and birds, seemingly unable to put the events of the past weeks into words.

Instead of replying, after a pause, Luke asked: "Han, you remember those stories you told me, the rumors you knew about Anakin Skywalker?"

Han was startled by the question, but replied, "Your father?" Han glanced warily at Leia, and continued cautiously. "Well, like most of the Jedi, all official references to him were eliminated. Most pilots say he was the greatest pilot ever, a soldier who would risk his own neck to save another soldier with him. Even clones who were considered by most to be little better than droids, he would return to rescue."

"Yes," said Luke.

Han continued, thinking this through. "So that means that Leia is his child too? She is the daughter of Anakin Skywalker?" Han's voice trailed off, grappling with this. "How did you find this out?"

"How do pilots say that Anakin died?" Luke continued, instead of replying.

Han reluctantly continued, looking over at Leia who was still gazing at the trees. "Some say he was killed in the Jedi Purge; some say he was killed by Darth Vader. A few even say...." Han paused, a look of understanding crossing his face, then said: "that he became Darth Vader."

Han looked from Luke to Leia. Luke held his gaze evenly; Leia continued to look off into the trees.

"But I never gave that idea much credit," he added, as if hoping his words could change what he was coming to understand.

Suddenly he wanted to wrap Leia in his arms, even though she seemed so distant.

Instead Han asked, "But how did you find this all out?"

At last Luke explained, "After we left Hoth, I went to the Dagobah system, as instructed by....". Luke paused. Han would have to come to terms with the presence of the Jedi, as much as he was coming to terms with Luke and Leia's abilities. "...as instructed by Obi Wan." To Luke's surprise, Han simply accepted this. "Yes," said Han, "that

is what you were moaning that night on Hoth. 'Dagobah', 'Obi Wan' and..." he paused, remembering. "Yoda."

"Yoda was the last surviving Jedi master, and from him I received Jedi training. But I had visions of you and Leia in pain, so, contrary to Yoda and Ben's wishes, I came to you on Bespin."

"So that is why Vader tortured us," Han said, finally putting the pieces together.

"Yes", said Luke, "and it was when Vader and I battled that he took off my hand and told me he was my father."

Han took a moment to absorb this. "So, are you a Jedi now? Is Leia?"

"I don't know if I am or not. As far as I know, Yoda and Obi Wan were the only Jedi to survive the Purge. I know that members of the old Jedi order trained for years from childhood, and that they took vows, which I couldn't begin to guess what they are. After we rescued you on Tatooine, I returned to Dagobah. Yoda was very frail and after confirming that Anakin became Vader, and telling me about Leia, he died. Obi Wan confirmed that we are twins. As for Leia, she hasn't received any training and is only beginning to feel the Force."

They both looked at Leia, but she did not respond, continuing only to look into the distance.

Trying to change the subject Han said. "Well, seeing that you killed the Emperor and Vader, you should get some recognition Luke."

"I didn't kill them," Luke replied. "And it is a problem if everyone thinks I did. I didn't kill anyone."

"Well, what happened then?" asked Han, and even he could see that Leia, although looking off into the woods, was now paying close attention to Luke's words.

"I refused to join them," said Luke sitting back on a fallen log, "I refused to give into the Dark Side, even after I saw the Death Star destroy the Mon Calamari ship the *Liberty*. So, the Emperor began to torture me. He was able to shoot bolts of energy from his fingers and these were agonizing. While the Emperor's attention was turned to me, Vader - Anakin - lifted him, and threw him into the main energy shaft, killing him."

"Vader then collapsed, I suspect because the energy bolts critically damaged his life support systems. I tried to bring him with me on a shuttle, but he was dying. He asked me to take off his helmet and I saw him. He was quite disfigured but he had... " how to say this utterly preposterous thing? "... he had.... kind eyes."

Luke looked at Leia, and she met his eyes, but he could not read her expression, or her feelings at all. He felt within her only a dull ache.

"He said to tell you Leia, that I was right, that there was still enough good in him. Then he died."

Luke continued: "I brought his body here and burned his armor about two kilometers to the east of here."

After a pause Luke said, "In any case, I don't want to take credit for something I didn't do. I don't want this New Republic to be based on lies. Palpatine, Sidious, the Emperor tyrannized with lies. We must not follow that path."

"I don't know how that can be managed," said Han gently, "It sounds like the Alliance is depending on you for its public image, to jump start the New Republic."

Luke didn't reply, thinking of this. Then they both looked at Leia. Her face was hard.

"I don't know if I can forgive him," was all she said. Then she turned and continued looking at the trees.

The planet Urdnough had always been known for its agriculture. Its mild climate, underground springs and fertile ground made for ideal growing conditions for noughnough, a grain that could be formed into many nutritious foods for humans and other species. Its farmers worked in cooperatives, using native insects for pest control and never artificially increasing the yield. Conditions were so consistent that they could make a good living growing and exporting noughnough, as well as grow their own vegetables and livestock to live happily and comfortably.

Not long after the declaration of the Empire, a regional Governor arrived, Governor Anastil, who enforced the will of the Emperor. He immediately implemented a Five Year plan, whereby the production of noughnough would be phased out, in order to grow noo'or. Noo'or was suitable for feeding to ragnas, beasts whose meat was preferred by first the clone soldiers and then the recruited stormtroopers. The farmers argued that Urdnough was not suitable for growing noo'or, especially as noo'or quickly depleted the soil of nutrients. Anastil was relentless though, and demanded that the farmers use fertilizers and growing methods that they knew would ruin the fertility of their soil. Some farmers acquiesced, and before long they could no longer make a living. To add insult to injury, they could no longer grow their own vegetables, and their livestock died of malnutrition. Other farmers resisted, and they were promptly removed from their land, land that had been in their families for generations. Families were broken apart and children died of starvation. The farmers appealed to the Imperial Senate and a few senators promised to bring forth their case, but no improvements resulted.

Luke and Han were seated in the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon, as it had been decided that this ship would transport Luke and Leia to Coruscant. Having Leia and Luke emerge from the damaged Correllian ship would present a better image than their arriving on an Imperial Shuttle, and these were the only ships that could reasonably make the trip. Lando and Chewbacca were on the hull, making some repairs.

As they tested the switches, Han decided to disclose his own truth. “Uh, Luke,” he said “uh, I think you should know...” Han looked into Luke’s clear eyes, which were turning mischievous, understanding what Han was about to say. “Leia and I...” he trailed off, not sure how to continue.

“Han,” Luke said, “you do anything to hurt my little sister, and you’ll wish we hadn’t rescued you from Jabba the Hutt!”

Han relaxed and smiled. “Wait!”, he said, “if you are twins, how do you know you are older?”

“He was born first, I remember now.” Leia said, entering, trailed by Threepio and Artoo.

“Well,” said Han, getting his cockiness back. “I only have one thing to say kid. I don’t know what possessed you to change your hair that way. It looks pretty silly.”

“What?” said Luke, startled at this change of topic. Artoo whistled. “Artoo concurs with Master Han’s assessment of your hair styling,” translated Threepio.

“I am trying to look like a serious Jedi Knight!” Luke exclaimed in his own defense.

“Sorry, Luke, it’s not working. You just look like an overeager politician,” said Leia, who reached out, mussed his hair, and grinned.

The planet Alderaan, not far from the Core, had circled far from its sun; if it hadn’t, it would have been uninhabitable, because of the great energy its sun gave off. The long Alderaanian year was split into a mild summer and a very cold but bright winter. Scientists had long wondered how the winters could be so cold and so bright, and had discovered at last that the atmosphere changed substantially during the winters, allowing great amounts of heat to escape into space.

As a result, the people of Alderaan were very hardy. They developed dark skin to protect them from the sun’s light reflected off of the snow. During the summer they traditionally harvested the many grains, berries and vegetables that would have to last them through the long, bright, cold winter. For the winters, they developed technologies that made use of the bright sun to keep them warm and dry. Thus they spent their long winters indoors making cheeses, wines and beers, caring for their very young and very old, studying the sciences of medicine, physics, astronomy and mathematics; and creating the most dazzling works of art. Sculpture, theater and music were the most popular, as well as wardrobe, either for official functions or the theater. One of the Alderaanian trees, the bak-ach, produced a wood that was very hard and very beautiful, glistening in lights and darks, in its finished state. The Alderaanian sculptors formed this into statuary, jewelry, furniture and much more, and these works were highly prized throughout the galaxy.

Alderaan culture had been long known for its technologies for protection against the cold, particularly the deep cold of space. More prosaically, they were known for skin creams and lotions that not only protected the skin, but also made it stronger and healthier.

During one episode at the height of the Republic the Alderaanians were appalled at the oppression of a particular species on a non-Republic world, and lobbied extensively for Republic members to intervene. Republic rules were strict however, and there was to be no official assistance. There was no preventing the compassionate of Alderaan from taking action though, and many of their doctors traveled in teams to this world to alleviate the suffering. These extra-governmental groups became a new kind of institution, traveling from world to world, trying to end violent conflict and providing medical care. The word Alderaanian became synonymous with selfless caregiver.

The Alderaanian Royal House was not really a single Royalty, but rather a network of families, who had over long generations worked together to make decisions about the planet's resources. Other worlds marveled at their ability to keep power without abusing it, but the Alderaanians only laughed when this was discussed, and replied that power was meaningless in the middle of winter when simply walking outdoors might kill you. Over time the families would select a King or Queen to serve for life, who moderated between the different families and made final decisions. The Alderaanians were a peaceful people, preferring discussion to violence, and clever solutions to seemingly intractable problems between parties.

If the Alderaanians had any fault at all, it was a kind of condescension they felt in regards to the superiority of their medical care. Why did others settle for the substandard care of medical droids when a well-trained living doctor could so much better make a diagnosis or plan a course of treatment? In fact, the day Leia was born, Bail Antilles Organa lamented greatly to himself that one of the better Alderaanian doctors was not present. Lost her will to live indeed! Who died of that?

But other than this, the Alderaanians were a compassionate, thoughtful people who despaired at the decline of the Republic.

The wedding of Bail Antilles and Aquilae Organa was a joyous occasion, as it added the Antilles family into the larger Royalty. The Antilles had been dedicated pilots and mechanics, and were credited with much of the technologies that protected against the cold. Young Bail was a skilled and careful politician who rose to prominence quickly, and was overwhelmingly selected to be the Vice Chancellor and Senator to the Galactic Senate. When the prior King died Aquilae was easily selected to be the Queen because of her intelligence and ability to negotiate not only between the various Alderaanian families but also with the members of the faltering Republic.

Their only sadness was that they could not conceive a child. The early spring day, when green was starting to

come to the valleys near the Royal Palace, when Bail brought tiny Leia home to the Queen was one of the happiest of their lives.

While Leia's adopted status was clear by looking at her fair skin and hair, which was much lighter than the golden brown skin and deep black hair of Alderaan, her non-native birth became even more obvious as her disposition developed. In time she learned patience and even-temperedness, but these were not natural to her. She was prone to impulsiveness and could become irritated if things did not go as she thought they should. Over and over she tested the patience of Aquilae and Bail, who took more day-to-day care of her as royalty than even most Alderaanian parents.

In later years, Leia would occasionally awake in the middle of the night and think to herself: if she had not gone to retrieve the Death Star plans, if she had not taken the Tantive IV to Tatooine in search of Obi Wan Kenobi, if she had perhaps killed herself instead of being taken by Darth Vader, then maybe Tarkin's attention would have been elsewhere and perhaps Alderaanians would still be making sculptures out of bak-ach trees and creams from the milk of local ruminants.

Queen Aquilae had shown the utmost of patience with Leia, and when others asked the origins of the child, the mother simply smiled. The Queen never asked her consort about Leia's parentage, although Bail was sure that she guessed it, if only from the way that the Queen arranged Leia's hair in elaborate braids, and read to her stories from the history of Naboo.

On that disastrous day, in the middle of summer when the planet was lush with brown and green plant life, on that day when the lasers of the Death Star trained on Alderaan, the hearts of many, the recipients of the selfless care of Alderaanian doctors, the other deposed senators of the Galaxy and the Alderaanians traveling around the galaxy on various missions, were broken.

The survivors regrouped after the Disaster, either in joy at finding those thought lost, or in despair and considered their next steps. They decided to remain dispersed, living on the generosity of sympathizers, joining the Rebel Alliance, until such a day as might arrive when they could recreate a homeland.

Leia did not know what she was expecting when the Falcon flew in over Coruscant. It had been a long time since she had been to the capital, and she wondered what would be the state of the skyscrapers and towers. As she might have expected, she saw that the regions under the control of the Emperor and his minions were still sparkling and beautiful, while other regions, inhabited by workers or those who could no longer work were deteriorated and dreary. In one spot, she noted a mob of people storming a palace whose automatic security they disabled, running away with expensive items and food. Leia wondered what if anything could be done, to prevent this looting so that any evidence or information about the workings of the Empire could remain untouched.

She was completely unprepared for the crowd that awaited them near the landing platform, and from Luke's gasp she could tell he was startled too. Fortunately they had been directed to a landing platform that was not much bigger than the Millennium Falcon. Some security was in place to keep the crowds off of the platform itself, so they clustered on surrounding platforms and on the balconies of nearby buildings.

The ship's occupants could see Mothma and Ackbar on the raised platform with a few other dignitaries. The surrounding crowds shouted and cheered. Even Han was speechless at the spectacle. Only Lando seemed excited at the prospect of the crowds. "They are here to see us!" he was saying, "They are here for us!"

"Right", said Han, under his breath.

"Oh My", said Threepio unsure of how to take in the crowd.

"Well, Lando, since you seem the most unfazed by the crowd, maybe you should go out first," said Leia.

"What can go wrong?" asked Lando, "they love us!"

"My father always warned me about the expectations of a populace, and how if those expectations are not met, a populace can turn ugly," replied Leia. Then she paused, and added with a hint of defiance, "My father, Bail Antilles Organa."

The Millennium Falcon alighted on the platform raised above the crowds, and even before the hatch was opened the occupants could hear the roar of the crowd.

Lando exited first, his arms extended to the crowds and their cheers. Then Han walked out and saluted.

Leia and Luke walked out next, together. Luke had seen quite a bit since he had left Tatooine, but nothing prepared him for the diversity of species in the crowd as their roar turned to him. As he and Leia stepped out they stopped and the crowds roared and applauded.

They were followed by Chewbacca, who had his own Wookiee cheering section, and finally the two droids, Artoo Detoo and See Threepio.

Mothma walked up to them, and greeted each of them in turn. The eight of them, along with Admiral Ackbar turned to the crowds surrounding them on the nearby buildings and platforms, who applauded and cheered until they were hoarse.

"And in the days of greatest despair, a hero shall emerge, and he shall be called the Son of Suns."

Vanaros wondered at this snippet of mythology that was repeating itself in his head. Where had he heard it? Who was the Son of Suns?

But now was not the time for this line of thought. His lieutenant was making a report.

“We are getting very confusing messages from the surface of Coruscant sir, nothing consistent. There is another Star Destroyer on the far side of the planet, but it does not respond to our hails.”

He paused and asked, “Have there been any commands from any of the remaining Admirals, sir?”

“The ones I have heard from are not at all coordinated. Each is commanding nearby ships to recon at some specific location. Clearly each is trying to seize some power. What is the status of the troops?”

“We have enough food and water for a few days, sir. However, we need to tell them something about what to expect. We don’t want to have a riot on our hands. Although some of them...”

“Yes?” asked Vanaros. “What about them?”

“Well, I think it is those who are the most recent clones, and maybe a few who are sons of the original clones. They seem...” he didn’t know how to say this, “they seem sluggish sir. Very tired and immobile.”

Vanaros pondered this. The Clones were rumored to have a devotion to the Emperor embedded into their design. It begged the question: what would happen when there was no Emperor to be devoted to?

His second was awaiting orders.

“Continue our course to Coruscant. When we arrive we will go into orbit and await further instructions.”

“Yes Sir.”

As the lieutenant stepped away to check their course, Vanaros realized that he had already decided what he would do next.

Mon Mothma, former senator and Supreme Commander of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, led the small group to a small, hastily converted conference room, below the landing platform.

“Leia” she said, turning and giving Leia a long hug. “For so long, we have waited for this day, and now that it is here, I feel more anxious than ever.”

Leia returned the older woman's gaze in sympathy, holding her by the arms. "I keep thinking back on the words of my father," said Leia. "He too had concerns about the day the Emperor was destroyed."

"And here we are," said Mothma. She turned the Solo and the others, greeting them, and then to Luke she said, "Here is our hero."

"No, no, not really," protested Luke, "Much more of the credit goes to Han and Lando and Wedge and the other pilots."

"You are so modest," she said. "You are a credit to the Jedi." She turned and gestured for the others to be seated.

"First, you should know that we have sent messages to many former senators, particularly those whose worlds were members of the Alliance, inviting them here to Coruscant."

"Is that safe?" asked Han. There must be hundreds of Commanders, as well as Generals and Admirals who will want to take advantage of the current situation, to try to take as much power as they can. Isn't it dangerous to bring all of the senators to one place?"

Ackbar replied: "We have considered all of this. It is why we must act quickly and decisively, preserving our momentum, and begin to build an interim Authority. It is our goal that this Authority will determine the structure of the New Republic. I also suspect that a few of the Imperial commanders will join us."

"With all due respect Admiral, why would they do that?" asked Han.

"The real threat to the new Republic is not the military commanders, but the regional governors. They are entrenched in their posts and positions, and will only relinquish their jurisdiction with a fight. I think that some military commanders will see that these governors will fight for their positions, but that the peoples of those worlds will be heartened by our victory and will rise up against the oppression. Captains and Generals do not want to be on a losing side, and will be reluctant to get bogged down in local skirmishes with highly motivated locals."

"And you are summoning the senators here to gain agreement on this course of action?" asked Leia.

Mothma answered her. "If we do not unite against the governors, successes will be sporadic and piecemeal. The galaxy will be haphazardly strewn with oppressed systems among free, placing the free systems under multiple pressures they may not be able to withstand. If we unite now, we can build on our momentum and oust as many governors as possible."

"What about financial backing?" asked Han. "Soldiers need to eat, and ships need fuel."

“That is another reason to maintain our momentum,” replied Mothma. “Mon Calamari and Chandrila have already pledged continuing support, and we will need other systems to continue and expand their support.”

“Well, I still think its unlikely that many Imperials will switch sides. Even if they do, we won’t know if we can trust them” said Han.

“That is our first assignment for you General” replied Ackbar. “General Nadine is already communicating with one Captain Vanaros, of the starship the *Silver Scythe*. We think he will surrender when he arrives at Coruscant. We are preparing to meet him, and reunite as many of his men as we can with their families.”

“Are we sure we want our new Republic to be militarized?” asked Leia. “Is this a path we are sure that we want to go down?”

“And how do you even know that systems will want to be a part of a New Republic?” asked Lando. “I can imagine an awful lot of people who will be reluctant to hand any power to a central authority after so many years of Imperial rule.”

“These are all valid questions,” said Mothma. “Our immediate concern will be welcoming the senators back to Coruscant in safety, so that discussion can begin, and so that the Regional Governors can be removed. Despite our efforts there are still many worlds whose inhabitants are enslaved and oppressed.”

Chewbacca growled in agreement with this. Han knew that he had been following rumors of the continuing oppression of the Wookiees on Kashyyyk.

“Where will the Senators stay when they arrive here?” asked Leia. “How much of Coruscant have you secured?”

“We will ask for General Calrissian’s assistance with this,” replied Ackbar. “We will need you to take a team to 500 Republica and the surrounding neighborhoods. You will find layouts and maps of the area on this disk.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Luke. “Artoo can help us. Threepio, you stay with Leia and assist her.”

“Yes Master Luke,” said Threepio, and Artoo beeped in agreement.

Leia spoke up. “Please try to damage the residences as little as possible,” she said. “Returning to familiar quarters will encourage the senators.”

Suddenly loud voices were heard from the corridor, and everyone tensed until an Alliance guard escorted in a tall, willowy insect-like creature.

"I am sorry Commander, but this Ompian insisted on speaking with you," said the guard.

The willowy creature knelt before Leia. "Your majesty, I am Numbaktwe of Omppe. So few of us are left, but we pledge our fealty to you. We have suffered for many years after our great massacre, visited upon us by Darth Vader. Queen Organa," she said, looking up, "Master Skywalker," turning pleading eyes to Luke. "Can't you help us?"

Leia did what she could to assuage the Ompian, and Luke joined her. With kind words they escorted her to the door and the guard led her out. Then Leia turned to Mothma.

"I am no Queen," she said firmly.

"And I am no Jedi Master," said Luke.

Leia continued. "We will not take these titles; we will not have these roles imposed upon us!"

Mothma said calmly, "Leia, you cannot underestimate to what lengths many will pledge themselves to you, and also what great need the people have for a leader who will lead them from the darkness of the Empire. You may say you cannot be such a leader, but any return to liberty will need a strong hand to guide it. If we take away a central figure now, the galaxy will descend into chaos."

Chaos, thought Leia to herself. Chaos. She wished she could have a cup of that Ewok tea.

Major Treg was not about to relinquish his command, or his comfortable residence on Coruscant, even if the Imperial hierarchy was disintegrating around him.

Just before the destruction of the first Death Star, the Emperor had dissolved the Galactic Senate, rendering the residences of the Senators useless. Many of the Senators had fled, taking only a few belongings with them, and abandoning their fashionable apartments. The massive mushroom-shaped building, formerly known as 500 Republica and now known as 100 Palpatine's Way, was actually the least preferred of lodgings by the Senators, partly because of the high traffic coming and going, but mostly because of the lack of a view, which was always useful in impressing visiting guests. Any delegation that had a longstanding history, such as Alderaan or Mon Calamari for example, had apartments in the adjoining neighborhoods, which could be customized for a given species' needs and preferences.

Not only was it Treg's and his command's duty to patrol and protect these neighborhoods for the military commanders who now resided there, but also he himself had moved into to one of the smaller apartments, in the

same tower as the residence of the former delegation from Naboo.

Treg was somewhat disappointed that few of the residents remained in the neighborhoods now. What information he could gather indicated that a few were killed, but that many seemed to have disappeared. Were they gathering at a secret location that he was not privy to? Or had they deserted?

In any case, Treg fully intended to protect and guard this neighborhood as he had for the past several years, in preparation for the return of the Imperial Military commanders.

Today, many of his stormtrooper guards were ill; some kind of lethargy had set in. Treg suspected that not a few of them had, against his direct orders, joined the revelry of recent days, and were feeling the aftereffects of excessive imbibing. This was especially disturbing since he, Treg, was concerned about the reports of looting and rowdiness from elsewhere on the planet, and was ordering an increase in patrols.

So, this morning, Treg himself was patrolling the neighborhood in his airspeeder, stopping to liaise with trooper captains, and monitoring reports from other sectors.

Thus it was that Treg saw the small airborne squadron, approaching the neighborhood, before any of his men.

Luke found himself to be quite calm, somewhat to his surprise. This despite the fact that he still felt quite overwhelmed with the dizzying complexity of the architecture of Coruscant, and despite the fact that he had no blaster with him, only his green lightsaber (which he only dimly remembered summoning back to himself on the Death Star, before half-carrying his father's dying body to the shuttle), and despite Artoo's constant tweets and whistles indicating transmissions to the other airspeeders in the small squadron, being led by Lando. Even despite the slight queasiness in his stomach left over from the Ewok beer.

No, he felt quite calm, as he piloted his own speeder, one of several that Mon Mothma had somehow managed to acquire towards the location everyone called 500 Republica.

He spoke through the ship's comlink. "See that Lando?"

"Yes I do, old buddy," came the reply, "but why do they seem so... scattered?"

They and the other fighters could see a hovering barricade surrounding the massive 500 Republica and the nearby area, but the airspeeders seemed illogically positioned: clusters surrounded apparently unimportant spots, and large gaps allowed access to ornate towers.

"Well, I am following your lead in," said Luke, and he and the other airspeeders followed Lando in a curved arc,

heading towards 500 Republica.

As they cascaded in, laser bolts strafed past them, but the Alliance fighters broke up into groups, chasing down the stormtroopers in their airspeeders. The Stormtroopers seemed scattered and disorganized, and Artoo easily jammed the transmissions between them. One of the Imperial speeders though, broke off and headed to one of the apartment towers.

“Luke, we will take the entrance to 500 Republica, you go after that fighter,” ordered Lando.

“You got it buddy,” and Luke peeled off from the rest of the squadron in pursuit of the lone speeder.

The two bobbed and wove among the buildings, and before long Luke realized that this was no different from negotiating the canyons of Tatooine, in fact it was easier, since the artificial buildings had a regularity to their structure.

The speeder he was pursuing suddenly docked at a platform that led directly to one of the apartments, and occupant leaped from his seat and took cover behind a column. Luke too drew up his speeder, and alighted, trying not to be awed by the luxury of the open-air patio where they were. He drew his lightsaber, held it in a defensive position, and looked for his combatant.

Treg stared at the slim young man in black who alighted from the speeder, and confusion filled his head. For some reason, perhaps the black accoutrements, the young man reminded him of Lord Vader. From his light sword to his careful manner, the young man was similar to, yet different from the images and holos Treg had seen of Vader. Suddenly a thought appeared unbidden in his mind: “And in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a Savior, and he shall be known as the Son of Suns.”

Why was he thinking this? Where had this come from? Was this the Son of Suns before him? And if so, was this a time of “greatest despair”? He, Treg, had always believed in the New Order, in the dominance of Men over Primitives, in a time when the well disciplined and well-raised would quash the unruly and ill-conceived. No, his faith in Order was not misplaced!

Treg leaped out from behind his column, his blaster blazing, with deadly accuracy at the young, slim man.

Luke easily deflected the bolts, and one deflected back into Treg’s chest, burning a hole in him, and killing him instantly. Then, he leapt back into his speeder with Artoo, and flew to rejoin Lando.

Ackbar and Rieekan were interviewing Captain Vanaros when Han entered the control room that the Mon

Calamari had secured.

“You can review our transmissions. While there are a few Admirals who appear to be trying to consolidate power in the sectors I have indicated, much of the fleet seems to be in disarray. Further, it seems that the Clone Troopers are slowly falling into unconsciousness and... dying.” This sounded preposterous even to his own ears, and Vanaros wondered if he would be believed.

But the Mon Calamari Admiral, the Alderaanian General and the just-entered Corellian General only nodded silently. The Alderaanian General said something into what Vanaros supposed was the Calamari’s ear.

“Why are you surrendering to us?” asked the Corellian.

Vanaros paused. Should he say something about the prophecy that kept replaying in his head like a bad melody? More unbelievably should he say something about his mother, the miner’s wife?

“I simply think that it is the Alliance who will be running things in the near future. I don’t want to be on the losing side, trying to protect some Regional Governor when his planet rises up against him.”

“Why should we trust you?” asked Solo.

“Right now, you probably shouldn’t. When you corroborate that what I have told you is true, that many of my clone troops are dying, that I released those troops who wished to seek out some remnants of the Empire, or who wished to return to their families, and that I have with me a small group of men who will follow your orders and place the Silver Scythe at your command, then you can begin to trust me.”

Solo grunted, looking at him. At that moment, Lando entered, confident in his recent victory, followed by Luke.

“Sirs, we have secured 500 Republica and the surrounding areas, and we have left a contingent stationed there to prevent looting and protect the area. Someone might want to get some droids in there, though, to clean up before the Senators arrive.”

But no one was paying attention to him. They were all looking at Vanaros, who had dropped to a position on his knees, but with a straight back and a wondering look, towards Luke.

“And in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a Savior, and he shall be called the Son of Suns,” he said.

Luke approached him. “Stand, Captain Vanaros,” he said. “Where did you hear this phrase?”

Vanaros stood and hesitated. “I don’t know sir, perhaps... my mother? But I pledge myself and my services to

you.”

“And we are appreciative of them,” said Luke, taking his hand. “Sirs? This man can be of great assistance to us.”

Han accompanied Leia to the Alderaanian apartments, which Threepio had hastily cleaned and tried to make more presentable. It had a grand view of the city, although the furnishings were of a style that Leia found quite unappealing. Leia noted that almost all of her favorite bak-ach pieces were gone, replaced by things of poor quality. Still, it was as spacious as it had ever been, and the luxurious bath was still in place, and the view from the terrace was still glorious.

“Well,” said Han, staying cheerful. “Quarters almost good enough for a princess!”

“Stop it,” Leia said, staring out to the senate building, which was miraculously still standing. “I am no princess, I am no queen. How can I even be a senator, without a world.” She sunk into one of the wide seats, staring out to the distance.

“Leia, you know me, I was just kidding. Look, you knew you were adopted long ago. The Alderaanian survivors still think of you as their Princess.”

“Stop it!” she said rising, more angrily this time. “Don’t you see, those people see me as something I am not! They see me as a ... a... Savior!”

“No, they see Luke as the Savior, they see you as the Queen.” Han hoped his attempt at levity would calm Leia. Instead it had the opposite effect.

“I am not a Queen! I cannot undo 25 years of Imperial oppression! I am descended from an agent of that Oppression! I should be nothing! I should be no one!”

Han approached her, placing his hands on her shoulders. “You are not nothing Leia,” he said, “You are one of the bravest people I have ever met. You are a Hero, you have helped bring down that oppressive empire.”

Leia looked away, still distraught.

“You are tired,” said Han. “You haven’t had any time to yourself.” He paused. “I picked out a small room for myself a few floors below, near Luke’s. I’ll let you get some rest.”

“No,” she said, turning to him. “Don’t leave. Stay.”

Luke had selected a small apartment in the same tower as the Alderaanian residence, a few floors below the luxurious top-floor terraced apartment, giving him a view of the city. After using the 'fresher, and feeling better than he had in weeks, Luke, the farm boy from Tatooine, spent some time marveling at the skyscrapers and towers, still astonished at the magnitude of the city. Now that it was dark, the city was a network of glittering jewels, and he thought he could watch it for hours.

However, he wanted to meditate, to process the events of recent days. He sat cross-legged on the floor, closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

First, he encountered Han and Leia making love in the apartment a few floors above him – he thought it best to not disturb them. Then, curious, he sought out similar couples in this building and nearby. He discovered that many, very close to him, of different species and shapes were engaged in sex, making love. The more he focused on this the more he found instances of it, everywhere. He wondered to himself, were there this many beings always coupling? Or were they all in a particularly celebratory mood? The energy of the lovemaking was intoxicating, and he knew he could slip into this, like a warm bath and stay there, just as he could have continued gazing out on the Coruscant landscape.

But this was not his focus this night. So he redirected his attentions and turned to the brightness in the Force that was the site of the Jedi Temple, not far from where they were. He had seen the abandoned remains of it that morning, and wondered what was left, and why the Emperor had left it untouched. He reached to it, but although it was bright, it was silent.

Luke was hoping for some guidance from the Force, something to tell him how to proceed. How should he continue his own Jedi training? Should he train Leia, and could he help ease the anger and confusion she continued to suffer? How would he even train Leia? What dangers existed for the nascent Republic? Should the Republic be re-created, or was that too dangerous? Should he re-create the Jedi order, and how would he do that? What should he do if he encountered another who was gifted with sensitivity to the Force? Many questions jumbled over in his head, and he tried to relax, and look for patterns.

Instead, a vision, or perhaps a memory, came to him.

His Uncle Owen and his Aunt Beru, at their homestead on Tatooine, relaxing one evening after a day of work, seated around a table with a friend of Owen's.

Owen saying: "Kenobi was seen near Anchorhead? He is still living in that hovel by the Dune Sea? Why is he still here? Why does he think Luke needs looking after, and why doesn't he think I am up to it? What does he think is going to happen?"

The friend replied, murmuring sympathetically.

“He showed up here, pretty angry after we registered Luke,” Owen continued, “angry that I had named him Skywalker instead of Lars! Why wouldn’t I have named him Skywalker? He is Anakin’s son! And Shmi’s grandson! Shmi was one of the most admirable women I have ever met!”

More sympathetic murmurings from the friend.

“I don’t know. But I do know I will never forget that day, that he came back with her body. How angry he was. He wasn’t angry in a loud and boastful way. More like he was angry deep inside and he would never stop being angry. And later we found out about that tribe of sandpeople who had been completely slaughtered. I don’t know. Maybe he did become.....”

Then Beru turned to Luke, in his dream/vision.

“Luke,” she said kindly, “Why are you still up? You must go to bed now, the next few weeks will be full of hard work.”

Luke opened his eyes. Beru was right. He needed to trust that these questions would resolve themselves in due time. He needed to rest.

As he lay down to sleep, he thought back to Owen, and how little credit he, Luke, had ever given his Uncle. And how simply continuing to care for his charge was an act of bravery and defiance equal to that of the heroes of the galaxy.

Part II

For Leia, the next few days were an exhausting blur. She spent much of her time with the Norgarran delegations, trying to sort among the competing interests, trying to find truth in the words of the various parties, trying to negotiate some way of including the Norgarrans in the Interim Authority. She spent a great deal of time with Nep, an Ornal who had joined the Alliance some years back, only to find out that Nep’s perspective and information were outdated, and that allegiances on the planet had radically changed. It was unclear to her whether the more intractable of the Ornal and Ronalla hated the Empire more, or each other. Every time she thought she had made a step forward, their scheming and misinformation took her two steps back. Conversations with the more educated and well traveled of the Norgarrans would seem to have fruitful outcomes, but when compromises were presented to the religious leaders of the two groups, they would be disputed on outrageous claims, before they were outright rejected.

And this was just one world whose concerns and demands were coming to light. The Wookiees, the Twi'leks, the Utapaun and all who had been oppressed by the Empire or had fears in regards to the transition, came to her door.

Most troubling to her was the news from Urdnough. There, the farmers who had been long oppressed by Anastil and his cronies rose up, and took Anastil's buildings and facilities by force. Not only were Anastil and his men killed, but also their low-level staff and families. The bodies of small children, who had not chosen to be born to Imperials were dragged through streets and burned. Pleas to them, to imprison the Imperials and join the members of the Senate on Coruscant, were met with silence or hostility.

The best moment of those days was being reunited with a cousin, on Bail's side, from Alderaan. Erish Antilles was the same age as Leia, and the two girls had played, and taken lessons together. Erish had studied medicine, and had been on duty in the Outer Rim when Alderaan was destroyed. Leia had suspected she might have survived, and when she saw her cousin before her, she hugged her deeply.

She debated with herself whether to ask her cousin for help sleeping, for she found herself being troubled by dreams.

These dreams were unlike she had ever had before, because she *knew* that they were not *her* dreams. They were *his*. Vader's. Anakin's.

In the first she saw a woman. She knew instinctively that this woman's name was Shmi, that she was a slave, and that she was Leia's grandmother (mother?). Leia (Anakin?) felt a deep and abiding love for this woman, who had kind, wise eyes.

In this dream (vision?) she saw the woman being brutally beaten, by unknown monsters. She longed to go to her, to rescue her.

But she could not. The Jedi would not allow her.

Or was it that she could not allow herself? Because doing so would jeopardize her position in the Jedi, would prevent her from ever moving beyond being a Padawan. Would prevent her from rising in the Jedi ranks.

But the visions, the brutality, the mother's suffering worsened.

And so she went to the woman to save her. But she was too late; the mother died in her arms.

Fury, rage engulfed her. She lashed out at the monsters who had done this. The monsters resembled Jabba the Hutt at first, great slithering slugs, leering at her. She destroyed them ripping their bodies apart with a thought.

Then the monsters changed, into Ewoks and Wookiees, cowering before her. Even so, her rage was unchecked and unmitigated, and she slaughtered them all.

Leia wondered if she should tell Luke about this dream, but he was preoccupied with preparing Rogue Group for the next inevitable mission, and with meditating over the Jedi Temple. So she did not.

While living under the Empire was difficult for humans to negotiate, it was often a matter of desperate survival for intelligent non-humans. Property rights, rights to self-determination, rights of speech and religion were stripped away almost immediately after the Empire was declared.

To the Wookiees who had the wherewithal to think about it, the Empire's appointing the Trandoshans as their slavers was particularly ironic. After all, the Trandoshans were not human either, and their roles could have easily been reversed.

The enslavement of the Wookiees by the Trandoshans was brutal, and would not be forgotten for millennia. A blockade was set up around the planet, allowing only slave ships, or ships bearing supplies for the Trandoshan slave masters.

Each Wookiee was implanted at birth with a slave transmitter, which could be detonated if the slave resisted or tried to escape. As clever as the Wookiees were with technology, they were unable to decipher the transmitter codes and disable the transmitters.

Wookiee families were broken apart when one member would be taken away to work in the spice mines of Kessel, or in the mechanical sub layers deep under the surface of Coruscant, or in one of many dark, hot places where Wookiees would live painful lives and die excruciating deaths.

Very old Wookiees, who traditionally would have been revered and allowed a life of rest and playing with small children, were forced to work under humiliating or life-threatening conditions; this was a deep insult to all Wookiees.

When the Emperor was killed and the second Death Star was destroyed, the Trandoshans held their blockade. A small uprising was quelled by detonating the transmitters of not just the Wookiee rebels, but also of randomly selected children and elders. For the Trandoshans had the intention of diversifying their markets to any and all who might need a strong slave in the chaos that was bound to follow the fall of the Empire.

Another dream: A Twi'lek woman, not very different from Shmi. She had not asked for this life of hard work, a

technician on the droid factory floor of Geonosis. The woman had not asked that her husband, a low level servant to a low-level stormtrooper officer be killed by the Rebels. She had not asked for her small daughter, the sole light in her life, to be Force sensitive.

The Emperor's orders were clear. No Force sensitive beings could be allowed to live. There could be no possibility of some well-hidden Jedi training a padawan, and the Sith rules were not only clear, they were completely reasonable.

So this Twi'lek child had to die.

Perhaps this was another test of fealty to the Emperor. If so, there could be no failure.

The only mercy that Vader (or was it Anakin? or was it Leia?) showed to the mother of this child was to take the little girl while she was off on an errand, to not murder her in front of her mother. Leia (Vader? Anakin?) met the child in the market place and attracted her with a shiny trinket, (was that how the Jedi took children? Did they spirit them away whilst on an errand?) and then in a dark corner, quickly crushed her throat through the dark side of the Force. The child's body was left where it could be easily found. Then, Vader – Leia – Anakin returned to the Star Destroyer, crawled in the hyperbaric chamber, and did not come out for a long time.

As much as Leia was fond of Erish, she found Erish's mother, Nas Antilles, to be irritating and presumptuous. She was reminded of this as the three of them took a midday meal together, in between meetings. Nas had a penchant for poking her nose where it was not welcome; she assumed too much. She had survived Alderaan's devastation because she was, of all things, on a shopping expedition.

"Leia," she was saying, "you know there are only a small number of worlds that would be suitable for us to settle on. With your help, we can easily negotiate our settling on a portion of one of them. I am partial to Cathar myself. Dear, you aren't eating anything. These pastries are delicious."

Leia was irritated, not at the thought that the surviving Alderaanians were seeking a new home world, but at the presumption of her Aunt that Leia, and the rest of the galaxy would make her preferences their highest priority.

"We will see, Aunt Nas," Leia replied.

She took a sip of Ommplan wine, a gift from some Ommplanians in gratitude for the expedition that had been sent to liberate their planet. Lately drinking was of more interest to her than eating.

"Now Leia, dear," her aunt continued, "I am so glad to see you. I want to discuss more than politics with you! I know a young man, Lord Anacc whom I would like for you to meet! I think he would be a suitable match for you!"

Leia stared at her aunt, unsure of how to counter this unwelcome meddling. Fortunately, Erish interrupted. "Mother, Leia is very busy these days. Let us not bother her with this now."

Leia sensed that her cousin had some inkling of Han, and she met her cousin's eyes gratefully. As she listened to her aunt prattle on, she wondered how many others were concerning themselves with her personal life.

The planet Naboo had for the most part escaped the attentions of the Emperor, perhaps because it had originally been his home, or perhaps because it had no resources of interest to him. Over the two and a half decades of Imperial Rule, the economy of Naboo, like that of much of the galaxy, declined and weakened.

The people of Naboo, the humans, did as they had always done since they arrived on the planet: cultivating a plant whose flowers made tnotot, a fiber that could be spun into sumptuous material; producing wines of various fruits; and building the corvette spaceships which were prized by the most wealthy of the galaxy.

Although customers for these products diminished both in number and in character, the Naboo continued their craft, hoping for a day when things might improve.

The regional Imperial Governor had built his residence and offices on a previously uninhabited portion of the planet; most of the Naboo found it to be ugly. While the Gungans whom he brought on as servants for his residence and fields were not officially slaves, they may as well have been. He took extra effort to favor certain of them over others in order to sow dissent, brutally beating one for a minor infraction, while forgiving another who showed outright incompetence.

The situation sowed dissent among the humans of Naboo as well. Some argued that the Gungans had sacrificed much during the battle of Naboo, and that they should be emancipated. Others though, were too fearful of attracting the attentions of the Emperor, fearful that the markets they did have would be taken over by the Governor, or worse.

A few did what they could for the Rebel Alliance, providing supplies and ship parts. A few pilots and ship technicians disappeared, leaving behind only rumors of their joining the Alliance.

Senator Pooja Naberrie of Naboo, niece of the one time Queen Amidala, had played a difficult juggling act while the Senate was still in existence. She attended to her official duties, appearing to carry out the will of the Emperor, while carefully not exposing or even thinking of the covert activities of the Rebel Sympathizers on Naboo. She remembered as a small child, meeting Anakin Skywalker and asking him about Jedi powers, how he said that sometimes the Jedi could read minds. She suspected that Lord Vader and the Emperor had these powers as well, for how else could they have defeated the Jedi? So she was very cautious.

Much to her relief, a few days after the battle of Endor, the Gungans had risen up against the Governor, and he had surrendered with little resistance. The current Queen of Naboo had asked Pooja to resume her duties, so she was bringing the Governor, under arrest, along with the Gungan, Grana Tarpals, to the Capital Coruscant, to play what role she could.

The welcoming party to celebrate the arrival of the Senators and Delegations was a joyous affair, a grand reunion. Leia found herself the center of activity, greeting old friends, exclaiming at finding someone alive and well, and saddened by learning of the death of another. She was glad that she had worn a simple, flowing white gown; not only did it enable her to traverse the room, but it also discouraged any assumptions about her role in the new hierarchy.

Han was uncomfortable in his formal Alliance General uniform, and he envied Luke's simple Jedi robes. Lando was entirely comfortable in his flashy, accessorized uniform, and he worked the room, shaking hands and greeting everyone.

A voice spoke at Leia's elbow. "Princess Leia, Senator Organa, I am so pleased to see you!" Leia turned to see Senator Pooja Nabberrie, bowing to her. "No Senator," she replied, "I am glad to see you!" and Leia took her hand and shook it warmly, kissing the senator on the cheek.

"Please let me express my condolences for your family and people. The day of the loss of Alderaan was one of the darkest in the history of the galaxy."

Leia nodded her thanks, and Pooja continued. "I always suspected you were a member of the Alliance, and now I regret that I did not reach out to you when we were in the Senate together. I have done what I could during the last few years.

"Pooja, we have lived through dangerous times. I was always inspired by your patience and discretion. The supplies and pilots from Naboo were very helpful. Please tell me, how is your home?"

"Well, my life has been markedly more quiet than yours. I returned to Naboo to raise my own children and to be with my sister and her family. My grandmother died last year after a long illness. She never truly recovered from the death of my Aunt Padmé."

At this name, Leia's heart jumped, although she did not know why. "Padmé?" she asked.

"Yes, my Aunt Padmé Nabberrie Amidala, who was herself senator from Naboo, after serving as our Queen as a young woman. I have also worked to collect her writings that she composed while senator. Our governor took an

interest in destroying them for some reason, so I quietly collected what I could.”

“What happened to her?” Leia asked distractedly. Suddenly, she wished that Han or Luke, or even Threepio or Chewbacca were nearby.

“She died, very young, from complications from pregnancy, within a few days of the declaration of the Empire. To some on Naboo her death symbolized the death of democracy, of liberty in the galaxy. Here, I keep a few pictures of her.”

Pooja produced a small halo disk from her pocket and images appeared one after the other. “My daughter, whom I named Padmé, and my son Rawaa, my nieces. Ah, here it is, me as a small child with my Aunt Padmé.”

Leia looked at the image, of a tiny girl with very curly hair, and a young woman with a happy smile, and her heart nearly stopped. “Beautiful, but sad.” Although in this image, Padmé appeared very happy. Leia kept her composure, but called out in her mind: “*Luke, Luke, please come.*”

Beautiful, but sad. This was her, her mother had a name: Padmé Naberrie Amidala.

Suddenly Luke was at her side. “Leia”, he said.

“Luke, please meet Senator Pooja Naberrie of Naboo. Pooja, please meet Luke Skywalker.” She kept her voice steady, as Luke and Pooja bowed slightly to each other. “She has just been telling me of her Aunt Padmé Naberrie Amidala,” and Leia gestured to the image.

Leia’s mental voice was much more urgent than her physical one however: “*That is her Luke! That is our mother!*”

Luke also stayed calm, although Leia could sense his agitation. “You are as lovely as your Aunt” he said, sounding like he had been taking flattery lessons from Lando.

“Here is an image from her funeral,” said Pooja. “So beautiful. She was very pregnant when she died.”

“*No!*” Leia thought to Luke, “*No, they made her look pregnant to protect us!*”

Luke could sense that Leia was near tears. Even so, he pressed.

“She was married? Who was her husband?” he asked.

“Ah, that was a great mystery. As far as we knew, she never married, but my mother often said that she wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that Padmé had married secretly. Her top candidate was Anakin Skywalker, even

though he told us that as a Jedi knight he could not marry. I remember seeing the two of them together. I remember thinking, 'those are two people in love,' even though I was very young. He was very handsome and very kind to me."

She paused, thinking, oblivious to Leia's agitated state. "Luke Skywalker," she said, "You are not related to him, are you?"

Luke was startled out of his thoughts, and paused, looking at Leia. "Ah, distantly," he replied.

"Are you sure?" Luke asked Leia when they had a moment away. She was seated, and exhaustion was setting in.

"Yes, I can feel it, as strongly as I feel you next to me." She held his hand tightly.

Han was approaching. "What's wrong?" he asked. He looked concerned.

Luke answered for Leia. "Leia was talking with the senator from Naboo, the niece of a former Queen, Padmé Amidala. Leia has sensed that this Queen was our mother."

Han sat next to Leia, and took her other hand. She was trying not to weep. She turned to Han, "Please, let's go back to our quarters, I am very tired."

"Well!" said Han, trying to lighten the moment. "I guess that means I can start calling you Princess again!" and he ducked to avoid the furious look that Leia gave him.

The conference room that Mon Mothma had chosen for the first official gathering of the Interim Authority could have fit into the Grand Convocation Chamber many times over. Reasons both political and logistical had led her to the decision to use this large room, which had a deep gallery a few meters up, and into which a small oval table had been placed.

Now she wasn't so sure; as soon as the Senators, delegates and invited guests arrived arguments broke out, over the assigned seats, over who was included and who was not. As the starting time approached, she hoped she could maintain order.

Men she knew as soldiers were now acting as ushers, assisting with the seating arrangements, and calming tempers. She knew they would quell any violence that broke out, but she hoped that this would not be necessary. Other men, who had repaired starships, were now doing final tests on the broadcast system in the room. One showed her how to enable and disable any given speaker's comm unit.

Mothma could see Chewbacca, Solo's partner with the Wookiee delegation, Lando Calrissian with a group from Bespin, and different commanders joining the delegations from their home worlds. It was curious to her, to see allegiances form and re-form.

In any case, tempers were rising in the room, and the time to start was approaching.

Then, the doors opened, and Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa walked in. They were followed by Han Solo, and then by See Threepio. At their entrance, the room fell silent, and after a pause Mothma heard the voice of Numbaktwe, the Ommpian who had plead for help so many days ago. "The Son of Suns and the Queen of the Galaxy!" she said, as if in announcement. Much of the room voiced in agreement as the two approached the table.

Skywalker spoke, raising his hands. (His right was still gloved, Mothma noticed. Hadn't he gotten it fixed yet?) To all assembled he said, "I do not know what the Son of Suns is, and I doubt that I am it. Leia Organa is here as the selected representative of the Survivors of Alderaan, and she has requested General Solo's and my presence here. In any case, I suggest we observe a moment of silence, in recognition of all who have lost and given their lives in this great conflict."

Thus quiet settled on the room. Leia could feel Luke drawing the Force to himself, using it to calm the room and ease tensions. The three of them took seats among the delegates and Threepio moved to stand behind Mothma. Then, the first official discussion of the Interim Authority of the Alliance to Restore the Republic started.

"I strongly object to the inclusion of the Hutts in this body! They hold and trade slaves throughout the galaxy. They have engaged in illegal activities, they have undermined local economies." The human woman speaking reminded Leia a bit of the woman Shmi, in her dream.

"Further, I move that we disallow here any group that engages in slavery. We have a chance at last to abolish this outrageous practice from the galaxy." Cheers of agreement and yells of derision met her words.

Mon Mothma had known the topic of slavery would come up, but she hadn't thought it would come up so quickly. She had been more startled than anyone when Evona the Hutt had arrived at her office. Change was twofold for the Hutts: not only was the Empire crumbling, but also after the death of Jabba, many intra-Hutt rifts had re-emerged. The various clans were vying for dominance of the Hutt-controlled interests in the galaxy.

Evona had come to Mothma with a kind of a deal. Include her faction in the Authority, and she would deliver various worlds, business deals and financial support to the New Republic. Mothma was reluctant to take the deal, but decided that the opportunity was worth the risk.

The Wookiees stood and demanded attention. Threepio translated from the grunts and roars to Basic.

“We concur with the speaker. The Empire is destroyed. Why are the Trandoshans still permitted to enslave our people and our home? We second that no slavers be party to these proceedings.”

Han could tell that Threepio was not just translating the guttural language of the Wookies, but formalizing it for the proceedings. He doubted any Wookiee would have ever composed the phrase, “be party to these proceedings.” He watched Chewbacca from across the room. Chewie was itching to return to Kashyyyk and forcibly remove the Trandoshans from his world.

Mothma spoke: “As unused as we are to the idea of cooperation with the Hutts, I have allowed Evona to join us today. Evona.”

Evona was smaller than Jabba, and of a darker color. She raised herself to her full height and spoke in Huttese. Again, Threepio translated.

“Members of the Authority. First, we the Hutts commend the Rebel Alliance on their victory over the Empire, and on the elimination of other exploitative influences.” Here she looked directly at Leia, who immediately understood that word was out that *she* was responsible for Jabba’s death.

“My People...” (“My People?” thought Leia. That phrase was deliberately vague.) “My People are eager to participate in the creation of the New Republic. While there have been differences between the Hutts and the other peoples of the galaxy, we are hopeful a more cooperative future. It is the dawn of a new era for the New Republic, and for the Hutts as well. We understand your concern in regards to slavery. We argue that this matter is not the jurisdiction of the New Republic. For too many years, all systems have suffered under the tyranny of the few. Let us not exchange one tyranny for another. We suggest that the New Republic should have very limited powers and that matters such as slavery should be decided by individual systems.”

The room broke out in a roar, and Mothma’s calls for order went unheeded.

“What was that? How could you have allowed this?” Leia asked Mothma angrily a few hours later in Mothma’s office. “After all you have done, how could you even consider allowing slave traders and owners to participate with us?”

Mothma looked resigned. “Leia, if we can reach agreement with the Hutts, we will gain sufficient resources and influence to liberate several worlds from their Imperial Governors, who are still clinging to power. Evona wants to use this opportunity to become legitimate. They are seeking more open and formal agreements with other

worlds.”

“You are selling out,” said Leia. “You are giving up on everything you have fought for, for so many years! You are selling out!”

Mothma looked at her sadly. “I am tired of war. War has taken so much from this galaxy. Too many lives have been lost. We must negotiate with those who can help us.”

“No,” said Leia. “If we tolerate slavery and oppression in our so-called New Republic, then the years of war, the lives lost, will have been for nothing.” With that, Leia turned and left the room.

Another dream or vision or memory. She is sitting in a room similar to the Authority conference room, and Imperial senators are discussing slavery. They are not discussing whether the practice should be abolished, but whether the Trandoshans should be entrusted with enslaving other races than the Wookies. There is great conflict within her, for some reason, perhaps related to Shmi? Some small, insistent part of her longs to free all of the slaves in the galaxy, abolish slavery forever. But acknowledging this wish would anger her master, who has methods both physical and mental to remind her of her apprenticeship. And, she is already in pain. Where her prosthetic left arm meets flesh, an infection has set in. She knows it must be treated, but she has delayed. She has found pain to be a useful tool, in protecting her thoughts from her Master; it gives her something to focus on when conscious acknowledgement of her doubts of him would be dangerous. She is becoming more adept at hiding her thoughts from her Master, and she knows that she will hide too her anguish over slavery.

Leia opened her eyes, confused and disoriented coming out of the dream. She was sweating, and her left arm was twisted under her in an uncomfortable angle. She was alone now, in the middle of the night, in her bed. For the past several days, she had been working very long hours in the conference room, and Han, exasperated with the proceedings of the Authority, had turned to the repair and assessment of the fleet.

The new Authority had spent much time in debate, and while slavery was the most contentious issue, there were many others that inspired high emotions. It was unclear if consensus could be made, if the New Republic would even come to be, and if not, would the galaxy fracture into small but destructive intersystem wars.

Leia was saddened by the realization that she and Han were both too preoccupied to focus on their new relationship. She wondered what that meant. And then, there came a voice in her head.

“Leia, Sister.”

“Luke, Yes?”

“You have been having dreams, visions.”

"Yes."

"Anakin's, Vader's dreams and visions."

"Yes."

"Why haven't you told me?" Luke sounded frustrated and concerned.

"You've been, we have both been, busy."

There was a pause on his end.

"Leia, it is time."

"Time?"

"I have visited the ruins of the Jedi temple, and I have found much there. It is time for you to come with me."

"Luke, I don't....."

"Leia, meet me there tomorrow. I will summon Han and Chewbacca. Bring Threepio and I will bring Artoo."

"Luke, are you sure?"

"Leia, it is time. Now rest. And Leia?"

"Yes, Luke?"

"Please, never keep these visions or dreams from me again. I can help you. They can help you."

And with that, Luke was gone. Leia did not have time to wonder who *they* were, as she was asleep in a few moments.

She spent the next morning reviewing reports from the various systems throughout the galaxy. Ommpe was definitively free, and a full member of the Alliance. The complete absence of news from Urdnough was very troubling. Kashyyyk was still under the control of the Trandoshans.

She had a quiet midday meal, and then summoned Threepio. Wanting to be anonymous, she wore a soldier's uniform, and went to take an air taxi, but it took a few tries to find one who would take her to the Jedi Temple. When she finally did find one, the driver expressed a great deal of concern about her destination. Not only was the structure crumbling and dangerous, but it was said there were ghosts.

He let her off on a small flat plaza located at the temple exterior. The spires were gone, and most of the entrances were unsafe. Yet, she felt peaceful, in a way she hadn't since she had left Endor.

Luke and Artoo emerged and came to her.

"Leia, Threepio, you are here. Come, I have found a way in, and a few safe passages. Han and Chewie will be here soon."

The space inside was unlike any other she had seen. Still intact sculptures of powerful gods presided over great soaring spaces.

"There was death here," she said, "bodies were here and here and here."

"Yes," said Luke, "I believe that they were finally taken by the Force. This way, we are headed to the old library."

He led her and the two droids to an immense chamber, which housed stacks and stacks of data disks. Luke answered her question before she asked. "It seems much of the library is still accessible. Somehow, Artoo seems to be able to decipher many of the codes. I spent the entire day yesterday, reading about the Jedi Council."

"The Jedi Council," she repeated. So much of this, she only recalled in whispered conversations overheard in Bail's offices.

Han and Chewie entered. "Kid, you don't know how hard it was to get here. Everyone thinks this place is haunted."

"Well," replied Luke, "that's because it is. Come this way."

Now he led them to a smaller, dark chamber off of the large library. It had a window overlooking the local neighborhood, but the window was darkly tinted, perhaps to preserve old manuscripts. This had probably been the office of the librarian. It took a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Luke pulled over two rotting seats to the middle of the room, and gestured for Leia to sit on one, after he waved away the dust. Han and Chewie found some plasticene seats; oddly one was large enough for Chewie's bulk. Artoo and Threepio stood off to the side.

Luke and Leia sat cross-legged on the two seats. Luke closed his eyes, and slowed his breathing, taking measured, slow breaths. Leia calmed herself.

Then Obi-Wan Kenobi appeared, looking as he had when he paid a visit to Bail Organa, when she was about 5 years old. He was still young at the time, but she remembered how weathered his skin and hair had been.

Their eyes met and he smiled at her.

Then Yoda appeared. She realized he had expected a human, but how could he have been, being 900 years old? No, Yoda was diminutive and green, with large, pointed ears. He looked at her appraisingly.

Next a Jedi she did not know at all, a tall, dark-skinned man, with fierce eyes. His expression to her was unreadable.

At last, a young man, handsome and tall, appeared. He looked very disoriented, and looked around the room as if he recognized it but could not place it. He looked at his own hands, as if amazed to see them, and at the beige robes he was wearing, as if they were someone else's.

He looked at Leia, very hard, as if he were not sure who she was, and then he turned to Luke, who was now returning the young man's gaze.

"Your sister is Leia Organa," the young man said softly. Luke nodded, and the young man bowed his head and turned away, as if in great pain.

"Why is he here?" asked the dark-skinned man angrily. "We should not allow this! This is an obscenity!"

"I brought him here." Another man's spectral form joined the group, and Leia liked him immediately. He had sharp features, but twinkling eyes, and long, brown hair. "I brought him here with Luke's help."

"Qui Gon!" exclaimed Obi-Wan happily. "After all of this time, I can see you!"

"I think we will find that Luke's strengths lie in visions and in drawing sufficient currents of the Force to help us achieve form. Through him we are visible to them and to each other." Qui Gon smiled. "On the other hand though, his form with a lightsaber is awful. How ironic that this young man who defeated the Sith has no grace at all with our signature weapon." Qui Gon paused, and looked at Leia.

"Leia, though, I cannot see what strengths she has, although she has had many visions. At the moment she is in much turmoil, it is hard to see clearly." He looked at her kindly.

"But these are the future of the Jedi Order!" said the dark-skinned man. "They must be trained and prepared to train others!"

"Mace Windu, I think not that the Jedi Order, have the same structure it will, if continue it does," said Yoda sadly meeting Mace's eyes.

"The Jedi ways lasted for hundreds of years, until *he* came along!" said Windu. "Young Skywalker and Organa must take the reins up again, without *his* influence!"

"Perhaps Anakin's fall was the will of the Force, perhaps we were too arrogant in our control of the Force. It is not clear yet, if balance has been brought to the Force." said Qui Gon.

Mace snorted. "Anakin's fall was caused by Anakin's selfishness, greed and lust for power. If anything, we must never again allow someone of his characteristics to become a Jedi."

“Well,” said Obi-Wan evenly, “The Prophecy was correct. With Luke’s help, he did destroy the Sith.”

“Did he?” said Mace angrily. “For all we know there are other Sith in training in some remote, enshrouded corner of the galaxy.” Mace circled around to stand in front of Anakin. “Will you even give us the truth in this, Vader?”

Anakin had been staring at the two droids, but turned his gaze to Windu. He looked at Mace as if Mace’s voice had come to him through a long tunnel, and he could not make out the words. And then, as if it didn’t matter, he turned back to the droids.

“Artoo Detoo and See Threepio,” he said, “How is it possible that they are here?”

Han was not sure why Luke had summoned him to this room. He felt confused, and his smuggler habits had trained him to not stick around when he was confused. Did Leia need him? She hadn’t been paying much attention to him lately, as if she had forgotten him. So why was he hanging around in this dark room, if she didn’t even need him?

But then he realized that the room had a strange glow, a glow whose source could not be identified as sunlight through the tinted windows or artificial light. He thought he heard murmurings. He thought he saw something standing next to Artoo.

He decided to stay.

“I must admit I was very startled when they arrived near my home on Tatooine, with Luke in tow, bearing a message from Leia and the plans for the Death Star!” Obi-Wan replied.

Luke was startled. “You recognized Artoo and Threepio?”

“Well, Artoo. I never interacted with Threepio much. But Artoo was Anakin’s astromech droid on many of our missions during the Clone Wars.”

“I built Threepio when I was a child, on Tatooine,” said Anakin, his voice gaining in strength. He looked into Threepio’s photoreceptors. “Can they see or hear us?” Anakin turned abruptly to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan replied, “Well Luke and Leia can. Probably we are very dim to Han and Chewbacca. The droids I am sure cannot....,” he was interrupted by a loud “EEEEET” from Artoo Detoo.

Threepio was startled awake, and Han could only guess at what caused the Artoo unit to vocalize. Threepio spoke, "Artoo, what? You can what? What are you talking about?"

Suddenly everyone in the room looked at Artoo. As if in reply, he suddenly projected a hologram: Leia, in white, bending, and standing and bending again, saying "Help me Obi Wan Kenobi, you are my only hope."

Anakin stared at the Artoo unit. "Artoo Detoo was the droid who carried the plans of the Death Star to the Rebel Alliance?" he said, disbelievingly.

"Like I said," said Obi-Wan, "I knew the time had come for things to change when he showed up with that recording."

Luke stared at the recording. He suddenly remembered the first time he saw it, in his garage on Tatooine.

Leia stared at it as well, suddenly seeing how much weight she had lost in the past few years. She really needed to take better care of herself.

"Artoo, I thought we erased that recording long ago," said Luke. As if in reply, Artoo turned off the recording, and backed up, as if to make himself less noticeable. Then he let out a stream of beeps and whistles.

"What is he saying, Threepio?" asked Luke.

"Just nonsense sir, I don't know where he gets these things."

"Tell us," urged Luke.

"He says that Anakin programmed to back up his own systems and the protocol droid's as well, and that these backups are intact. And that the protocol droid's memory was wiped right after the birth of Luke and Leia, but that his were not." Threepio was suddenly indignant. "What do you mean you have been backing me up? No little astromech droid is capable of that!"

For the first time, Anakin smiled. "Artoo is." Then he looked directly at Luke. "You must ask Threepio if he wishes to have his memory restored, if he wishes to remember what transpired before....," his voice trailed off, and he looked at Threepio. Softly he said, "I gave Threepio to Padmé shortly after we were married, and she gave Artoo to me."

Now Obi-Wan was stern, and he looked at Anakin directly. "When were you and Padmé married? When did you first break your Jedi oath?"

"We were married right after the Battle of Geonosis, on Naboo, when I escorted her home. We knew we were living a lie, but we saw no other way. She did this for me, although it was against her better judgement." Anakin was looking off into the distance, through the tinted window over the city.

Yoda sighed and dropped his head. "Obi Wan, knew about this you did. This you should have reported to us."

"I was not the only one who knew!" Obi Wan defended himself, "You saw her arrive running, despite her injuries, in that cave on Geonosis, crying out for him!" Obi-Wan turned, "Oh Anakin! Why didn't you come to me for help?"

Anakin did not answer, he continued to stare out the window.

"How did Padmé die, Obi-Wan, did I kill her?"

Obi-Wan was taken aback by the directness of the question. He paused, and then said softly, "We didn't know Anakin, the medical droids and medics on Polis Massa said that she was physically healthy, but that she had lost her will to live."

"This had better not be one of your 'certain point of view' truths," Luke interjected.

Obi-Wan looked at him, and exasperation set in. "Well, ask Artoo then, he seems to be the vast repository of everything that has happened."

All eyes turned to Artoo, who replied with an audio recording, a medical droid saying, "she has lost her will to live."

"Artoo remembers our birth?" exclaimed Luke, very astonished.

"She willed herself to die," said Leia, speaking for the first time. "She wanted to protect us from you, and she knew that you would not stop at anything to find her and us, so she willed herself to die," Leia stared at Anakin, who only looked off into the distance. "I remember now, I remember her determination, the moment we were born."

Han knew a great deal was going on, that he simply couldn't perceive. The strangest thing was that it seemed that Artoo could perceive it. He looked at Chewie, who was staring at the space in front of Luke and Leia. Maybe the Wookiee could perceive it too. Han suddenly had an idea. He stood up, hoping to be unobtrusive, and squatted next to Artoo. His hand approached Artoo's dome, and after a pause, he placed his palm flat on the silver surface. Suddenly the room was crowded, with four men, one of whom looked like a younger Ben Kenobi, and a green dwarf creature. Han yelled, startled, and all of them looked at him suddenly.

His mind worked fast, and he decided to take advantage of the situation. "Look, I don't know what you all were

discussing here, but someone has to help Leia. She has been having bad dreams, and the stress of the past few weeks is wearing her down.”

“Solo is right.” Han knew right away that the young man was Anakin Skywalker. The others were a mystery to him. “She has been suffering visions and she feels the Force strongly. She must not be tempted towards the path of darkness.”

“So, Skywalker, you think they should be trained as Jedi? We will keep our own council on this!” Windu had been checking his anger, but it was now showing.

Anakin looked at him directly, evenly. “I do not think they will ever be Jedi, or Sith. I don’t see either of them taking any restrictive oaths any time soon or swearing allegiance to any but each other. They have both already demonstrated that they will not forsake their loved ones to join a bunch of detached monks. Compared to Leia’s love for Solo, and for her brother,” here Anakin nodded at each of them, “the procedures and strictures of the Jedi are utterly irrelevant.”

Yoda sighed. “Right he is, Windu, gone our way of life is. Anakin, now must I tell you something that thought over much I have for many years. I felt your pain that day your mother died. Felt your anguish and pain I did. Nothing I did, hoped did I, that your pain would resolve itself. Arrogant was I. Failed you, failed all of us I did.” Yoda bowed his head.

Anakin turned to Yoda, and bowed, “No Master Yoda, I failed you. I failed you and Obi Wan. I failed Padmé and these children.” He paused. “Thank you, thank you for hiding my children from me, thank you for training my son.”

The room was silent for a moment, and Han wondered what would happen next. Then Anakin looked mischievously at Luke. “Although something clearly went wrong with Luke’s saber training. Qui Gon is right, we can’t have him going through the galaxy hacking at his opponents.”

“Hey!” said Luke, startled at the sudden, gently mocking, attention on him.

Windu was clearly angry at the changed, light tone in the room.

“You never answered my question, Skywalker,” he said returning to his earlier topic. “How many other Sith are there, who is in training?”

Anakin looked at him. “You must understand, as much as you did not trust me, nor did Sidious. Even though he was my ... creator, he did not include me in his schemes. It is the nature of the Sith to hide knowledge, to be devious. I was often tasked with hunting down gifted ones and killing them. Only twice did I stumble upon gifteds who had apparently received extensive training from Sidious. I could not tell if he was serious about training them,

if he considered breaking the rule of two, if he meant to replace me, or if he was simply testing me. Both times I killed them. The second one was powerful and strong, and I received injuries deeper than the ones I already had.

“Through one of his royal guards, I learned of Dark Hands, lesser gifteds who carried out assassinations or gathered information, but I never met any of them or learned more. In short, I do not know how many gifteds, trained or untrained, Luke and Leia will find.”

Qui Gon said, “Well, before they can engage unknown opponents and internal voices, they will need training. I offer to train both of them, in both saber skills and meditation.”

“No,” said Leia, standing. She stared at Anakin. “I do not wish to have this power, or any training. I do not forgive you. I do not trust you.” She looked at the rest of them. “I cannot do this,” she said, “I cannot do anything.” She suddenly sat back on the seat and buried her face in her hands.

Luke placed his hand on her back. “Leia,” he said.

Qui Gon dropped to a crouch before her. “Leia, the Living Force is reaching out to you. You know this, you have felt it, but you cannot control it, you cannot understand it. Receive training, if only for your own well-being. You have already done much to save the galaxy. We will not ask more of you. Accept this training, in order to save yourself.”

She looked at him, into his wise, luminescent eyes. At last she nodded in agreement.

Luke, Han, and Leia took a meal in Leia’s apartments. Chewie had gone off to meet the Wookies. Artoo served them, and Threepio sat motionless. Han couldn’t tell if he was shut down or not.

After the meal they sat silently, each absorbed in their own thoughts. Han watched as both Luke and Leia fell asleep where they sat. He carried Leia to her bed, and made a bed on the floor for Luke. He then undressed, and slid into bed beside Leia, watching her, until he too fell asleep.

Part III

The next morning, Leia was sitting on a small stool, in the alcove that Luke had set up for himself with tools and parts, off of the main hangar that Rogue group had occupied. Here he worked on ship parts and repaired droids and solved other mechanical problems that kept cropping up. He was hooking an elaborate set of conduits from Artoo to Threepio, and checking items in their respective interfaces.

Leia found talking to Luke relieving; he willingly listened to her frustrations and concerns about the various intertwined politics she was struggling with.

“How can I support Mothma’s overall goals, how can I build support for her larger agenda, among those who are undecided or outright terrified of a New Republic, when I disagree with her so strongly on the issue of slavery and the Hutts?” Leia got up and began to pace. “I am being asked to present convincing arguments in support of her, when I don’t believe what I am arguing for! If we cannot abolish slavery from the galaxy, then at least we must not tolerate it among our members.”

Luke just listened, for which she was very grateful. The last thing she wanted was quick but useless answers to her difficulties. She continued.

“We haven’t heard anything from Urdnough, so she finally agreed to send one of the Star Destroyers that has joined us. Although even with the change in colors, I fear that some battle will break out over a simple misunderstanding. I am scheduled for more pointless meetings between the Norgarrans today. At least the Imperials did not utterly devote themselves to religious fervor. These are the most difficult negotiations I have ever been through.”

“On top of all this, when I am simply walking from one meeting to another, beings I don’t even know or recognize bow or curtsy to me or show reverence in whatever form their tradition demands. It is completely disconcerting; I can’t help but feel that they expect something of me, that I can never accomplish.” Leia sighed.

She looked at Luke, who cut an odd figure. He was dressed in his black Jedi tunic, his black robe hung nearby, and his lightsaber dangled from his belt, but here he was, wiping grease from his hands (well, hand, he was still wearing the black glove on his right), and rewiring the conduits for a pair of droids, like an ordinary mechanic.

Leia abruptly changed the topic. “What do you think that Qui Gon meant when he talked about ‘bringing balance to the Force?’”

Luke was absorbed in attaching a connection to one of Artoo’s ports. “I don’t know,” he replied. “I have been puzzling about that myself.” He sat on his heels and looked at her. “Balance between the light and the dark? Is that even something one would want? And, that seems too ... easy somehow. Anyway, I think we are supposed to go to the Temple tomorrow, to begin training. Maybe we can learn more then.”

Luke looked at Threepio, whose systems seemed to be mostly shutdown, but who jerked alert when Luke said, “Threepio?”

“Yes, Master Luke, I am ready.”

"Threepio, are you sure you want to do this?"

"I am sure Master Luke. As bad as my memories might be, they are *my* memories."

"Well, you might as well shut down all non-critical systems. This will take a few hours."

To Leia, Luke said, "I can't promise that this won't fry his internal circuits. He may be completely useless after this."

"Go ahead, Luke," she said. "If we are going to believe in freedom and self-determination, we must lead by example. Call me when you are close to being done, and I will try to come down."

Luke nodded, and she touched his arm, and left.

Luke used the time to do some physical cleaning of Artoo, who still had some dirt from Endor in his bearings and hinges.

Luke sprung the compartments on Artoo's dome, to clean those as well. Then he stopped, and stared at the compartment where he had stored his lightsaber right after building it on Tatooine, and from where Artoo had launched it into his waiting hand when he needed it.

Why would an Artoo unit have a compartment perfectly designed for such a purpose? Now that he thought about it, he realized he had never seen such a compartment on any other astromech unit.

"You put that there, didn't you, Father?"

The reply came as a vision. He saw an alcove, similar to the one he was in, and a young padawan Anakin, was bent over the internals of a partly dismantled Artoo. Obi-Wan, standing nearby, said, "Anakin, you are not going to entrust your lightsaber to that droid, are you?"

"It's perfect Master. No one will suspect he is carrying it. If we are captured, he can help us. Besides, I can put a spare, standard issue lightsaber in here, *and* he can keep it charged. What's more, this is not just *any* droid. This is Artoo."

Obi-Wan just looked on, disbelieving. "Why did Padmé give you her droid anyway?"

Anakin's eyes opened wide. Clearly he had not considered the possibility of having to explain this. "Well," he said slowly, "on Naboo I was saying what a great droid he was to fly with during the battle 10 years ago, and so she

gave him to me in thanks for guarding her.”

Obi-Wan looked as if he were going to say something, but instead he turned and walked away.

Anakin turned towards Luke. “Listen,” he said looking over his shoulder at the departing Obi-Wan, “don’t ever let him make fun of Artoo or Threepio. He dislikes anything mechanical, and he especially hates flying.”

It was strange to Luke, to consider this young man, who appeared to be younger than him, to be his father.

“Luke, this is important, you must tell Leia. Chewbacca has been working with some technicians. Every slave in the galaxy, of all species, has a device in their bodies somewhere; if they try to escape, it explodes, killing them. It took me and the Jedi years to find mine, and it was very tricky to remove it. Chewbacca is close to finding a way to disable the devices.”

Luke absorbed this; Anakin had been a slave? He asked, “And you aren’t supposed to be helping him figure it out, are you.”

Anakin looked at him. “Don’t tell Obi-Wan. It will just upset him, and he will just give me a lecture on the inappropriate use of my powers.”

Then Anakin faded away, leaving Luke with his questions and the two inert droids.

“We understand that the perception of indentured labor is a negative one. Allow me to assure you that our workers are treated well. They receive adequate nutrition and health care. They are given tasks commensurate with their abilities, and they get satisfaction from completing their tasks. If this body or any other were to abolish this practice, most of these workers would not know where to go or what to do, or how to care for themselves.

“Further, they are a vital part of our economy; they enable us to deliver goods and services that are in high demand throughout the galaxy, at an affordable price.

“We concur with the Trandoshans that legislation in regards to indentured servitude is external to the purview of a centralized government. The government on Coruscant that would serve the galaxy best is a small one that does not interfere in these matters. Furthermore....”

The Toydarian representative continued on. Leia was breathing carefully, controlling her temper. She saw Chewbacca across the room, also looking very angry.

“In summary, we the Toydarians of the Hutt Worlds look forward to joining the New Republic and helping to guide

all of us to a bright new future.”

Leia met Mothma’s eyes. She hoped her expression conveyed the anger she felt.

Mothma called a recess, which was fortunate, because Leia could hear Luke calling to her. As she left the room, Mothma stopped her. “Leia, I need to meet with you and Luke.”

“How long are you going to let this continue!” Leia at last exploded. “This is outrageous! These proceedings are an insult to everything we have fought for!” Before Mothma could respond, Leia stalked away.

She was not much calmer as she returned to the alcove. The three were much as she had left them, except that the droids looked much cleaner.

“Mothma is still caving on the slavery issue, isn’t she,” said Luke. He didn’t need the Force to guess the source of her anger.

“It is outrageous and insulting. More and more, I wonder what I am doing here,” she said, and then took a few breaths. She didn’t have much time to waste on her frustration.

“Well?” she asked, “any success?”

“I think so,” said Luke. He was disconnecting the conduits, and had switched on Artoo, but had not yet powered up Threepio.

“Let’s see how he is,” he said, and then flipped a switch on Threepio’s back panel.

At first nothing happened, and Luke wondered if he had connected the power recharge correctly.

But then, Threepio’s eyes lit up, and he stared at Leia, and nearly screamed, “Mistress Padmé! Oh! Mistress Padmé! Master Anakin what are you doing!”

Threepio rose and began to stumble aimlessly. Luke and Leia had to take him by the arms and reseal him. Artoo beeped concernedly.

“What do you see, Threepio?” Luke asked gently. Threepio stared at him. Instead of replying he took a thin cable that was still connected to his visual processor and connected it to a small holoprojector.

Luke and Leia saw an image of fiery place, and, on a flat platform, was Anakin, Darth Vader, possessed by the

Dark Side of the Force, eyes burning full of rage and hate, his gloved right arm outstretched. Nearby they saw Padmé, very pregnant, holding her throat, her eyes pleading. Then Padmé collapsed.

“Oh, my mistress Padmé,” said Threepio mournfully.

“Threepio, he was a monster, he was a ruthless killer, he had no mercy for your Mistress,” said Leia firmly.

“No, Princess Leia, you don’t understand. I do not understand the human concept of love, but they showed it more than any other humans I have known.”

He showed another image. This was on a piazza near a lake, surrounded by green mountains. It was a wedding picture, and the young couple looked both pensive and joyous. The pretty dark-haired bride wore an intricate lace veil, and the tall, handsome groom wore dark, Jedi robes. A gleam of metal shone from his right sleeve, but other than that, they might have been the most ordinary happy newlyweds in the galaxy.

It was this image, of a simple wedding, and not the one of fire and death, that caused Leia to cover her eyes and begin to sob silently. Luke put his arms around her, and found he couldn’t take his eyes off of the scene on the piazza.

Threepio looked at him. “He was my maker, Master Luke, my creator. My maker was Darth Vader.”

Hearing this, Leia calmed a bit, and pulled away from Luke. “Well then Threepio, that means you are our brother. So you must stop calling me Mistress and Luke Master.” She put a hand on Threepio’s bronze arm. Artoo made another comforting sound, and moved closer.

“But how does one go through life, with Darth Vader as one’s maker?”

“Well, Threepio,” replied Luke, putting away his tools, “if you figure it out, please let us know.”

The next afternoon, Leia once again slipped away incognito to the Jedi Temple. Upon her arrival, seeing no one, she went to the library. There she found Luke and Artoo, reviewing data disks; Luke was completely absorbed and did not even see her until she came close.

“Leia! Come, sit. I have been learning about the ritual and progression of becoming a Jedi.”

She came closer and sat by him. Luke explained.

“Small children, who were determined to be sensitive to the Force were taken from their families, and brought

here to start training. At this level, they were called younglings.”

“Yes, Bail told me about this. I think it didn’t sit well with him, that the Jedi took small children this way.”

“Yes, there was actually some disagreement about it, among the Jedi. Anyway, when the younglings reached a certain age, depending on their species, they faced certain tests, to become Padawans.”

“What happened if they failed?” asked Leia.

“Well, I think they were allowed to make a few attempts, but if they failed, they left the order. Although I think most of them ended up working for the Jedi in various capacities.”

“Then?”

“Those who succeeded continued training as a Padawan, with a single Master. Qui Gon Jinn was Obi Wan’s master. After some time, again by their abilities and by species, they faced the Jedi trials. One of the trials was to make their own lightsaber.”

Leia glanced at the lightsaber Luke had made. “Then?”

“Then they took a series of oaths. It was then that they renounced all ties with family and loved ones, and they vowed never to marry.”

“That’s a bit harsh, isn’t it? Renouncing their families?” Leia asked. It was a wonder that for centuries the galaxy had revered this order.

“Well, it makes sense if you think about it. They had to devote themselves without distraction to the Force, and to their duties. They were warriors. They, like us, had unique abilities. A great deal of time went into their training. The Republic had to know that they would be completely focused in times of need, and would not go rushing off to save their loved ones.”

Leia thought this over. “How many refused to take the oaths?”

“Surprisingly few I think. By the time they reached that stage, the Jedi *were* their family. Also, I think there was a fair amount of tolerance for, ah, liaisons between Jedi. I found a story from hundreds of years ago, where two Jedi were lovers, but then one had to slay the other for duty.”

Leia nodded. “But in the end, all of those oaths and rituals didn’t matter. Vader and Sidious killed them all.”

Their eyes met. Then Luke carefully placed the data disk back in the slot from where he had retrieved it.

“Come on,” he said. “We are going down to the weapons training room.”

How Luke had found this room, Leia couldn't guess, probably by ethereal intervention. It was a long and tortuous way to get there.

When they entered she was surprised that the room was in such good shape. Although it was very spare, it was large, and seemed to have no damage at all.

Luke brought her over to a case, where he had been repairing and charging several lightsabers.

“See?” he said, lighting one with a pink blade, “this is a training blade. It's not lethal, but it's probably a bad idea to touch it.”

It hummed as he waved it through the air; then he angled it to the floor. Instead of going through the floor, the blade just shortened, and the floor was undamaged.

“I think they trained with real blades in here, which is why the room is so solid. I can't figure out what it is made of, but lightsaber blades don't cut through it.”

Leia nodded.

Luke hesitated, and then said, “I fixed this for you. It is a standard blue.” He handed her a saber of a style she had never seen before. She lit it, waved the blue blade through the air, and then shut it off.

“Thank you,” she said simply, and then put it back in its holder, in the case.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Ah, well, I guess we just wait.”

She and Luke are sitting cross-legged, back to back on a flat stone slab, that is part of one of her favorite places on Alderaan. A moment before, they were sitting back to back in the training room, but it has dissolved away.

She can feel the light breeze in her hair and on her skin. Nearby is the Museum of Pindar, a great museum of antiquities. Children play on the plaza, and in a nearby fountain. Their shouts ride on the breeze.

"Where are we?" asks Luke.

"The Plaza of the Museum of Pindar, on Alderaan."

"It's beautiful."

"Yes, it was."

They continue to take in the breeze, the trees, the shouts of children, the graceful museum.

Until she suddenly sees in the sky the Death Star, training the circular concavity of its superlaser on the plaza, the museum, the fountain, the children.

Her heart races and her breath shortens. She wants to scream, in terror in warning. She wants to move, to run, to rescue the children, to stop this monstrosity, but her limbs seem frozen.

Luke is by her. "Leia, breathe slowly," he says.

But she cannot, her breath is caught in her chest.

Then she hears Qui Gon's voice. "Leia," he says, "Stop, breathe, feel the Force."

She tries to focus on the Force, she tries to remember that this is just a vision, and that this vision is in the past, and she can do nothing about it.

She draws the Force around her to control her fear. But just as she has succeeded at this, the superlaser shoots its series of green, notched lasers that combine to a single bright light, which hits the plaza before her. Fire erupts, the museum explodes, the children are burning and screaming.

Still, she holds fast to the Force, as a cloak around her. She continues to breathe.

"Good!" said Qui Gon. "Fear is a crippling enemy, that takes away your reason, undermines your thoughts, prevents you from seeing through to the truth. Remember, your focus becomes your reality. When you listen to the Force, it can guide you through your fears, towards reality. In time, with practice this will become easier."

Leia felt drained, but at the same time... energized. She got up and stretched and saw that only a few minutes had gone by. It had felt longer.

“Now,” said Qui Gon, “I think we can start with some very basic lightsaber forms today.”

Leia hesitated, but Qui Gon beckoned. Luke went over to the case holding the sabers, but Qui Gon held up his hand to stop him. “Not yet,” he said.

“Your being human will make this somewhat easier. Teaching non-humans takes some adaptation. Now, I want you to stand with your legs apart, about the width of your shoulders. Keep your legs bent.”

They both did.

“Now, I want you to shift all of your weight onto one leg. Notice how vulnerable this makes you, you cannot easily move in the direction of this leg. You should always try to stay balanced on both legs.”

“Balance,” thought Leia to herself.

“Now keep your knees bent. Again notice how this pose gives you strength against an enemy’s attack, and also flexibility to mount an attack.”

He continued.

“Now, face this way, one leg in front, bend it, bend it Luke. The other leg behind. Stay balanced. Now bring your rear leg closer to the front one, but not too close, and then move the front leg ahead. Not too far, don’t overextend your self. Now, move across the floor like that.”

Luke and Leia both danced across the floor, not terribly gracefully.

“Not bad!” said Qui Gon. “You just need practice.”

“Now, with your legs apart, keep them bent, twist your body and bring your hands together. Notice that this line, from your hips to your shoulders, gives you strength. You do not hold the saber with the strength of your arms, but with your hips and shoulders. Luke, keep your legs bent.”

This all reminded Leia of an exercise class she had taken very long ago on Alderaan. The poses felt very natural to her.

“Artoo,” Qui Gon continued, “get those training sabers.” Artoo went and retrieved them.

“Now, return to that pose, hold your sabers. All we are going to do, is to cross the floor again.”

The two pink blades hummed to life, and Luke and Leia advanced with their blades held before them, somewhat more gracefully than before. This continued for about an hour, Qui Gon directing them in very simple moves. It came quite easily to Leia.

After Qui Gon had taught them attack, parry and riposte, and after they had repeated this several times, he said to them, "This is a bit unorthodox, but I admit to being tempted. Let's have you dual each other. I am curious to see how this goes, the two of you both being connected to the Force and to each other. Artoo, flip that switch over there."

When Artoo did so, a series of lines appeared on the floor, forming a long rectangle. Luke was somewhat surprised the mechanism worked after all this time.

"This is your dueling area. If you step out, you automatically lose. Now, first position, face each other. Leia, you attack, and Luke, you parry. Luke, keep your legs bent."

So, Leia did, stepping forward, attacking as Qui Gon had shown her. Luke stepped back in perfect unison and parried.

"Now reverse."

Luke attacked towards Leia, stepping forward, and Leia stepped back and parried. In response, Luke made a riposte.

"Good!" said Qui Gon, "Now, duel." He sounded like a man who was throwing his charges into a pond, to see if they could swim.

The moment Qui Gon said this, Leia felt Luke hesitating, as if reluctant to attack his sister. So she pressed, swinging her pink blade towards his. He parried easily though, and they held for a moment. Then, she came around and the duel began in earnest.

Leia felt right away Luke's disadvantage. He had heard repeated so often that his habits were bad, that he doubted himself; he slightly hesitated at each move, to consciously think if he was doing this correctly. She pressed forward. Yes, he was stronger than her, and more experienced with the heft of the blade, but her legs moved easily under her, and she felt the Force singing through her. Qui Gon was right: her center sat at her hips, which were carried by her legs, and her strength emanated from this center.

She thought she saw Yoda and Obi Wan out of the corner of her eye, but she kept her focus on the duel.

Luke tried an attack, based solely on strength, but he overextended himself, and almost fell forward. She stepped easily away. In that moment, she brought her saber down and then up, and hit his unprotected midriff with her blade.

“Ow!” he yelled, and tumbled over. He had been right: the training blades were not lethal, but they were painful.

Luke was breathing heavily. Leia found she wasn't. She felt calm and very much awake.

“Well!” said Qui Gon. “Luke, you have just been sliced through the middle and are now dead.”

Luke sighed. “I forgot how humiliating this is,” he said.

Qui Gon continued, ignoring him. “You must both practice meditation and the exercises we have done here today. If you spend some time each day, you will find it comes more easily. We will come together again in a few days.”

He faded away, without another word.

“Don't they ever say 'goodbye' or 'see you later' or anything?” asked Luke, half to himself.

“Balance,” said Leia out loud. “Balance.” Then, looking at him she said, “Luke, I have to get back. I will find you later. Try not to feel bad.” She set down her training saber, and left the room, leaving Luke alone with Artoo.

He rubbed his side, and put the sabers back into their case. He looked in the case, at the saber he had given Leia, and then he looked at Artoo. Then, he took out the saber, popped Artoo's compartment, and placed the saber into a holder inside.

Leia was extremely hungry; she hadn't felt this hungry in a long time. As she plaited her hair, she ate from a tray of fruits and meats that Artoo had brought.

“What, there won't be anything to eat there?” She hadn't heard Han come in. He looked uncomfortable in his formal general's uniform, but he came over and kissed her on the cheek.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

She was wearing an elaborate blue and gold gown that Pooja had lent her. She smiled at him and continued plaiting. “I don't know what will be there to eat. In any case, it can't hurt to go not hungry.”

He looked around. “What is Luke doing?” he asked, when he saw his friend standing with his eyes closed and his

legs apart. Luke was slowly shifting his weight from one leg to another.

“He is practicing bending his knees. Be nice to him, I beat him at a practice duel today.”

“And, what is wrong with Threepio?” he asked, jerking a thumb in the droid’s direction. Threepio was standing, inert, at an awkward angle.

“Oh, you didn’t hear that part. Anakin made Threepio when he was a child on Tatooine, and he set up a back up routine between him and Artoo, when Artoo was his astromech. Yesterday, Luke restored his memories. We aren’t sure it was such a good idea.”

This took a moment to sink in. “What?” sputtered Han. “Are you telling me that Anakin, Darth Vader built Threepio, *and* he owned Artoo, before you were even born?”

“Well, it’s not as unlikely as it sounds,” said Leia giving her hair a last tug. “At the fall of the Jedi, the droids were given to my father Bail, and they worked on his ship for most of my life. I really don’t know if he will be much good for translation in the next few days.” She sighed.

“I’m kept busy for a few days and all kinds of weird things happen.” Han went over to Threepio and touched his shoulder. Threepio jerked awake and yelled “Oh!”, but he relaxed when he saw Han. “Oh! Master Han. It’s you.” He then went back to an inert state.

Luke called from across the room. “You know, if you think he won’t be much help to you, maybe he can help me go through the Jedi files. It would be a big help, and it would give him something to do.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Leia said brightly. “Threepio, would you like to help Luke?”

Threepio jerked awake again. “If that is your wish Mistress Leia, I will do so.”

Leia sighed. “Well, we have to get going. Artoo, keep an eye on Threepio, will you?” Artoo replied with a beep, as they left the room.

“What was that all about?” Han asked her angrily. Suddenly she realized that his patience was wearing thin.

The evening had gone pleasantly enough, Leia greeting senators at the formal affair, and Han and Luke making the most of the drinks. Then Leia’s Aunt Nas had appeared with a Lord Anacc, of whom she had earlier said, “My dear, you must meet him. You have so much in common. He has been so kind to me these past few years!” And Leia, knowing she had nothing in common with Lord Anacc had bowed gracefully and exchanged greetings. She

said: "Aunt Nas, Cousin Erish, Lord Anacc, please meet Luke Skywalker...." Everyone bowed all around. "... and my betrothed, General Han Solo."

The looks of shock she had gotten had given her the most enjoyment she had had in a while. But now it seemed that her fun had backfired, the moment they arrived back in her apartments.

"Look Princess, I know you are having a tough time, but I am getting a little tired of being jerked around!"

"Maybe I should go," said Luke. "I'll see you tomorrow." He made a hasty exit.

"Han, I was just tired of my Aunt's meddling..." she tried to explain.

"And so you use me to solve your little problem for you. Just like you use me for sex to help you feel better, and then you just ignore me. Now everyone thinks we are going to be married. Do you know what a hard time I am going to have now? This is going to make Vader's interrogations feel like a pleasure ride!"

"Don't joke about that!" she snapped. "And I haven't heard you complain about the sex at all!"

"Look Princess, you do your thing, go be a Jedi Knight, go be the Queen of the Galaxy. This is all a lot more than I ever bargained for." With that, Han stalked out of her front door.

Leia looked at Threepio, and envied his ability to just shut down.

They had been trying to put it off, but finally Luke and Leia were sitting in Mothma's office. They were growing increasingly uncomfortable.

"The delegates are becoming more and more fractious," said Mothma. "I think it is time we make use of your, ah, status to try to unify them."

"The reason they are being so fractious Mothma is that you are betraying those for whom you will tolerate continued oppression!"

"Leia, the Hutts, the Trandoshans have already been very helpful in eliminating some regional governors, and in getting us some badly needed supplies."

"Those governors would have probably surrendered anyway," replied Leia testily, "and I am sure we could have gotten the supplies from elsewhere."

"Well, in any case," said Mothma, "I think we should have a ceremony were we honor Luke for destroying the Emperor and Vader, and that he should start taking more of a leadership role."

"I didn't kill the Emperor, or Vader," said Luke, more calmly than Leia.

Mothma was surprised. "You didn't? If you didn't, how did you escape the Death Star?"

"Vader killed the Emperor, and then died from the effort."

"Vader killed the Emperor? Why?" Mothma seemed almost suspicious.

"He'd been wanting to kill him for some time I think," replied Luke, ignoring her tone. "I was just there. You see, I didn't really do that much at all. It was Lando and Wedge and Han, and their crews who should get the credit."

"You 'didn't do that much at all'? Oh Luke, you kept the Emperor distracted. No one else could have done that." Leia spoke in his head.

He replied, *"Well, from a certain point of view. Besides, I don't like that she thinks I am so manipulable."*

"I still believe we should continue with such a ceremony, Luke. I think you should play more of a leadership role." Mothma pressed.

"I will not live a falsehood. Furthermore, I agree with Leia on this slavery issue. I think you are making a grave mistake." For the first time, Mothma did not meet his gaze.

Luke went down to the hangar where the Millennium Falcon sat. Han and Chewie were completing the installation of a new communications dish, to replace the one snapped off over Endor.

"Look, Luke. I know you care for her, but this thing between her and me isn't going anywhere. And it's more than that! I used to be my own boss. I used to be able to take a job when I needed it, and then float around the galaxy when I didn't. Now, this is worse than the war! Now I have to deal with politics and... and... management!"

"Don't go, not yet Han. Leia needs you. I know it doesn't seem like it, but she does. It's been hard for her, harder than it has been for me or for you. Besides leaving now would be premature. That thing that Chewie is working on isn't functional yet, right?"

"How did you know about that?" asked Han, suspicious. Then he remembered. "Your ghost friends? That's another thing! Suddenly all these ghosts have a thing to say about everything! Don't get me wrong, I admired the

old man, but seeing him as a ghostly young man? It's just too strange. The dead should stay dead. Give me a reality that makes sense."

"Han, don't go yet. Things are coming to a point. I can feel it. Please, just be patient."

Han looked at him, this friend who had changed so much in such a short time.

"When are you going to get that fixed?" Han asked.

"What?"

"Your arm. Once you get it fixed, you can take off that creepy black glove."

Luke smiled.

"How's Threepio?" Han asked. While he was refusing to discuss the topic at hand, he would keep the conversation going.

"I sent him to the Jedi temple with Artoo. There is a lot of material to go through there." Luke played along.

"Well, we still have a lot of adjustments to make to this dish," said Han, somewhat calmer. "We aren't going anywhere for a while."

Luke smiled and batted him on the arm. "Thanks Han, this will work out. You'll see."

Han looked at Luke and just shook his head. Then he returned back to his work.

Except that later that day, Chewie arrived with the news that the device, he was calling it simply the emitter, was functional. Several slaves, many local ones on Coruscant had given their lives in the testing of it, and Chewbacca felt each of these deaths as if they were his own family. But now that he had made it, he didn't know how to proceed.

Han pondered the news. "We should tell Luke and Leia," he said. Chewbacca responded with some grunts. "I know I am mad at her, but she feels pretty strongly about this slavery thing. I think she can help us."

"Yoda and Mace did not want to admit Anakin to the order, but Qui Gon did. Ben wasn't so sure either. I think Ben only trained him, out of devotion to Qui Gon. If Qui Gon hadn't died on Naboo, *he* would have trained Anakin, and

he would have been a far better match. Things might have turned out completely differently.”

Luke was relating to Leia what the droids had found at the Jedi temple. “He was a cute kid too. I think I looked a lot like him at ten.”

Leia was thinking this over, when Luke’s communicator buzzed. “Kid? Are you there with Leia?”

“Han, yes. We are in her apartments.”

“Chewie and I are coming up.”

Just then, Luke realized that he hadn’t told Leia about Anakin’s request.

“Are you sure it works, Chewie?”

The Wookiee grrred affirmatively in response to Leia’s question.

“They have tested it pretty extensively, and a few slaves gave their lives in the process. The past several tests have been successful. The slaves here on Coruscant, whose transmitters have been disabled, are really something. They have gone back to work, so this isn’t revealed.”

Han continued. “The parts are not hard to find, it’s just the calibration that’s the trick. We can make several emitters in a few days. What do you think?”

“How does a slave know their transmitter has been disabled?” Leia asked, still working this out.

“They feel a sensation, and they have said they can feel it shutting down. So, not only do they know it is off, they know where it is if they ever want it taken out.”

“Luke, you can get Rogue group together without attracting attention, right?” Luke nodded.

Leia continued, “What was the name of that commander who bowed to us when we arrived? Vanaros? He can help us too.” A plan was forming in her mind.

She looked at Han, and at Luke and then Chewie. “We are going to free the slaves,” she said.

The plan was simple. They chose several worlds where slavery was prevalent including Kashyyyk, Tatooine and

Coruscant itself. Each world had a designated team, which first consisted of a small landing group, who would arrive planetside to spread word. Then, a large ship, in some cases a recolored Star Destroyer, along with a squadron of one-man fighters would drop out of hyperspace and disable any slave holding ships surrounding the world. Then the emitter would be initiated.

“Are you going to let Ackbar in on this?” Han asked Leia. He was wondering if they might be able to get a few Mon Calamari ships.

“We can’t. The risk is too high of him telling Mothma, or otherwise leaking it.”

“Alright. I think that from the time we leave Coruscant to the time the slaves are rising up, will be less than 36 hours.”

Leia agreed. “That’s about how much time it will take them to even realize what is going on.”

During the preparations, Luke and Leia had time for one more training session with Qui Gon. Despite being presented with painful images, of slaves treated brutally no less, Leia kept her breathing even. She reminded herself that losing control would only undermine her resolve. She stayed calm.

The two dueled again, and this time were much more evenly matched. Luke and Leia danced around each other, and traded blows for the better part of an hour. Both felt the Force flowing through them, as if the Force itself delighted in this game, as if they were vessels through which it could feel muscles extending, hearts beating, and lungs breathing. Through which the Force could experience the improbable miracle of being alive.

The duel only ended when Leia stepped outside the glowing rectangle, and relinquished in exhaustion.

Qui Gon looked at them, and said simply, “That, my young ones, was beautiful.”

A few mornings later, very early, before the sun of Coruscant rose, the friends met in the hangar bay, where Rogue Group and the Falcon were preparing for take-off.

Lando had left the evening before, taking Threepio and some of the Endor command team, in the shuttle Tyderium. He had arranged a meeting with the Trandoshan blockade commanders of Kashyyyk, on the lead ship. Having all of them in one place would simplify disabling their ships. Threepio was surprisingly subdued upon being parted with Artoo. As they left, he looked down at his little partner. “May the Force be with you and Master Luke, Artoo,” was all he said, and Artoo beeped in reply.

Tarfful, one of the Wookiee elders who had come to Coruscant to petition for the freedom of the Wookiees, had left even earlier, in a very tiny craft. He knew a way to the planet surface where he wouldn't be detected, and would spread the message among the Wookiees.

"Are you sure you are okay with our being split up?" Luke asked Leia, holding her with one hand on each arm.

"Luke, I'll be fine. It makes sense for you to go to Tatooine. Han and I will go to Kashyyyk with Chewbacca."

Luke turned to Chewie, who was more nervous than Luke had ever seen him. Chewie roared at him, and gave him a huge hug. "May the Force be with you, Chewbacca. This day will be long remembered by the Wookiees and by all the galaxy."

"I'll see you soon, Kid. I sure hope I don't have to come and rescue you!"

Luke laughed back. "I hope *I* don't have to come and rescue *you*!"

He and Han embraced. "May the Force be with you Luke," said Han before he turned back to the Millennium Falcon.

Luke and Leia's eyes met. "*Keep breathing sister.*"

"Keep your knees bent brother."

And then he turned away to join Rogue Group, who were climbing into their X-Wings.

Han felt a tremendous sense of security and familiarity as he settled into his pilot's seat on the Millennium Falcon. Chewie was beside him checking gauges and readouts, as well as making sure the two emitters they carried were secure and ready. Leia was strapping herself in; even if he was still mad at her, it was good to have her there.

Until he heard a voice behind him, "This ship is looking much better than the last time I was here!" Han whirled in his seat and saw a young Obi Wan and Qui Gon floating by the cockpit entrance.

"What are *they* doing here?" he asked Leia. Obi Wan was positively grinning.

Qui Gon answered, "Some part of Leia has invited us here. It is through her strength that you can see us. Obi Wan is quite excited to be able to view today's events, and we both thank you for accommodating us."

Han gaped. "Alright, but no giving orders! This is my ship! I might not be a Jedi or whatever, but I give the orders

around here.

Qui Gon bowed, "Of course Captain Solo."

"Where's the rest of the ghosts? Where's Vader and the green thing?"

"Yoda has traveled with Tarfful to Kashyyyk and Mace is staying here on Coruscant." Qui Gon responded.

Obi Wan continued, "Anakin is with Luke. He wanted to go to Tatooine."

Han nodded and turned back to the controls. "Why do these ghosts have to go 'with' anyone anyway?" he mumbled to himself. "Can't they just pop in and out as they please?"

But then Chewie drew his attention to the engines, which had completed their power cycle, and soon they were following Rogue Group out of the hangar and into the early morning sky.

"Rogue Group, call in!" Luke spoke into his comm unit as the ships took off.

"Rogue 2 in position," called Wedge. "Rogue 3, here sir." Each of his squad called off, and Luke did a mental tick off while he checked his readouts, and also for the emitter that had been maneuvered into the belly of his X-Wing. Wedge had one as well.

"I've always admired these things." Luke heard Anakin's voice in his head. "They take a beating but continue to fly. And Incom managed to fit normal propulsion systems in with a hyperdrive. And keep the thing pretty agile."

"I disagreed with Tarkin and the others on the TIE fighter design," Anakin continued. "As far as he and Sidious were concerned, the pilots, who were mostly clones, were expendable. So the TIE fighter was designed to be extremely light, but also very fragile. Getting my own TIE Interceptor was such a huge effort. Artoo calculates the navigation on the hyperdrive jumps, right?" Anakin was pretty talkative today.

"Yes," Luke replied in thought, "although there is a communications channel now, if a pilot loses the astromech, the pilot can get readings from another astromech or nav computer. Artoo and I have made some modifications to this particular ship, mostly to make it more livable for long journeys. I was glad to get this ship back from Bespin."

"Artoo, are we ready for the jump to light speed? Rogue group, on my mark."

Artoo beeped affirmatively, and his squadron replied as well. The Millennium Falcon peeled off from Rogue Group and then all the ships disappeared into the stars.

Later that morning, Evona the Hutt awakened in her Coruscant apartment, feeling the effects of overindulgence the night before. Where was Estreph, her servant boy? She wanted her morning meal, which would improve her condition considerably.

“Estreph! Come to me now!”

There was no response.

“Where is he?” Evona mumbled to herself. “Where is that thing?” It had been some time since she had had to use Estreph’s remote to summon him to herself. At last she found it and pressed the switch.

Oddly, the remote indicated that he was standing right in front of her when clearly he was not. Unless she had drunk far more than she had realized the evening before. She stared at the device. Suddenly, something felt very wrong.

“Estreph!” she called again, even though she now understood that he would not respond.

The Millennium Falcon dropped out of hyperspace and immediately made contact with the Ponder Light, a Correllian transport ship piloted by Captain Storres also of Correllia. It was ferrying a squadron of Y-Wings from a recent battle in the Corellian system, and Han had managed to contact them, before they were scheduled to return to Coruscant. They had emerged from hyperspace some distance from Kashyyyk.

As soon as they dropped out, Han checked Lando’s signal, and then hailed Captain Storres. “The Trandoshans fell for it, Captain. Lando has gathered the blockade ship captains on the command ship. I’m sending you those coordinates. Disabling the blockade ships shouldn’t be too hard. Chewie says that the Trandoshans use the Wookiees as slaves on their blockade ships, so once we set the emitter, their crews will get a surprise.”

“Alright, General Solo. Let us know when you have set the first emitter.”

The Ponder Light held back, and the Millennium Falcon flew in towards Kashyyyk, on the side opposite of where Lando was now engaged in meaningless negotiations with the Trandoshan leadership.

It would be touch and go, since the Falcon didn’t have a cloaking device. By the time they got close enough to set the emitter, some of the blockade would have already detected them. The Falcon would have to defend itself, and set the emitter simultaneously. Han suddenly wished he hadn’t brought Leia.

"Maybe you shouldn't have come, Princess. This is going to get a bit dicey."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for anything," she replied.

"Well, make sure you're strapped in tight. Chewie, let me know the minute you have set the emitter."

Han flew straight towards the planet and the blockade, until they were hailed, by a ship directly ahead.

"Unidentified ship! Transmit immediately your identification and destination!"

Han responded by abruptly changing course and twisting his ship, so that it presented less surface area to the hailing ship.

"Unidentified ship! Respond immediately!"

Chew growled slightly, checked the readouts and placed a giant paw over the emitter switch.

The Trandoshan blockade ship opened fire, shooting a stream of laser fire to where the Falcon had been a moment prior. Han didn't return fire but continued twisting and diving, evading the blockade ship. Leia felt a little ill. It felt wonderful.

Then, with an "Arrgghh!" Chewie hit the emitter switch.

"That's done, Captain! The first emitter is fired!"

Behind them the Ponder Light's hatches opened and swarms of Y-Wings, and a few B-Wings poured out, breaking up into groups, each making way to a blockade ship.

The Falcon retreated, leaving the blockade ships to the team of snub fighters who swarmed in and began targeting canons, turbolasers and offensive positions.

Han took the Falcon in a great loop, around to the other side of Kashyyyk. It was daylight there, and so the Kashyyyk sun rose over the Falcon as if it were sunrise.

Already the first transmitter was having an effect; no more of the Trandoshan ships hailed them. Han could only imagine what was happening inside the ships, and he hoped that the Wookiees had gotten the message to hold the Trandoshans as prisoners of war, instead of pulling their arms out of their sockets.

A few squadrons of Y-Wings had followed Han around to this side of the planet. By now, word would have spread

among the blockade, and the first emitter had not reached this far, so these ships were putting up more of a resistance. Lasers crisscrossed, and Han saw a few Y-Wings explode into fragments, or plummet into the surface of the blockade ships. He dodged his way around to the second location. Chewie grunted at him.

"I'm doing my best here ol' pal, that emitter won't do any good if we get blasted getting there."

They were pulling closer to the command ship, which had all of its lasers firing. The Falcon swooped to avoid one shot and barely ducked another. Finally Chewie yowled and hit the emitter switch again, igniting the second emitter.

Han transmitted again to Captain Storres. "The second emitter has been set! I repeat, the second emitter has been set!" Then to Chewie he said, "C'mon, let's go help disable the command ship," and the Falcon came around, avoiding lasers, to join the team who were targeting the command ship's guns.

"Han! Han! Are you there?" Lando called over the comm.

"Both of them are set, Lando. You'd better watch out that the Wookiees there don't mistake you for a slaver!"

"Han, we are getting out of here! Cover me!"

Han could see in the docking bay the shuttle Tyderium, and Lando and Threepio running towards it. Han shot out as many guns as he could see, in and around the docking bay. The Tyderium raised ship.

"Millennium Falcon! Cease your attack! This is an outrage!" One of the Trandoshan generals was hailing him.

"Do I answer?" Han turned to Leia.

"No, what we are doing is not sanctioned, so we can't tell them they are under arrest or anything."

Han ignored the hail, and continued covering Lando, who was now approaching the Falcon.

"Han, you there?"

"How was it Lando?"

"Ooooh, they were mad! As soon as they figured out what was going on, they started using language that would have caused Threepio to melt if he translated it. Where are we headed?"

"Well Chewie, what do you think?"

Chewie grrr'ed.

"Chewie wants to head to the surface." Han told Leia. She nodded, smiling.

"Lando, we are heading down to Kashyyyk."

The battles in orbit and on planet had been surprisingly short. When the Falcon and the Tyderium alighted on the landing platform, the occupants saw that the Wookiees had already detained the Trandoshan platform guards who were seated in neat rows, hands on head.

Tarfful was there to greet them. When Leia stepped out of the Falcon, the Wookiees all dropped to one knee. Although Threepio translated their words, she didn't need his service to know that they were chanting, "All Hail Queen Leia!"

Luke and the Rogue group dropped out of supralight a distance away from Tatooine, where they were to rendezvous with the Silver Scythe. Luke saw the Star Destroyer as soon as he dropped into normal space.

"Captain Vanaros, Rogue Leader here. We have you in visual."

"Commander Skywalker. Your timing is excellent; we just arrived, and I don't think the Hutts have picked us up yet."

Luke could feel Vanaros struggling to keep from dropping to his knees, and calling him "Son of Suns". Technically, Luke was of a lower rank than Vanaros, even in the confusion of their new alliance.

Vanaros continued: "We have located two star destroyers in orbit, at these coordinates. It appears that the Hutts have contracted with them for security patrols." Vanaros didn't bother to hide the contempt in his voice, at this development.

"Also, Akira has made contact from the surface, and she is spreading the word from a location called Mos Espa." Luke remembered the serene woman, the former slave, who had spoken so eloquently at the meeting of the Interim Authority.

"*Mos Espa,*" Anakin whispered in his ear. "*That is where I grew up.*"

"Thank you Captain," Luke responded, making sure that Rogue group was picking up on his transmission. "While

it is a little strange for us to be cooperating with a Star Destroyer, we must all be mindful of the sacrifices and risks of Akira and those like her.”

“I am in agreement, Commander Skywalker. How do you like our new coloring?” A large blue Alliance insignia now decorated the surface of the Star Destroyer. “There is one on the underside as well, sir.”

“Very good, Captain, very good. Rogue group, remember your orders. We are not here to destroy any ships and we are trying to minimize the loss of life. Our mission is to disable the weapons and the hyperdrive of those destroyers, and any other Hutt ships that might come after us. I will let you know when I have set the first emitter. Wedge will report from the other side of the planet when he has set his.”

As the snub fighters reported in and confirmed their orders, they and the Silver Scythe headed towards Tatooine.

Captain Vanaros hailed the two Hutttese Star Destroyers. “Star Destroyer Missile, Star Destroyer Antagonizer. Stand down in the name of the Alliance.”

Before Luke could correct this reference, the closest Star Destroyer opened fire.

“Luke! Should any of us go to the other Star Destroyer on the other side of the planet? When should I head over there?”

“Not yet, Wedge,” Luke ordered between the flak that came at him. “Wait for them to come to us. We will all stay here and work on disabling this Destroyer.”

While the Scythe prevented the Missile from going anywhere, the snub fighters flew in and with great precision shot out weapons banks, gun turrets, proton torpedo cannons and finally the hyperdrive propulsion.

The Missile, taken by surprise, had been relatively easy to disable. By the time the Antagonizer came into range, its crew were at their stations. The Scythe and Rogue group swarmed over it. This time the fire was more intense. “I’m hit!” one of Luke’s team yelled, and his ship plunged into the surface of the Star Destroyer. Luke winced. Then, noting a canon, he leveled in and removed it with a few blasts.

“Wedge! Sango! We need to target their main blast array! Follow me!” The three snub fighters grouped in formation and flew as one towards the tip of the Destroyer. Still in tight formation, they clung tightly to the Destroyer’s “blind alley”, a region along the edge of the Destroyer where the guns could not reach them. Then working as a team, they shot out the forward blast arrays, which exploded into infinite burning fragments.

After that the battle was definitely turned in their direction, and Luke wanted to set the emitters before the Hutts

sent up any more ships. "Wedge, head over now to the other planet side. Let me know when you have set it. Captain Vanaros, I am going to move into position. Rogue Group, I will meet you on the ground."

"Artoo," he asked his astromech, "have you calculated our location? Where do we need to be?"

Artoo beeped as the coordinates appeared on Luke's monitor. "Okay, here goes."

The X-Wing floated above Tatooine. "*Luke.*"

"*Yes, Father?*"

"*Thank-You. Thank-You for all of this.*"

Luke did not reply. Instead, he flipped the switches to ready the emitter, and then pressed the button with his thumb.

"Artoo, did it work?" No sound, no vibration, nothing had resulted, that Luke could tell, from the controls being set. Probably Chewbacca hadn't thought to build in a feedback mechanism.

Artoo burred a response. "Yes," appeared on Luke's monitor.

"Well then, to the surface then. Rogue group, match my coordinates. Let's hope things don't get too chaotic on the ground."

"What do you think we will find Luke?" Sango, Rogue Eight, asked.

"I'm worried about violence down there. Slave owners will not be thrilled about suddenly losing their property, and the slaves themselves might want more than a little revenge. I hope they don't break out in hand-to-hand combat, or worse. Rogue Group, we have to try to stop any violence without engaging in any shooting ourselves. Make sure your weapons are set for stun."

Luke was worried about Rogue Group. They had never had this kind of mission before, where they would be called upon to quell violence. He hoped they were up for it.

Rogue group swooped in and landed on a plain of salt flats outside of Mos Espa. Luke was the last to land, and in his cockpit, removed his helmet. "Artoo, stay here. I don't think you can help, and every time you come here, it takes weeks to get the sand out." Artoo beeped in agreement.

Luke jumped to the ground, took off his flight suit, and attached his saber to his belt. He could see Rogue Group ahead of him, atop a rise. They were turned back and looking at him, as if unsure how to proceed. He walked up the rise, and was completely unprepared for what he saw.

The slaves of Mos Espa, thousands of them, were gathering on the salt flats before them. A few slave owners were chasing them, screaming threats and waving blasters, but the former slaves simply wrestled them down, disarmed them, and then ignored them, leaving them to howl uselessly. All were turned to the rise where Luke was now standing, and when he stopped at the summit, his cape fluttering in the breeze, they began to cry out in unison:

“Son of Suns! Son of Suns! Son of Suns!”

Then they were quiet. For a long moment, the only sound, despite the thousands of beings before him and Rogue Group around him, was the wind, blowing across the flats.

Then a loud cheer went up from the crowd, a cheer that rose to the heavens of Tatooine and into the Galaxy.

Despite her protestations, Leia and Han were seated at a place of honor, on a prominent platform built into one of the largest of the wroshyr trees, while a great banquet was spread before them.

She was reminded of Endor, but Kashyyyk somehow felt deeper and older than Endor. She didn't think it was that the Wookiees were larger than the Ewoks. Perhaps it was knowing how high they were in the wroshyr trees, and that in the fused branches deep below, there resided entirely different creatures, older and more dangerous.

This feeling was intensified when several Wookiees brought their great drums onto the platform, each made out of a hollowed out trunk and a skin stretched tightly over its top. Some were taller than her, and Wookiees stood on stumps to play them. These drums were far more deep-throated than those of Endor, and their *whum whum* resonated through her. She closed her eyes and let the drumbeat echo in her limbs, her heart and her very cells. Long into the night, the Wookiees performed their ancient dances and the rhythms of the music stayed with her even as she drifted off to sleep.

“Surprisingly the slaves haven't risen up against their former owners, and the owners haven't made many moves to recapture their slaves. When I got out of my ship, they were spread out before me, calling me the “Son of Suns.”

“Yes, Luke, it is pretty much the same here, they won't stop calling me Queen Leia.”

Leia had asked one of the Wookiees for a holocomm to reach Luke. The sun had risen and the Wookiees were busy reclaiming their property and assessing damage to their homes. Happily it seemed that the emancipation had gone just as smoothly on the other worlds where it had been attempted. No word had been received from Coruscant.

"It seems that this was pretty easy Leia. The slave owners don't really seem to know how to react."

"Well, " said Leia thoughtfully, "they were so accustomed to relying on the transmitters and controls to maintain enslavement, that they never even considered what they would do if the transmitters no longer functioned."

Luke's blue holoprojection nodded. "Leia..." Luke paused and then pressed forward. "Leia, Anakin and I want to return to Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru's homestead. He wants to show me where Shmi's grave is."

"Wasn't it there when you were growing up?"

"I guess it was, I never saw it. I am beginning to think that Owen buried it, so that I wouldn't ask any difficult questions." He hesitated.

"Leia, we are wondering if you want to come too."

When she didn't respond he lapsed into kidding. "Then of course you can see where I grew up and realize that you had it much, much better than me!" He grinned at her.

She smiled. "Alright, I will let you know how I will get there, and you can send me the coordinates."

"Lando and I already promised Chewie that we would help him tomorrow. There are still some Wookiees being held hostage a few hundred kilometers from here."

Han looked concerned at her decision to join Luke on Tatooine.

"I'll be alright. I can take the Tyderium, and both Threepio and I know how to pilot it."

Han wasn't assuaged. "Listen Leia, I don't know what is happening between us but I don't like the idea of you going off on your own like this."

She smiled and took his hand. "It will be alright. I will probably be on Tatooine for only a few hours, and then Luke and I will plan where to meet up with you."

Seeing his still worried look she said, "Captain Solo, the fighting is over. I'll be all right. Besides, Threepio will look after me."

She kissed him gently and then turned, taking the path that would take her back to the landing platform.

As the Tyderium folded its wings and landed gently in the desolate wastes of the Dune Sea region of Tatooine, Leia thought she saw Luke. Some distance from the homestead was a hooded figure, in black, simply standing and staring at the deepening blue horizon. It didn't seem right though. The figure seemed taller than Luke.

So when she exited the shuttle, descending the ramp and saw Luke coming out of the low domed building she looked back and forth between the two figures. She realized the other was Anakin.

Luke came to her and hugged her. "Come over here," he said. He took her hand and drew her to a spot where a flat stone had been placed vertically in the sand. It was simply marked, "Lars."

"The farmers who buried Owen and Beru must have known where Shmi was buried because they placed them right next to her." He pointed out a similar stone, which lay flat in a depression, now visible where Luke and Artoo had removed the sand. The stone read in small letters, "Shmi".

Leia looked up at Anakin who was still a distance away, staring into the setting suns.

Leia heard the whir of Threepio's gyros behind her. "Oh my! I remember this place!"

Luke smiled at him. "Of course Threepio, this is where my uncle purchased you and Artoo from the Jawas."

"No Master Luke. I was here before that. I spent many years working for Mistress Shmi and Master Cliegg, until the day that Mistress Shmi died. Master Anakin and Mistress Padmé then took me with them to Coruscant."

Leia was suddenly reminded of her vision. Hearing Threepio speak of it made her stomach twist.

Threepio continued. "Sir, it is getting dark, and we should be getting indoors." He paused, "If you would like, I can relate to you all that I can recall of Mistress Shmi. She was very kind to me."

Luke looked at him, reminded of the history that the two droids carried. "Yes, of course Threepio, you are right. We will spend the night in the shuttle. Why don't you and Artoo go in and make preparations. Artoo needs more power anyway."

"Yes, sir," said Threepio, and Artoo followed him into the shuttle.

"Tomorrow," said Luke, "I will uncover Cliegg's marker, and pull his and Shmi's up so they are visible." His eyes met Leia's and she nodded. Anakin was still standing, unmoving, watching the sunset.

Threepio re-emerged from the shuttle. "Mistress Leia. Mon Mothma is on the holocomm and she is requesting to speak with you."

The reality of current politics returned to Leia. She turned to Luke. "Well, this is it. Mothma is going to give me an earful about this unsanctioned action. I might be a while."

Luke smiled at her. "Go ahead, I want to get some supplies out of the X-Wing and lock it down. I'll meet you in the shuttle."

But as she entered the shuttle, Luke stood a while longer, looking at Shmi's grave, and at the deepening sky.

He stared at Anakin. Suddenly Anakin turned and looked at the shuttle. "Leia!" Luke heard him call out, and Anakin disappeared. Before Luke could feel what had startled him, the Tyderium's ramp retracted and the ship took off, shrinking quickly in the Tatooine sky.

It wasn't until the ship had entirely disappeared that Luke remembered that Artoo was gone, along with Leia and Threepio.

Leia prepared her thoughts, remembering her arguments in support of the slave emancipation. She took a deep breath and flipped on the transmission. She was unprepared for what Mothma had to say.

"Leia, some survivors, both native and Imperial have arrived from Urdnough. They are quite weak, but they have described to us some disaster, an attack by some form of modified, old style battle droids."

Leia wondered why Mothma was telling her this. All she said was, "Yes?"

"This prompted us to seek out some records here on Coruscant. Leia, it seems that the Emperor kept a prison camp, within a rocky plateau, in a remote area of Urdnough. The battle droids were guards there. I am sending you the coordinates."

"A prison camp?" Leia's head was starting to spin.

"Leia, according to the records we found, your father Bail was delivered to this camp, just after the destruction of Alderaan. Apparently he was on Coruscant at the time."

Leia stared at Mothma. "I am on my way," she said, and switched off the transmission.

"Threepio! Get up here, we are leaving!"

"What? Mistress Leia, what are you doing? We must wait for Master Luke!"

"Now Threepio! Don't contradict my orders." She quickly flipped the switches to retract the ramp, and ignited the engines. "Luke can't help us, we must leave immediately."

"Yes Mistress Leia," said Threepio disconsolately, and took his spot next to her. Behind them, Artoo beeped, concerned. "Mistress Leia, we cannot make the jump to light speed, until we have cleared the gravity well of Tatooine and calculated the jump. Please Mistress Leia, slow down."

Leia ignored him.

"Leia, don't do this, wait for Luke."

She whirled to see Anakin behind her. "What are you doing here?" she hissed at him. "Get away! I don't want to see you! I don't want to hear you!"

"Leia, I ..."

She cut him off. "No wait, I want to know what you know. You will tell me everything you know about this prison camp."

Luke struggled to remain calm, but it was an effort. Where had Leia gone, why had she left without so much as a thought to him? His mind was rushing. Even if he could find out where she had gone, without Artoo, it would take him time to get his X-Wing to lightspeed.

He climbed into his cockpit and activated the comm. "Wedge, are you there?" He suspected Wedge had been celebrating. "Blast!" he said to himself. "Sango? Rogue Group? Come in immediately!" There was no response.

He was just about to hail Captain Vanaros when Wedge's voice came in. "Luke! Sorry about that sir, stepped away for a moment. What can I do for you?"

"Wedge, I need you to meet me at the Silver Scythe. I have lost my Artoo unit and I need yours. Leia is in trouble."

“Tell me! What is on this planet? What did Mothma mean when she said there were old style battle droids there?”

Once they had made the jump to hyperspace, they moved to the hold. Leia couldn't stop pacing. Anakin gestured for her to sit. After glowering at him for a second, she did.

“Leia, you must understand that the Emperor excluded me from many of his plans and schemes. Believe me when I tell you, I was aware of this prison camp, but I never heard that Bail Organa was still alive, or that he might be there.”

Leia continued to fix her eyes on him. He continued.

“The Emperor liked to ... experiment. He was fascinated with the integration of living tissue, living intelligence with mechanicals. There was a general during the Clone Wars, who had been a man from Kalee I believe, who had almost died in a horrific accident. Sidious worked with the Geonosians to build an exoskeleton for his brain and organs. He also manipulated the linkages between mind and mechanics so that Grievous became a brutal, ruthless killer, without even being aware of any change within himself.

“Then of course, there was me, whom he long considered his greatest masterpiece.” Anakin said this, without expression.

“Not long after I ... joined him, he began to work with some slug like creatures that were sensitive to the Force. Their brain stems were small, but indicated a great deal of activity. He somehow connected this brainstem and this creature to the processors of an old style battle droid. He started with simple security battle droids, perhaps hoping to attempt this fusion on the more powerful bodyguard droids that Grievous employed. He was trying to create a droid that he could control with simple inflections of the Force.”

“What happened?”

“They were very unpredictable. They could be programmed with some simple commands and given a set of rules to follow. However if the conditions of the rules changed significantly enough, they tended to go haywire.

“After I hadn't seen them for some time, I asked the Emperor what happened with them. He said he was disappointed in them, but that they had been put to good use.

“Then he looked at me and said that he already had a subordinate whom he had a hard time controlling, that he didn't need more of them.” This memory seemed to please Anakin in a grim way. “Humph,” grunted Anakin to himself, “rotted old liar.”

“Anyway, Leia, from what you have described I suspect that Sidious employed these fused slug droids at his prison camps, and that they might have begun to behave erratically, at the fall of the Empire.”

He looked at her. “Leia, don’t do this alone. Call for Luke, call for Han. Please get some help.”

“I don’t need their help,” she said, her temper barely restrained.

“Then Leia, let me help you. I can help you.”

Leia did not respond, but stood and returned to the cockpit, refusing to acknowledge his offer.

Part IV

Major Arnulf Jerjerrod, commander of the Emperor’s Urdnough Alim Re-education Center had just about given up hope that his brother, Otwin, had somehow survived the destruction of the Death Star. Not that he had had much time to think about it; he was lucky to be alive himself.

He and a small group of his men were only alive because they had managed to convince the slugdroids that the prisoners might perish without this small group of Imperials. Jerjerrod smiled grimly to himself: he had devoted his life to an Empire that valued his life far less than those of the prisoners he guarded. The slug droids had specific programming or conditioning or whatever it was they had, that made the health and captivity of the prisoners their highest priority. He and his men were expendable.

Slugdroid was of course only the name that he and his men called these half droid unknown, unknown, unknown, half living flesh creatures that the Emperor had put under his command. The Emperor’s name for them, Binksoids, was rumored to originate in the name of some creature on the Emperor’s home planet. Jerjerrod did not know what the Emperor’s home planet was, or if the name was of a species or an individual, but he often wondered if the namesake creature was as stupid and single-minded as the Emperor’s creation.

Only their Captain, a slugdroid called JB-0577, spoke Basic; amongst themselves they communicated in an electronic hum that was meaningless to humans. Jerjerrod often found interacting with JB-0577 to be similar to communicating with an insane person. The droid was constantly recalling old grudges and ancient insults. Jerjerrod’s sense of caution had increased when he realized that JB-0577 carried a lightsaber, perhaps purloined from a long-dead Jedi, clamped inside its dorsal unit.

Urdnough was well known for its lush valleys and formerly fertile farmlands. It was less well known for the Alim Plateau, a desolate, rocky, elevated region, far from the planet’s oceans and lakes, formed millennia before by powerful volcanoes. The upper surface of the plateau was worn smooth by a long receded sea, and by the

ceaseless winds that swept over and above it, and through its many fissures.

The volcanic rock itself was porous, making the creation of artificial tunnels, caves and cells quite feasible. It was here that the Emperor placed his most important re-education camp, guarded not only by Imperial troops, but also by his Binksoids.

A small command area overlooked a landing well in the northern region of the plateau, and tunnels radiated from the landing well into the rock. Through these tunnels, single-car transports ran, on a single repulsor rail, from cell-block to cell-block, carrying prisoners to and from their cells, as well as the drone droids who delivered food and water. Each cellblock was nothing more than a nearly featureless room, open only to the transport tunnel, containing four deep wells. Each well led several meters down to an individual cell that contained some artificial light, a cot, a table and a refresher booth. A flat elevating platform traveled up and down each well, and many prisoners had attempted, to no avail, to hotwire the elevating platform to make an escape. Other prisoners attempted to escape by climbing the well, but its walls were slick and the well was deep. When they inevitably fell, the elevating platform would rise up to catch them, and then carry them back to the depths of their cell.

Each day, most prisoners were transported in small groups to the rocky surface of the plateau for light and exercise. Occasionally the Emperor used Urdnough to break a prisoner's spirit with indefinite captivity in a darkened cell, but this was unusual.

Here the Emperor kept those prisoners from whom he might later require information, or of whom he might want to make an example.

It was Arnulf Jerjerrod's role to oversee this Center, and things had gone smoothly until word came that the Death Star had been destroyed, that the Emperor was dead and that the local farmers had risen up in revolt against their Imperial Governor. Right away the slugdroids began to behave erratically, refusing to follow orders and shutting down the tunnel transports when his men were en route. When the farmers approached, climbing the escarpment and crossing the plateau, the droids went berserk, climbing to the surface to slaughter the intruders, and turning against many of his men, killing them. It had been an effort to bring them back under control, and Jerjerrod was concerned that any other unexpected event would push them over the edge again.

On this morning, Jerjerrod was wondering how he should proceed, especially since he had heard nothing from any commanders, Imperial or otherwise. He wondered if anyone even knew he and his men were here. He also idly wondered if his brother had contacted any of their relatives, and if his family assumed he was dead. This was running through his head, when an Imperial shuttle dropped out of the sky and alighted in the landing well, carved into the volcanic rock.

It was only a few hours later that Luke's X-Wing jumped into hyperspace towards Urdnough, but it felt like too

much time had been wasted. He had reached Mothma easily enough, and learned what had set Leia on a course to Urdnough so quickly. Han however was headed to a remote location on Kashyyyk and Luke had only been able to send a message to him, without being sure that Han had received it. Wedge had inserted his astromech into Luke's X-Wing, but it took some time for this droid to familiarize itself with Luke's customized X-Wing and to adjust its supralight calculations.

It wasn't until he made the jump that Luke had time to speculate how Leia might react if Bail Organa were not on Urdnough, or if she were too late to save him.

"Mistress Leia, please allow me to contact Master Luke and Captain Solo. We are about to drop from hyperspace and we must tell them where we are!" Threepio was nearly hysterical.

Leia came out of the daze in which she had spent the journey. So many memories of Bail and Acquillae had been flooding her mind; she had hardly been able to focus on getting to Urdnough. She recalled in great detail how Bail had suffered when Acquillae had died after a long illness, and how he renewed his clandestine efforts to assist the Rebel Alliance.

She looked at the fussy protocol droid. "Threepio, you may stay with the ship and send an encoded message to Luke and to Han."

A blue-ish glow appeared nearby and she grimaced as Anakin's figure sharpened. "Leia, what are you going to do when you land? Do you have a plan? Do you even know what you will find there?"

Leia noticed for the first time a scar on the side of Anakin's right eye. She wondered how he had gotten it.

"I am going to find my father," she replied evenly, meeting his eyes.

"Leia, you don't even know for sure that Bail Organa is there. Please wait for Luke or Captain Solo."

"I am going to find my father," she repeated.

Anakin sighed. For the first time, in all of the chapters of his life, he could appreciate the struggles that Obi Wan must have gone through, training him.

"Then let me help you Leia. With your strength, I can help you."

"Threepio, you will stay with the ship," Leia said again. "Artoo, Vader and I will disembark and find what we can."

Thus, knowing his next task would be to contact his Master, Threepio monitored the shuttle as the stars slowed around them, the hyperdrive engines handing control over to the normal space propulsion. He then piloted the ship to the coordinates that Mothma had provided.

Jerjerrod did not know what to expect when he approached the Imperial Shuttle, which was still venting plumes of exhaust. He wondered where JB-0577 was. Other slugdroids were approaching the shuttle in formation. He heard a strange noise, it seemed that the slugs were humming.

The ramp lowered, and a small blue and white astromech droid exited. Then, Jerjerrod's breath caught in his throat.

Lord Darth Vader, Dark Lord of the Sith, the Emperor's Executor was exiting this shuttle. The Dark Lord was here, at his installation. Darth Vader, who was reported to be as dead as the Emperor, was here on Urdnough.

A small woman followed the Dark Lord. Jerjerrod felt he had seen her image somewhere, but he couldn't place it.

He swallowed hard, and then stepped forward.

"Lord Vader. Major Arnulf Jerjerrod at your service sir. Welcome to the Urdnough Alim Re-Education Center." Then, in a rush without thinking he said, "M'Lord, we thought you were dead."

"Jerjerrod?" the Dark Lord surveyed him. The woman was silent.

"My brother, Moff Jerjerrod was the supervisor overseeing construction on the Death Star."

"Major, that posting was to remain confidential. It appears that he revealed this to you."

Jerjerrod faltered. "M'Lord, my brother and I are both deeply dedicated to the Empire, M'Lord."

"Your brother was dedicated to the Empire, Jerjerrod. Or perhaps we should say he was dedicated to furthering his career within the Empire."

Jerjerrod gulped. "Yes, Lord Vader."

"Major, do I look dead to you?"

"N- no, no sir, I am very glad to see you alive."

"Major, I am ordering you to allow this droid to access your information systems, and to copy all information on the prisoners who are kept here."

"Of course M'Lord, but don't you have that information available to you?"

"Are you questioning my orders Major?"

"No, of course not M'Lord." Jerjerrod glanced again at the young woman. Where had he seen her before?

"Please, come this way."

"His brother was an idiot, whose ambition outweighed his competence. We will see if he is any more able." Leia heard Anakin's voice in her head. She wanted to push it away.

She looked around, taking in the layout of the landing well, noting the tunnels exiting off, and seeing individual transport cars arriving and departing in the tunnels. She paid special attention to the battle droids; she could feel the Force emanating from the arm-length long slugs held in their chest cavities.

She didn't respond. Walking freely beside Darth Vader, not as his captive, was something she never could have imagined herself doing. Panic hovered at the edge of her consciousness, but she kept it at bay.

Jerjerrod was reporting to Vader on the Center's status, but it was clear to Leia that he was leaving something out. Two of the battle droids followed closely. She noted, or rather felt, how he furtively glanced at the battle droids as if he were at least as fearful of them, as he was of Vader.

Finally he led them to a communications terminal room, and Artoo inserted his data connector into an appropriate socket, turning it one way, then the other. The two battle droids continued to watch over them, and Jerjerrod continued to deliver a very mundane status report to Vader. Leia wondered if Vader had spent much of his time as a Dark Lord, listening to such status reports.

At last Artoo disconnected from the terminal, and pulled away with a beep.

Vader turned to her. "Captain, take this droid back to my shuttle." Then he turned to Jerjerrod saying, "Major I have further questions to ask of you. Where can we meet in private?"

Leia saw Jerjerrod blanch. "Of course M'Lord, please come this way."

As they exited the communications room, Leia and Artoo turned back towards the shuttle without a word. Vader and Jerjerrod continued on to his private office.

Leia struggled to calm herself as she went with Artoo. The two battle droids had somehow chosen to follow her, instead of Vader and she wondered what they would do once she and Artoo reached the shuttle ramp. Artoo rolled along, utterly unconcerned. She envied the small droid.

When they arrived, thankfully, the two battle droids took up guard on either side of the ramp, outside the shuttle. Leia and Artoo entered.

“Threepio! Threepio!” Leia’s voice rose in impatience, and the droid came scurrying towards them.

“Mistress Leia! I have gotten word that Master Luke and Captain Solo are on their way!”

Leia ignored this last. “Artoo, tell Threepio, is Bail Organa here? Where is he? How many prisoners are here? How many have survived?”

Artoo uttered a stream of whistles and beeps, hooting in various tones. Leia waited impatiently, pacing in a small circle.

“Mistress Leia, I am terribly sorry, but the prisoners’ names are still encoded. Artoo is working as fast as he can to decode them, but at the rate of his calculations, he might not complete the task for 3 standard years and 4 standard months.”

“Blast!” Leia was furious and the circle of her pacing widened. She was trying to think, trying to stay calm. Being so close, having come so far for so long and feeling so trapped was completely infuriating.

“Mistress Leia, Artoo has found a group of prisoners who arrived here not long after the destruction of Alderaan. It is possible that Viceroy Organa is with them.”

“Where are they?” Leia demanded, stepping forward. Artoo rolled back a few centimeters, and then projected a hologram showing a tortuous path through the tunnels away from the landing well.

“Artoo, you come with me. Threepio stay here and guard the ship.”

“Mistress Leia, what shall I tell Master Luke and Captain Solo when they arrive?”

Leia stared at the droid. “Tell them whatever you want,” she said, and turned back to the ramp.

What to do about the battle droids? She could use her blaster, but she probably wouldn’t have time to blast one

and then fend off the other. Besides, doing so would only attract attention from the other droids. From behind a corner she peered out at the droids guarding the ramp. She felt out with the Force to explore them.

As she approached they turned to her, almost as moths to a light, and then raised their blasters. She reached out with her mind, felt the slugs within them, and then easily crushed the slugs one after the other. The droids collapsed; apparently some animation was required from the creature inside in order for them to function. It was almost frightening, how easy it was to do this.

In his office Commander Jerjerrod ran his fingers over various controls to bring up current troop counts and prisoner status reports, for Vader's view.

Once the door was shut, he turned to Vader. "M'Lord, these slu---- Binksoids are nearly out of control! They are single-mindedly preventing my troops from approaching the prisoners, and they have killed several of my men. Can anyone or anything control them?"

Vader did not respond. He simply stared at Jerjerrod. Suddenly, Jerjerrod's attention was turned to a monitor, where he saw, as if in answer to his question, two collapsed battle droids by the shuttle ramp, and then a trail of unmoving droids leading to one of the tunnels. He switched to another monitor and saw the young woman and the astromech droid riding on one of the tunnel transports. Then he remembered who she was: Princess Leia Organa, one of the Empire's most sought-after fugitives. Here she was, on her way to the cellblock where the Alderaanian prisoners were kept.

Jerjerrod turned to look at Vader, who still kept his silence. Then he pressed some buttons and issued various commands, to shut down all transports and to alert the troops, including the battle droids, and JB-0577. He turned to Vader again, and his eyes opened wide. The Dark Lord had disappeared.

The tunnel transport stopped so abruptly that Leia and Artoo were thrown forward. Simultaneously, most of the lights went out, leaving the two in near darkness.

"Blast!" said Leia under her breath, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Artoo, continuously optimistic, switched on a light beam, and trundled forward to the front of the car. Leia followed. She could see small emergency lights, lining the tunnel, giving off a dim illumination.

"Artoo, see if you can get this hatch open." Leia gestured to the front of the car. Artoo located a small switchbox, locked into the port, and caused the front hatch to slide open. Leia peered out the front.

She could see the tunnel and the single repulsor track go past two lit platforms, before it curved in the distance.

She jumped out. Artoo waited for a small lift to rise up, and then carry him down to the trackway. The two then started down the tunnel.

Fortunately she was looking at the platform ahead, and not at the tunnel walls, when a stormtrooper peered out over the edge, presumably looking for her. Leia backed up against the tunnel wall and gestured for Artoo to do the same.

“See anything?” she heard one trooper say.

“Nothing here. They have us looking for some escaped prisoner, when one of those battle droids could appear at any second and start shooting at us.”

Leia inched down the tunnel, until she could peer onto the platform. The stormtroopers were inspecting one of the deep wells. Two shots from her blaster rang out, and the troopers fell to the ground, both hit in the neck.

A small set of stairs led up to the platform and Leia warily made her way up. Artoo followed. Once up on the platform, Leia could see four openings in the floor, each one about the diameter of her outstretched arm. She looked down the first one, and seeing a dim light from a small room that seemed to be at the bottom far below, she called: “Hello?” There was no response.

She was about to make her way to the second, where the two stormtroopers were, when a door in the wall slid open, revealing a single battle droid.

Right away, she could sense that this one was more powerful than the others. Reflexively she brought up her blaster and shot at it, but it did something she had seen only once before in her life: it raised one of its hands and deflected her blast easily. Then the blaster was yanked from her hand, to the battle droid's, by a force she did not anticipate.

“Intruder!” it barked, “How dare you intrude here! None shall move about in my domain except by my leave!”

As it stepped out of the recess, apparently a small elevator, it reached behind into its dorsal storage compartment, and pulled out a light saber. Leia gasped as it swept it up in an offensive motion. She stepped back.

She tried, using the Force, to reach into its cavity to find the slug therein, to crush it, but she was repelled.

“Ah!” it yelled, “A user of the Force! You will see that none are more powerful than I! I will enjoy defeating you!”

Artoo beeped behind her. She hissed at him to be silent, but he beeped again, adding an insistent trill. She looked down and saw Artoo offering, from a compartment in his dome the lightsaber that Luke had constructed for her on

Coruscant. She grabbed it from him, bent her knees in a defensive position and swept the saber up in front of her, just in time to see the battle droid leap up into the air and land nearly on top of her, slashing.

Luke dropped out of hyperspace, and brought his X-Wing down into the atmosphere of Urdnough. He could see below him formerly lush valleys that were now eroded, but his attention was turned to the plateau some distance ahead. The Millennium Falcon was not on any of his scopes; he hoped fervently that Han had gotten his message.

He instinctively reached out through the Force, looking for his sister. "*Leia*," he called, searching, "*Leia!*"

She deflected easily, and pushed the droid back a few paces. Even so, it began to cackle.

"I know who you are! You may have disguised yourself as a young woman but you are my old nemesis, Darth Mandalor! I know you! You fled in fear but now have been drawn back into my power! You could not resist me! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Leia had no idea what this mad droid was talking about, and it took much of her concentration to parry its thrusts and keep from moving too close to any of the holes or the platform edge. Even so, the absurdity of its words struck her, and she was suddenly furious that this thing was impeding her. Suddenly she hated it, hated its bloated sense of self-importance, hated that such a ridiculous thing should keep her from her goal.

Her rage grew, and with this rage came a newfound strength. She clenched her jaw and attacked the droid, slashing and attacking with her blue blade, narrowing her eyes and trying to destroy it with her raw hatred.

It was physically stronger than her though; it deflected most of her blows and dodged others. It continued to laugh. "Oh Mandalor, you tried to crush me once, and you failed! You will fail again!" It lunged at her.

The droid's strength and mad insistence did not mitigate the Force; she it felt flowing through her, like hot liquid in her veins. So much so that when the droid renewed its attack, she parried easily, spun away and nicked part of its casing.

Her anger did not abate, but grew. She began to remember so much of the horror of her life, a life given almost wholly over to war. The senseless death of Queen Aquilae, from an illness that might have been cured if the Empire had not restricted the trade of a particular flowering plant; her torture at the hands of Lord Vader, him trying to extract from her the location of the rebel base; the repulsive, presumptuous tongue of Jabba the Hutt, licking her before he forced her into that humiliating outfit; Bail Organa's obsequience to pathetic Imperial bureaucrats who made him pay in dignity for every humanitarian request he ever made; the look on Han's face as

he threw his head back in agony, as he was frozen in carbonite; the destruction of her home world, where lived not just brave men, women and children but also a small, gentle mammal, one of which she had once had as a pet; all of these memories cascaded onto her and she glared at this pathetic, self-important droid before her. Suddenly she remembered the meddling of her Aunt Nas and with a furious growl she lunged forward at the droid; her blade found its mark and she sliced off its head, which went tumbling away from its body.

She stepped back, panting. The droid stood there, unmoving.

Then the head continued to cackle. "Mandalor! You cannot defeat me! Once before you dismembered me but I survived! I will survive again!" The body lunged at her.

Suddenly, in the dark rage of her mind a bright light blossomed. "*Leia! Leia, where are you?*" she heard Luke's call. In that moment she forgot her rage and was distracted. Thus, she did not react quickly enough when JB-0577 pressed forward and brought its saber down through her forearm; her hand dropped to the floor, with the saber it was holding.

She screamed in pain and backed away from the droid, which was pressing in, cackling. She reached out in her renewed rage to destroy the life inside the chest cavity but it only came closer. When it waved its saber toward her face she lost her footing and fell backwards into one of the wells in the floor. She panicked, anticipating a long fall to the bottom of the well; her remaining hand scabbled for a hold and found none. But she did not fall far; the well's elevating platform had risen up to catch her and she was now being swiftly carried down to the well's bottom.

She looked up screaming, and saw the torso of the droid above her, almost as if it was peering at her. As she reached bottom, it turned, as if its attention were being drawn elsewhere, and it disappeared from her view.

The headless body of JB-0577 reached down and picked up its head. A new presence absorbed its attention. Perhaps it had been mistaken! Perhaps the young woman was not Mandalor in disguise! Perhaps this new entity was! JB-0577 stalked over to a small control panel set into the wall, and tapped out a set of instructions, too fast for human eyes to see. It would set up a little surprise for Mandalor! A moment later the tunnel transport car pulled up to the platform and the droid entered. Rather than returning back towards the landing bay, the car pulled away from the platform deeper into the prison blocks.

JB-0577 was so absorbed in the new presence it had felt and so focused on leaving the platform to find this presence, that it did not notice a small astromech sliding up to inspect the control panel that it had just left.

Luke landed his X-Wing on the flat, black surface of the plateau a few hundred meters from the edge of the

landing well. He could feel Leia, and something felt very wrong, as if her presence were enshrouded in a thick, dark cloak. Luke was torn between going to her right away, and waiting for Han. Luke reasoned that he had no idea when Han might arrive, so he climbed out of his ship and out of his flight suit. Along with his saber and his black cloak, he took some tools from the X-Wing's storage compartment.

He walked to the edge of the landing well, and concealing himself behind a rocky promontory, looked down to see what he could.

There was the Tyderium, its ramp extended. Maintenance droids were gathering parts of fallen battle droids that littered the floor of the landing bay; Luke had only ever seen them in images. As he watched, four battle droids in formation exited one tunnel and swiftly walked towards another and Luke immediately felt the odd coloring of the Force that seemed to be a part of them. He reached out and felt the slugs residing within. He wanted to get closer.

He took a rappel cord and attached the clamp-and-spool end to the promontory. He put his foot into the loop at the other end, grasped the cord, tested the spring mechanism slightly and then swung out over the edge, letting the spring slowly lower him to the lower level. Immediately the four droids saw him and changed direction, to approach him. They raised their weapons and blasted, but Luke deflected their blasts; his saber was already in his other hand.

As they came closer he jumped from the rappel cable, landing lightly and reached towards the closest one, sending out a warm wave of the Force. It stopped, as if stunned. He touched it, and the slug inside seemed to curl up on itself and go to sleep. The droid was frozen in its tracks, and stood there, somewhat slumped over. He did this with the other three quickly and easily.

"Master Luke! Thank the Mak--," Threepio paused, then continued, from the top of the ramp. "I am so happy to see you Master Luke! You must help Mistress Leia!"

Luke ran up to the ramp of the Tyderium. "Threepio, where did she go?"

"She was very frightening Master Luke, very angry. She went towards that tunnel there, in the hopes of finding Bail Organa. She simply pointed her hand at these droids, and they collapsed right where they stood! Please do something Master Luke, please. I cannot bear to see this happen again."

Luke reached out and felt the crushed remains of the slugs inside the droids littering the floor. He turned to Threepio. "Stay with the ship Threepio. Here is a comm, listen for me on it. Continue scanning for the Millennium Falcon. If you are able to contact Han, tell him where we are." Luke raised his hood. "I am going to find Leia."

Having spied the slim young man in black on a monitor, Jerjerrod led a squad of four troopers to the landing bay. He had them halt just out of sight of the large bay, and then he peered ahead. The young man was headed to a tunnel opening that was closer to Jerjerrod than it was to the young man.

Jerjerrod gave his men a quick hand signal, and they entered the bay and began blasting at him. Oddly, it seemed the he turned to face them *before* they started shooting, as if he had heard them. Which seemed impossible.

The young man wielded a light saber and deflected the bolts. But he could not do this and advance towards his destination. He moved backwards, still deflecting bolts, and then turned and ran to another tunnel opening.

Jerjerrod wondered if he should do something about the four battle droids standing at odd angles across the floor. The maintenance droids seemed to be deliberately avoiding them. He wondered what the young man had done to them. Just then a trooper came to report on troop strengths, and in his distraction Jerjerrod forgot about the four oddly standing droids.

“Blast!” thought Luke to himself, as he jumped down to the transport car track. He ran further ahead, until he felt sure that the stormtroopers weren’t following him. He reached out with the Force, feeling for any of the Jedi who might be nearby to assist him. There were none.

“Never a ghost around when you need one,” he thought to himself ruefully. He reached out for Leia. She was some distance away, in another tunnel, but she still felt very different, in a way that made Luke very uneasy.

He traveled further into the tunnel, seeing a light in the distance. He wondered if it were an exit, until he realized it was a transport car barreling directly towards him.

Leia dragged herself to the cot in the dimly lit cell. Pain and rage coursed through her. How to get out of here! How to complete what she had set out to do! Although it was not quite clear to her what it was that she had set out to do. Something about her father.

Then a luminescence appeared in the cell, a handsome, tall, young man. Seeing who it was, Leia seethed.

“What are *you* doing here? Get away from me!”

“Leia, don’t do this!” Anakin spoke to her.

“Get away! I hate you! Get out of here!”

"Leia, do not go down this path!"

"I hate you! I hate everything about you! I hate that you are my father!"

"Leia – "

"I hate that you are allowed to be here, to be conscious! You do not deserve it! You only deserve an eternity of suffering! You do not deserve the slightest forgiveness for the crimes you have committed! I hate that you are allowed to be walking around! I hate that you can use *my* strength to be standing here before me! I hate that the mere existence of Luke and me might give you a single moment of joy!" She panted for breath.

"Then Leia, do not become me. Please do not follow in my footsteps. Do not allow your rage and hatred consume you! Do not let your anger eat you out from the inside! Do not become what I became!"

"Get away!" and she lurched towards him as if to do him harm. But she only fell through him and found herself lying on the floor, face down. She looked up at him, fury in her eyes.

"Are you choosing this Leia? Are you sure this is what you want?"

"I hate you! I hate everything you have ever done! I hate that you killed my mother! I never knew my mother because you killed her!"

Anakin regarded her without flinching at her words. "If this is the path you wish to choose, then I will show you the depth of it. I will show you the truth of the way you are choosing, the truth of the Dark Side."

Suddenly she is lying on a blisteringly hot embankment, and she can feel the heat of a burning river not far from her. Her entire body is in pain, not just her arm, but all of her limbs are suddenly missing. A man is standing on the embankment above her. Is it Anakin? She cannot see through her pain, and through the smoke and burning ash of this place. Perhaps it is Obi Wan? Or Luke?

"I hate you!" she screams at the figure, because she has decided it is Anakin. "I hate you!"

"I loved you!" the figure cries back. "You were supposed to destroy the Sith! Not join them! I loved you!"

She then loses all focus, for the agony multiplies as she feels her flesh burning. All of her, her hair, her skin all of her is afire. She screams and looks at the figure, unable to discern if it is Luke or Obi Wan or Anakin. Whoever it is reaches down to pick up something and then turns and walks away, disappearing over a rise. Walks away! This simple turning away seems the deepest insult of all.

Leia moans in pain, and rolls over. She cannot tell where she is, only that she is in great pain. Time goes by. The pain abates somewhat and the red hellish glow fades to blackness. For a while, all is dark.

Then, a small boy appears, approaches her and sits beside her. She recognizes him right away, even though she has never seen him before. He moves his hand towards her face, but stops several inches away. Their eyes meet, and they hold each other's gaze for what seems a very long time. A blue glow suffuses the room, and she feels as if she were watching herself from a great distance. Then she nods.

He nods in reply and then touches her forehead, very gently. The touch becomes a conduit, through which her pain, her anger, her hurt all flow, into Anakin. He absorbs all of these, and as he does so he changes. He becomes older and then begins to burn. All of his limbs transform into burning stumps. His face burns, the skin twisting into horrific unnatural shapes. His lovely hair burns off and his remaining body becomes nothing but charred flesh.

Through all of this she stares at him and he returns her gaze unflinching.

Leia sees the face of Darth Vader, knowing he has absorbed the Dark Side of the Force from her. All of a sudden, something deep within her, deeper than anger or hurt or even the Force, takes over and she slides into unconsciousness.

Han Solo landed the Millennium Falcon next to Luke's X-Wing, on the surface of the plateau. Exiting the Falcon, he cautiously approached the edge of the landing well, and saw several stormtroopers and old-style battle droids gathered in formation. He wished Chewie were with him, or even Lando, but there had not been enough time for them to rejoin him; he had wanted to get to Leia as quickly as possible.

He puzzled as to what to do, when suddenly an Imperial officer emerged and began to issue orders. In small groups the troopers and the battle droids dispersed into the various tunnels, until only two troopers were left, guarding the shuttle. The commander disappeared down one of the tunnels.

Han grinned to himself. Maybe this wouldn't be so hard. He skirted the edge of the well, and saw Luke's rappel cable. He pressed a button to reel it in and detach it, and then moved around so that he would be hidden from the two guards, by the shuttle.

He silently descended, riding the rappel cable down, and then ran silently under the shuttle and to the small area beneath its ramp. He hid there, debating his next move.

Then he saw out of the corner of his eye, four battle droids who had been standing oddly bent over. They were

beginning to move. Han peered out to look at the troopers; they too had seen the four droids and were raising their weapons. One of them glanced at the other, hoping for a signal.

The four droids spied the two troopers and raised their weapons, and suddenly there was a firefight. When the smoke had cleared, Han saw the bodies of the two troopers and one droid at the bottom of the ramp, and the three remaining droids rushing off to one of the tunnels. Han had gotten lucky twice within an hour. This was unheard of.

Han quickly ran up the ramp and almost ran into Threepio.

“Captain Solo! I am so glad to see you!”

“Shut up Threepio, where is everyone? Where is Leia?”

“Both Mistress Leia and Master Luke have disappeared down different tunnels!” Threepio turned to a comlink. “Master Luke! Where are you? Captain Solo is here!” There was no response.

Luke was running as fast as he could from the approaching light, towards the brighter light of the landing bay. It looked like he might make it. His optimism mounted until he saw a figure step into the light, a strange headless droid, holding its head in one hand and a lightsaber in the other. Luke heard the hum of the tunnel transport car as it approached. He had to take a chance.

As he approached the end of the tunnel he gathered the Force around him and at the last moment leapt into the air, lightsaber lit and flipped past the droid, deflecting its blade as he flew past. He landed lightly on his feet and immediately went into attack of the droid. It was clearly hampered by its refusal to let go of its head.

“You thought you fooled me Mandalor! I am not easily fooled! I will destroy you!”

Luke could not allow his puzzlement to distract him, and he brought his saber around to try to take the legs out from under the thing. It jumped back and deflected his blow.

“What prompted you to attempt to dismember me and use me for spare parts? Was it jealousy that my Master admired me more than you? Or was it sheer stupidity?”

Luke moved around to left side of the droid; it was holding its head in its left hand, and this would give him the advantage. He tried to use the trick of putting it to sleep as he had the others, but this one was so caught up in its madness that it would probably never go to sleep. Luke was about to deliver a blow to the torso, when the Force warned him of trouble in another direction. He reflexively lifted his saber to deflect a blaster bolt from a trooper

emerging from another tunnel entrance. This was starting to look bad.

Threepio was still trying to contact Luke, when Han heard the hum and clash of lightsaber blades in the landing bay. He leaned out, and saw Luke battling a headless droid. Then he spied the troopers emerging from another tunnel leveling their blasters in Luke's direction. Han ran out, aiming his blaster at the troopers, taking out a few and drawing attention away from Luke. He ran towards them.

Luke saw Han coming towards him and breathed a word of thanks. He resumed battling the mad droid, which was now saying something about the mother of Mandalor. The words that made any sense at all were not very flattering. Luke came around and the droid cackled. "I cannot be destroyed!" it yelled. "You failed before and you will fail for evermore!" Without warning the droid raised its arms, one holding its head and the other holding a saber, to the sky. "My Master adores me! My Master will protect me forever!" Taking his chance, Luke brought his saber through its torso, slicing through the slug within. It crumpled to the ground in parts.

Luke took a deep breath and a blaster bolt nearly hit him. He turned to the stormtroopers and began deflecting bolts. A few were reflected back, killing the troopers who shot them. Han was closer now, picking off troopers. Still, they were outnumbered.

They saw the Commander come out of a tunnel, surveying the battle. He was calling additional men to him.

Jerjerrod saw a few of his men fall to the shots of the second intruder and he saw JB-0577 collapse to the ground in pieces. Then, from a tunnel he saw battle droids rushing in, less like droids or soldiers and more like a crazed mob. They began shooting at his men, who returned fire. He saw the two intruders, one with a blaster and the other with a saber draw together back-to-back. Jerjerrod tried to give orders to the commanding trooper, in the melee.

Suddenly Darth Vader was beside him, appearing as if from nowhere.

"Jerjerrod, order your men to stand down."

"Excuse me M'Lord?"

"Give an order to cease firing!"

Jerjerrod turned to stare at the Dark Lord.

"M'Lord, I-"

“Do it Major, or I will.”

Already a few of the troopers had noticed the Dark Lord.

Jerjerrod spoke into his comlink. “All troops cease fire. I repeat cease fire!”

Immediately, his troops began to draw back. The droids paused, unsure of how to proceed.

“Commander Skywalker!” Vader’s deep voice carried across the floor. “Disable the slugdroids immediately!”

Jerjerrod saw the young man retract his saber, and go into a deep trance. The droids all returned their weapons to their dorsal units and turned to face him.

“Captain Solo!” Vader continued, “The Artoo unit behind you will lead you to Princess Organa!”

Then Vader turned to Jerjerrod. “Major,” he said, “Now you must decide if you will assist us, or if you will continue to fight for a prison camp of a destroyed Emperor.”

Jerjerrod stared at Vader. Suddenly, a phrase that he had last heard as a small child, rung through his head: “The Son of Suns.”

“M’Lord,” he said, “I am ready for your command.”

Han Solo had only been able to gape at the figure of Darth Vader, a feeling of sickness gathering in the pit of his stomach. He hadn’t immediately known whether to believe Vader when he said to follow a droid to Leia, and was thinking of trying to blow this entire place up. Then he saw Artoo Detoo at the entrance to one of the tunnels, waiting by a transport car, beeping. He glanced at Luke, who nodded at him, and then back at Vader, who had turned his attention to the Imperial Commander. Han then turned and ran towards Artoo and the tunnel. Artoo led the way into the car, and once they were both in, pressed a control. The car shot off away from the landing bay.

Luke kept his attention on the slugs within the droids, using the Force to calm them. He was coming to understand how they were attached to the circuitry of the droids, and he thought it might be possible to extract them.

He felt out towards Leia. Her presence in the Force had shifted slightly; he was a bit less worried about her. He approached Darth Vader and the Commander. “Father,” he said.

Vader gestured to him. "Major Jerjerrod. This is my son, Luke Skywalker. I suggest you now follow his orders. It is time for the prisoners of this facility to be released." Without another word, Darth Vader turned, walked towards the shuttle and disappeared inside.

"His- his- son?" Jerjerrod stammered.

Luke regarded him. "Major ..."

"Jerjerrod sir, at your service."

"Major Jerjerrod, I will need to send a message to Coruscant, and we will need to release all the prisoners. Also, I will need several maintenance droids to assist me in releasing the slugs from these battle droids."

Jerjerrod suddenly felt like his future was taking a turn for the better. "Yes Commander Skywalker," he said and led Luke away towards the control center.

Leia vaguely heard the elevating platform engage and rise up from the bottom of the well. Someone was coming, but who? She did not feel like she could face anyone. She had come so close to falling to the Dark Side and she anticipated deep disappointment from Luke. She imagined the chagrin in the faces of the Jedi. She kept her eyes closed. Her right arm throbbed.

The platform returned, and someone approached her, and crouched down. She cringed.

"Leia," a voice said. She opened her eyes to the face of Han Solo, and suddenly began to weep with relief. He gathered her in his arms. "I've gotta get you out of here," he said. She allowed him to pick her up, and tears streamed down her face, as Han called up to Artoo to raise them up.

Once up on the platform Han looked again at the grisly sight of Leia's hand holding a saber. "Artoo!" he called out, and gestured with this chin towards it. "Go get that."

Leia moaned in his arms, "No, no, just leave it." But Artoo trundled over to the saber, extracted it, and placed it into one of his compartments.

The three entered the transport car, and Han laid Leia out on the floor. As the car accelerated away, she slipped back into unconsciousness.

She reawakened in the hold of the *Tyderium*; Han had connected her cauterized right arm to a medical cuff, and must have given her some fluids. She was feeling better. She climbed to her feet and went to him in the cockpit; they were just clearing the landing well.

He glanced at her. "Luke can handle things here. I am going to get you back where you can get help," he said.

"No," she replied. She spotted a small grove of trees in a protected corner of rock on the plateau. "Please. You can leave me there. Please go back and see if Bail Organa is alive. Please Han."

"Leia, I've got to get you back! You need medical attention! You look like you have been through hell!"

"Please Han," she pleaded. "I will be fine, really. Please, see if my father is there."

Han looked at her. Despite her battered condition, her steely resolve was returning. "Alright," he said, "I don't like this, but alright."

She was resting on a mossy patch of ground, beneath a large tree. A small spring chattered nearby. Threepio sat by her, inert. Qui Gon Jinn was also sitting on a rock nearby, staring off into the distance. Leia slowly sat up, holding the medical cuff and her less-painful right arm with her left.

Hearing her, Qui Gon turned, and smiled at her. "I hope you are feeling a bit better Leia?" She nodded.

Han had left a container of water. She took a deep drink. A question, which she had been considering for some time, occurred to her. Now was as good a time to ask as any.

"Qui Gon, what does it mean to bring balance to the Force?"

Qui Gon looked at her for a moment. Then he looked off into the distance again.

"Throughout history, there have always been beings who have been sensitive to the Force, but their understanding of it was very haphazard. Their *control* of it even more so. The very first Jedi were in awe of the Force and for many generations they simply studied it and allowed it to guide them. Much as one might take a small boat on a great sea without oars or sail, and simply allow the winds and currents take one where they will, being open to whatever experience might occur, they allowed themselves to be *in* the Force, they gave themselves over to it.

"Then a few argued that this was nonsensical, it would be better to direct the Force, rather than be directed by it. They began to use the Force for their own ends. They were not willing to be patient or to wait to see what the

Force showed them, but they expressly used the Force to find what they were already seeking. They approached the Force with an agenda, shall we say, and expected the Force to comply.

“After various great battles, these Dark Jedi were exiled to a remote world, where they grew in strength. About 1000 years ago, the Sith, as they called themselves, attacked the core worlds and the Republic. Their defeat was more a result of their infighting amongst themselves, rather than the strength of the Jedi or the Republic. Darth Bane instituted the law of two, and from then on, only two Sith existed at any one time. Even so, this difference persisted. The Jedi approached the Force in a passive, learning way, while the Sith used the Force for their own ends.

“But in the last 500 years or so, things shifted subtly. The Jedi too began to approach the Force with an agenda. They convinced themselves that this was acceptable, since their agenda was the peace and well being of the Republic. They convinced themselves that if they let go of passion and attachments then they remained in harmony with the Force. They instituted rules and procedures, believing that doing so maintained their connection to the light side of the Force.

“As an aside, Anakin always sought to follow the strictures set out for him, to follow the Jedi Code. I suspect that deep down, he hoped that this would keep him from falling victim to his passions, would keep him from being completely overpowered by his immense capacity to be in the Force. As we all now know, it wasn’t enough, especially when the other Jedi Masters began to bend the rules.

“I believe that the Jedi were mistaken. Connection with the Force is *not* about being passionless. It is about accepting how the Force guides us, even when that guidance does not match with our own objectives. But that doesn’t mean that we should ignore or stifle our passions. Often the Force guides us through our passions. It is often tricky to know whether a strong feeling about something is a result of our own wishes, or the will of the Force.”

Qui Gon paused, looking at Leia to see if she understood his words. He asked, “And what do you think my young Padawan?”

Leia smiled at the designation. She thought for a moment and then replied, “Even now, it makes no sense to me, as Yoda told Luke, that anger only leads to the Dark Side of the Force. If we were not angry at the practice of slavery we would not be compelled to eliminate it. Anger, against injustice, against tyranny is a powerful ally. It gives us the drive to do what must be done.

“I think that part of the balance is, like you said, an equilibrium between passion and composure, knowing when to be angry and take action to make a difference, and when to wait for other forces to come together. It means knowing when to let go, and when to hang on. Above all, perhaps, it is trusting the Force to provide an indication of whether to act, or to simply be.”

As she finished this sentence, she saw the Tyderium once again raise itself out of the landing bay, travel the short distance to the grove where she sat and then fold its wings as it landed. She saw its ramp lower, and two figures supporting a third between them, heading towards her. She stood up and watched them, her heart pounding. "Daddy?" she said once, and then began to run towards the group, calling "Daddy! Daddy!"

Luke had made arrangements with Vanaros to come and get the prisoners of Urdnough, and to take them, along with Jerjerrod and the remaining stormtroopers to their home worlds or to Coruscant. Also, he and a few droids had extracted the dozing slugs from their droid enclosures and placed them in tanks of bacta. They too were returning to their home world.

As per Leia's request, she, Han, Luke, Bail and the droids traveled to Naboo. Luke sent word ahead to Pooja, and asked for a place of retreat in the Lake Country where she lived. Upon their arrival, Pooja was helpful, but somewhat perplexed as to why Leia had chosen Naboo as a place to heal. Leia and Luke told her of their parentage, of the truth of Padmé and Anakin. Pooja wept, and hugged them each in turn.

As Leia's bruises and cuts were treated, and a new prosthetic hand was fitted, Han teased her; now she was a full member of the Skywalker family. She and Luke simply gave him sour looks. Luke said that just for that, he would put off even longer getting *his* hand repaired and waved it around Han's head, making *whoo-whoo* noises.

Leia has another vision, but this is not a vision of an event that had occurred or would occur. It is more of a wish, or perhaps just a fancy. Of her own, or of Anakin's, she cannot tell.

Anakin Skywalker, sole proprietor of Skywalker General Repair and Parts of Theed (we fix droids, we fix ships, you'll have company, on your trips) is working on a recalcitrant thruster. Artoo thinks it is the power supply, but Anakin is sure that something in the decondenser is rusted out.

A 10-year-old Leia is nearby, studying for the entrance test for Leadership School. "Daddy?" she asks, "Is Alderaan's monarchy older than Naboo's?"

Still trying to remove a rusted cover plate he says, "Little Angel, I don't know politics or history at all. That is a question for your mother. You will have to wait for her to come back from her errands."

Then Luke comes up. "Dad! The control board for the T-16 has arrived! When can we install it?"

Before Anakin can respond, a voice behind them says, "Anakin, you aren't really going to allow Luke to pilot a skyhopper are you?" The children turn and then squeal, "Uncle Obi Wan!" They run up to him and begin to tug on

his robes.

“Obi Wan!” says Anakin, rising and wiping his natural hand. He too gives his old friend and mentor a hug. In response to Obi Wan’s question, he takes him over to the used skyhopper. “Well, I thought it would be a good learning experience for Luke to put one of these together. And he is becoming quite a pilot.”

Anakin and little Leia stand watching, as Luke shows Obi Wan the skyhopper, as well as the parts that are still to be installed. Then another voice is heard behind them. “Obi Wan! How good to see you! You must join us for dinner.”

Padmé is radiant; her hair cascades down her back. She is pushing a carriage and Threepio is behind her carrying preparations for dinner.

Obi Wan thanks her, and the two children go off with her.

“So,” says Anakin turning back towards the thruster, “what brings you here?”

“Anakin, is that a bongo?”

Anakin is surprised that Obi Wan is familiar with this ship. “Yes, it belongs to Boss Nass. I always fix it for him now.”

Obi Wan stares at it for a minute and then says, “Anakin, the Council has a favor to ask of you.”

Anakin stops and sits back on his heels, looking at Kenobi. “And what favor might the grand Jedi Council request of a humble repair shop owner? They must know by now that I will never allow them to train my children. If anyone does, it will be me.”

“No, No Anakin, it’s not that. No, there is going to be an expedition to Korriban. We want to be sure the Sith are gone from the galaxy and we are going there to learn what we can. And, frankly, we are somewhat anxious about what we might find there. We could use your help.”

Anakin turns back to the bongo, finally removing the plate. “Korriban is parsecs away, I don’t want to be away from Padmé and the children for that long.”

“Anakin, you are still the most powerful Jedi we have. If there is a malevolent force there and we cannot contain it, it might spark another invasion.”

“I thought it was pretty clear that I am no longer a Jedi.” Anakin uses the force to hold some wires aside while he

inspects the decondenser.

Then he stops and considers it. "I will help you with this, for 80,000 Republic Credits."

Obi Wan is startled. "Anakin, I don't think the Council will consider *paying* for the services of a Jedi!"

"A Jedi? Obi Wan, tell me what Jedi has a daughter who will need supplies for leadership school, a son who wants every machine he sees and will probably be accepted to engineering school, a four-year old who needs specialized medical care, a fourth child on the way, and a mortgage to *your* brother for a repair shop on Naboo, which, although it is enough in demand to require two assistants still needs crucial capital expenditures? Tell me Obi Wan, does that sound like any Jedi you know?"

Obi Wan blanches, "A *fourth* child, Anakin? Oh my."

"Obi Wan, I love you like a brother, but you must know by now that the expeditions of the Jedi Council are *not* my top priority. They can take my offer or leave it."

"Well then, my old friend, we shall present this to them, and see what they say. Tell me, is Padmé making those dumplings that I love so much?"

Anakin reaches out with the Force and sees his beautiful wife with their children. Leia is caring for the baby and Luke is chopping vegetables. "I think so, she has all of the ingredients for it in front of her. It would be good to have you join us. Just don't mention this expedition to Padmé, until we have decided. She won't like it."

So Anakin and Obi Wan close up the shop and head towards the home of Anakin and Padmé for a simple dinner. And all is good, because in this world, in this dream, Anakin has trusted. He has not used his saber to cut off Windu's hands leaving him defenseless, has let Windu kill the deceiving Palpatine. He has trusted that the Republic's problems would sort themselves out, trusted that Obi Wan would help him prevent his awful nightmares from coming to fruition, trusted that Padmé would not die in childbirth, trusted that the galaxy does not need his unceasing intervention to keep on spinning. And because he has trusted, he is happy.

As she awoke from this dream, Leia reached out and thought, "Oh Anakin, you would never have been satisfied with such a prosaic life. What has led you to dream up such a story?"

To her surprise, there was a reply in her mind. "Perhaps you are right, Leia, perhaps we cannot realize what we have, until we have lost it. Don't lose it my daughter Leia. Please, don't lose it."

During their several weeks on Naboo, Leia slept more deeply than she had in a long time, and her appetite for healthy fruits and nuts and other nourishing foods returned. She and Bail both began to get their strength and health back, and Bail only wanted to sit and talk with both her and Luke, as if Luke were *his* long lost son. At long last he could relate to her those awful days when he had seen firsthand the destruction of the Jedi, the death of Padmé, their birth and separation. He was overcome with joy that they were reunited. At Leia's suggestion, he contacted the survivors of Alderaan, and offered to be their senator.

Leia and Han took walks through the town, and he updated her on the final stages of the slave emancipation and on other reports from Coruscant. Surprisingly there was very little backlash, either by the slave owners or the new Authority. Slowly and steadily, Imperial Governors, Admirals, Generals and Commanders were surrendering, or simply abandoning their posts.

One day, he found a small boat and took her for a ride on the lake.

She continued training with Luke, more assured now. They were very well matched in saber fighting, and Leia encouraged Luke when he reminded himself that the only saber battle he had ever won was with a crazy droid who had thought the Emperor was coming to its rescue.

The two spent much time in meditation, seeing events of the past, and possibilities of the future. They were able to discuss these possible futures, and carefully consider how they might act on them, or to wait to see how things played out.

They also spent long hours talking with the ghost of Qui Gon learning the history of the Jedi, seeing occasionally the ghosts of Yoda and Obi Wan listening in.

"Qui Gon," she asked during one of these talks, "Did your body disappear when you died?" They were sitting beneath a tree at the edge of one of the Naberrie family's vegetable gardens.

"Hmmm? No, why do you ask?"

"I remember seeing Obi Wan's body disappear, on the Death Star, and Luke said that Yoda's body disappeared, and we can see their ghostly forms. Presumably what was left of Anakin's body disappeared when Vader died. So I wonder if your body disappeared as well?"

Qui Gon looked at her blankly. Then finally comprehending her meaning he said, "Oh! I see. No Leia, the disappearance of the body at death, and your being able to perceive us are entirely unrelated."

"They are?" asked Leia.

“Yes, after I died, I was conscious of myself, and I was conscious of being in great distress about Anakin. I found I was able to communicate with Yoda, and through him, I gained strength. Eventually I was able to make myself heard. I taught this ability to Yoda and to Obi Wan, and was able to bring Mace Windu to us. With Luke’s help, although he wasn’t really conscious of it, we were able to bring Anakin to us. With the strength of you and Luke and, strangely enough, Artoo, we are able to be perceived by you and by others.”

“Are you saying that I brought Anakin to myself in that cell in Urdnough?” Leia looked off into the distance.

“Yes, Leia, you did.” Qui Gon paused, then continued. “Anyway, the disappearing at death trick is something that Obi Wan became aware of during his long, solitary, meditations on Tatooine. He thought that Darth Vader would be startled and confused by it, so he tried it out on the Death Star. And Vader was startled and confused.” Qui Gon grinned.

“Then why did Yoda do it when he died?” Leia was still perplexed.

“Well, to prove that he could. Although Obi Wan gained wisdom as he matured and although he was a powerful Jedi, he was not among the most powerful. Quite the contrary to Anakin, I might add. Anyway, it wouldn’t have looked very good if Obi Wan could pull off this trick, and a great 900 year old Jedi Master could not.”

“Wouldn’t have *looked* very good?” Leia gaped.

Qui Gon glanced at her. “Leia, I know that you and much of the galaxy imagine the Jedi as a noble and solemn order, but at times they can be outright petty.”

“So I am finding,” said Leia, and she leaned back on her tree, returning to her thoughts.

During another conversation, prompted by the visions that he and Leia saw in meditations, Luke asked Qui Gon, “Qui Gon, do you think that Palpatine created Anakin, that he used the skills taught to him by Plagueis to use the Force to conceive Anakin within Shmi?”

Qui Gon thought for a moment and then replied, “I really don’t know Luke. I have thought over this much myself. Often it seems to me that no, Palpatine could not have created Anakin, could not have created such an unpredictable creature, with such a capacity for good, as well as for evil. But then I wonder if that is my wishful thinking speaking, that I simply don’t want Anakin to have been solely Palpatine’s creation. I must tell you that I simply do not know.”

Luke nodded in response, and somewhere, he could feel Anakin weeping.

At some time during her sojourn on Naboo, Leia came to a decision. Perhaps it was during her conversations with Qui Gon, or perhaps it was during the time she spent with the recovering Bail. Perhaps it had something to do with the quiet ministrations of the handmaid Dormé and her two daughters, Padmé and Cordé. They had cared for her since she arrived, and Dormé had told her of being a handmaid for her mother, as well as the history of the Naboo handmaid tradition which was steeped in ceremony and ritual. The three had pledged themselves to her service while she was on Naboo, and had implied quite strongly that they would continue to serve her if she asked.

She would need to tell Luke and Bail, and would have to plan her speech to Mothma and the Authority. She would have to tell Han. Suddenly this seemed more important than the rest.

She went in search of him, and found him at the Falcon, making never-ending adjustments.

He looked up as she approached, and then turned back to his work. "Han," she said. "Han, can we talk?"

He looked at her, somewhat warily, and then said, "Sure, Leia," and led her into the hold.

She looked around, remembering the first time she arrived here, escaping the first Death Star, trying to comfort Luke, feeling irritated at the brash Correllian. She looked at him now, seated at the main computer console, facing her expectantly.

"Han, I am going to return to Coruscant. I am going to tell Mothma and the Senators about Luke and me, our parentage. Then, if they still request it, if the people of the galaxy still want me to be the Queen of the Galaxy, I will do it."

She began pacing, working through her thoughts for what seemed like the hundredth time. "But not indefinitely. I will only serve for a fixed term, and will steer the Authority towards a New Republic, with a distinct separation of powers and mutual oversight between those powers. The New Republic must be guided by the will of the member systems, and must be configured so that no one individual system or faction can ever again seize control. Membership will require certain standards, the first of which is the prohibition of slavery."

She looked off, deep in thought. Then she turned back to Han.

"Anyway, I am sure that you will not want to be immersed into this life of politics and the debate over new constitutions. Perhaps you and I should go our separate ways." Her eyes met his.

"Is that what you want, Leia?"

"What I want?"

"Yes, do you want me to leave? What do *you* want?"

Leia smiled grimly. "What I want." She repeated his words, staring at the game board without seeing it. She closed her eyes.

"What I want is to marry you and live here on Naboo, and have lots of children and pets, and travel with our family to Kashyyyk and Tatooine and wherever our loved ones are."

She opened her eyes, and Han could see she was close to tears.

"But," she continued, "I do not think that is my destiny."

"But you just said that you would not accept being Queen indefinitely."

"No," said Leia, composing herself. "The systems of the galaxy must learn to govern themselves, they must learn that giving over their liberty to an all-powerful entity, even a benevolent one, will lead only to tyranny."

Han stood and faced her, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Well, Queen Leia of the Galaxy, if you don't mind having a consort who is an old smuggler, let's you and I get married."

The wedding of Leia and Han was a small affair, attended by Luke, Lando, and Bail. Chewie and his family, and Lando arrived from Kashyyyk. Artoo and Threepio were there, as well as the handmaids. Erish traveled from her current posting to attend. The Naberrie family was in attendance, and Pooja had found the lace veil that Padmé had carefully stored away. A few of them could see the ghostly presences of Qui Gon and Obi Wan, and Luke could see the hooded figure of Anakin, at some distance away.

They were married on the same terrace where Anakin and Padmé were married so many years before. There Leia and Han looked into each other's eyes and pledged their lives and futures, to each other.

This time, when Leia flew into Coruscant aboard the Millennium Falcon, she was delighted. New construction was everywhere. Workers were cleaning and clearing areas that had fallen into decay. New gardens, atop repaired towers, were being planted.

She and Luke met with Mothma and Ackbar. When Mothma heard what she and Luke had to say, she almost began to weep. "I should have realized you were Amidala's daughter," she said. "You look just like her. You are as strong as her, and carry her same convictions." Mothma paused, and her expression darkened. "And Anakin

Skywalker became Darth Vader. That explains much of his knowledge.” She met their eyes. “Don’t you realize that he was such a hero to so many in the galaxy?” Then she looked off into the distance. “I was so young then; he was very kind to me once. I –.” She cut herself off, and changed the topic.

“Leia, I want to apologize to you. You were right, that slavery should not be tolerated. I betrayed myself, in a way, betrayed who I once was.”

Leia looked at the older woman kindly. “I think that the time after a great trauma can be more difficult than the trauma itself,” she said. “During the war, we were so busy, so preoccupied, that we didn’t have time to be terrified. Now when we look back on it, we wonder how we ever survived, and we can be more fearful of living through such times again. Your instincts were right, to shy away from war. What we must struggle towards is a balance, between striving for peace and compromise, and never forsaking those truths that we hold most strongly.”

The two women embraced. Mon Mothma looked at both Leia and Luke. “Your mother would be very, very proud of the both of you,” she said.

The news of Luke and Leia was carried to the Authority and released over the newly re-organized public information channels. The peoples of the galaxy clamored even louder for Leia to be their Queen, for her to lead them into the time of the New Republic.

There came a day when Leia and Luke met with the Jedi Council, to discuss the future of the Jedi Order. The Jedi temple, still perceived to be occupied by ghosts, was not undergoing repair as so many other buildings were.

Again, she and Luke, and Han, Chewie and the droids assembled, and again, Qui Gon and Yoda, Mace and Obi Wan and Anakin appeared before them. She could see dimmer manifestations of other Jedi, whose names Qui Gon had taught her.

Obi Wan again appeared old, as Luke had known him on Tatooine. Anakin looked as Luke had seen him on the Death Star, badly scarred. He floated in air, apparently without arms or legs. This startled everyone for a moment, and they stared at him, until they realized that he didn’t look so bad after all.

Mace Windu spoke first. “Well, Leia, Luke, when do you plan to start rebuilding the Jedi Order? You must seek out initiates, and training must begin quickly, if the Jedi are to continue.”

Luke looked at his sister to answer this. Instead of doing so, she turned to the apparition of Obi Wan.

“Obi Wan,” she asked him, “why did you not kill Vader on Mustafar?”

Obi Wan was startled by her question. “What?”

"Why did you not kill him when you had the chance? Either out of mercy, or to prevent his subjugation of the galaxy?"

Obi Wan stared at her. Then he turned away, not meeting their eyes. "At that moment, Leia, I had no mercy for him. I wanted him to suffer as he did. Some part of me wanted to punish him."

"Then why did you not kill him as you had been ordered? You were sent to that place to destroy him!"

Obi Wan paused, staring away. His voice was soft and regretful.

"Leia, there was a moment, on Mustafar, a moment when we were fighting that he had his hand on my throat. His right hand, the artificial one. It was very strong, stronger than a flesh and blood hand. He had improved it himself. Anakin was very strong as well, both physically and with the Force. At that moment, he had his hand on my throat he could have quite easily squeezed his hand very tightly, and killed me right away. He didn't.

"When I looked down at him, on the slope before me, limbless and burnt, I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill him."

Then Obi Wan returned her gaze. Despite his sorrow, she pressed.

"So then Obi Wan, if you could not bring yourself to kill him, why did you lie to Luke in such a way as to incite *him* to kill Vader?"

"What?" Obi Wan stared. "I wanted only to protect him, to not burden him so quickly with this knowledge!"

"Then why not say that Anakin was killed by clones, or even by the Emperor? Why tell him specifically that Vader killed him?" When Obi Wan did not respond, she continued. "I think you told him that Vader killed him, so that Luke would exact revenge. So that Luke's feelings of vengeance would incite him to kill Darth Vader, his own father. You couldn't bear to kill Vader yourself, but you were willing to push Luke to kill him, out of that most un-Jedi of sentiments, revenge."

Obi Wan shook his head. "No, No," he repeated.

Anakin turned to Leia. "Leia, please stop. Let him be."

Suddenly Obi Wan was angry. "You do not understand! He was my best friend! I loved him like my brother! He saved my life, risking his own, more times than I could count! I did everything I could to train him, and it was more than training him, I had to be a father he never had! I cannot tell you how painful it was to me, that I put so much effort into training him and raising him, and then he would have one conversation with Palpatine, and Palpatine

was almost like a god to him! That Palpatine was so wise and had so many answers! When in my heart, I knew that Palpatine was not to be trusted. Anakin trusted him! And Anakin didn't trust me!

"I hated this monster. My best friend, my brother, my child, was consumed by this monster! Of course I wanted it destroyed!"

Leia gave him a moment, but then continued. "And so, you deceived Luke about Vader, and you deceived yourself about your own motives. Obi Wan, you, who were among the wisest of the Jedi, succumbed to this deceit."

Windu interrupted. "Your Majesty, what is the point of this? Those were extraordinary times. The Jedi order survived for thousands of years, until the Sith took their vengeance on us!"

Leia turned to Mace. "Mace Windu," she said slowly. "I ask you, please tell me what you were thinking when you made the decision to kill Palpatine, rather than to arrest him?"

Now it was Windu's turn to stare at her. "That he was too dangerous to live! That he held the Senate and the Courts under his control! That he was a Sith and needed to be destroyed!"

"Is that all you were thinking? I wonder if part of you wanted to see what Anakin would do if you moved against Palpatine. That you guessed that Anakin would defend him and you wanted to see if you were right, if Anakin was just as fallible as you predicted. You wanted to be right. I think you wanted to be proven right, even if it meant that democracy and liberty would be lost to the galaxy. How many times did you say you suspected a plot against the Jedi, and yet what did you ever do about it? Was seeing the truth of your predictions that important to you?"

Mace glowered at her, but Leia had already turned to Yoda. "Yoda, you have said that you did not assist Anakin when he needed you. Here was this young man, through whom the Force flowed very powerfully. But even more powerful were his passions, his need, his fear, his loneliness. And when he did the right thing, and came to you for help, you refused to hear him. You gave him Jedi platitudes, and did not listen to what he was saying. All of you," and her gaze fell upon each of them in turn, "all of you knew he was in distress, and yet you were deliberately oblivious. What were you thinking?"

Yoda bowed his head before her.

"Further Master Yoda, you yourself did not follow the rules you laid before Anakin! You instructed him to not fear death, that death is a 'natural part of life'! Yet here you are! Enjoying virtual immortality, something sought by the Sith for generations!

Yoda kept his head lowered, and for the first time Luke saw in his face an expression, not of confidence or all-

knowingness, but of sadness and regret.

There was a pause.

“Would you have us go away?” Yoda asked Leia, looking up at her.

Leia’s tone softened. “No Master Yoda, if only because I will need your wisdom and experience in the years ahead. I believe that you *have* learned from your mistakes, and I would not be so arrogant as to think I can learn nothing from you.”

“So, are you saying you forgive Anakin? That his fall was our fault and he was a victim of his circumstances?” Mace challenged her.

Leia looked at Anakin. “It is not for me to forgive Anakin’s sins, or to hold him to them. I will say, though, that I think I understand Anakin, far better than I did before.” She returned her gaze to Windu. “Master Windu, I do hold Anakin responsible for the decisions he made. And I know the Jedi, in losing everything have paid the price of their prior arrogance.”

She continued. “I do not say these things to you simply to harm you or cause you further grief. It is for these reasons that Luke and I have decided that the Jedi Order must not be recreated as it was. Luke and I do not know what form it will take, but we will see to it that small infants are never again taken away from their mother’s arms, to play a role in Jedi ritual. If and when we encounter adepts to the Force, we will not impose a set of rules upon them, a set of rules that substitutes for a poor understanding of the Force.”

“Luke, are you in agreement with this?” Qui Gon asked.

Luke spoke up. “Yes. I will continue to learn about the Force and the history of the Jedi; I will do my best, with your help, to continue my training. If and when gifted ones approach me, I will teach them what I can. We will not take children away from their mothers’ laps. We will not hold those we train to oaths. Training in Jedi skills will be provided to those who request it, even if they have little or no sensitivity to the Force.”

“And you will teach them what?” Qui Gon asked Luke.

“We will teach them balance. We will try to help them to negotiate the balance between action and passivity; between caring for the self and caring for others; between speaking and listening; between mindfulness of the future and being in the present; between controlling the Force and leaving oneself open to the Force. We will teach them what we know of the Dark Side, and try to show them that although it is very compelling, although the strength it derives from anger is powerful, that ultimately the Dark Side destroys the self more thoroughly than it destroys one’s worst enemy.”

Leia concluded. "But the Jedi, or users of the Force, will never again be the military branch of the Republic. It will be the responsibility of the Republic to maintain its own peace, order and continuity. As Queen, I will do my best to set the Galaxy on this course."

The room was silent, and the afternoon sun slanted into the room.

"Well then," said Obi Wan, suddenly brighter. "You are both wise beyond your years. I for one will respect your intentions and do what I can to assist. Luke, you have grown so much, I feel quite proud to have been able to train you."

"Train him much longer did I, led him through his first trials I did," interjected Yoda.

"Both of you just provided some training, he is *my* son. These are *my* children. And Luke, I am genuinely sorry that you had to suffer under Yoda's tutelage what with his weird talking and constant insults." Anakin smiled at Luke.

"Speak like that a Jedi must not of a Master!"

"I think we are all in agreement that I have been expelled from the Jedi Order. At long last, I can finally say what I think of your exercises."

Han leaned into Leia, "Are they going to spend all of eternity, bickering with each other like this?"

"I think they might," she replied. "I think they might."

On a bright day, in the newly planted Gardens in Memory of the Fallen of Alderaan on Coruscant, Queen Leia of the Galaxy was coronated by Luke Skywalker, the Son of Suns. (Or perhaps the Son of the Son of Suns?) Celebrations in the Galaxy lasted for many days.

The next few years were somewhat trying for Han Solo, as they were for everyone in the New Republic. He grew impatient with politics and politicians. He wore through several formal dress outfits.

Still, sometimes he realized himself quite lucky to be able to see firsthand the birth of the New Republic, to see it take shape.

Queen Leia and Chancellor Mothma at last informed the Norgarrans that if they refused to live in peace then they could not be a part of the New Republic, and that purchasing brthdeium from Norgarra would be formally

discouraged. The Norgarrans returned to their world and continued fighting for some time, but slowly came to realize that they would benefit much more as a part of the New Republic. They let go of their ancient hatreds and lived in peace.

Urdnough once again fulfilled its promise of fertility and noughnough was once again exported throughout the galaxy. The Urdnough farmers formally apologized to the families of those they had killed, on an anniversary of the day of the fall of the Empire.

Captain Vanaros became Queen Leia's chief of security, and Dormé and her daughters were her personal handmaids. Threepio continued to serve in many capacities, some well suited to him, and others not so much.

Chewbacca started his family on Kashyyyk and then became the Kashyyyk Senator to the Republic. Lando traveled a great deal, until he settled again on Bespin to start his family.

Bail Organa served for many years as a Senator. The Survivors of Alderaan did not finally settle on a single world, but dispersed. Even so, they kept their identity as Alderaanians for many generations.

The Jedi Temple was eventually transformed into a vast library. Not only did it house the original Jedi documents and compositions of the New Republic, but it was also the focal point of a vast communication network that allowed anyone in the Galaxy with an appropriate terminal to research its holdings. Queen Leia believed strongly that the free exchange of ideas and information would foster freedom in the Galaxy and she was a powerful advocate as well as user, of the Library.

One day, while sorting through the records in the Library, Threepio came upon a document that described the risk a woman who was not Force sensitive might face, if she carried a gifted child. Midi-chlorians from the child could enter her bloodstream, and towards the end of her pregnancy she might become Force sensitive herself. But once upon giving birth, the midi-chlorians would depart abruptly, leaving her much weakened, occasionally to the point of death. Illness or death could be averted, if a powerful, trained Jedi stayed with her and drew the Force around her. When Anakin learned of this, he recalled hearing how ill Shmi had been after his birth, and for many days, both Luke and Leia found him floating aimlessly and weeping.

Slavery gradually died out of the Galaxy, even on worlds that were not a part of the Republic.

Luke traveled widely throughout the Galaxy, trying to bring peace where he found strife; several malevolent entities sought the rebirth of the Sith Order, and his adventures battling them were widely chronicled. He never became very adept at battle with a lightsaber, but did become a great healer, and could draw upon the Force to heal the deepest wound or most persistent illness. Nonetheless, he and Artoo Detoo had many adventures and saw many strange things, Han Solo frequently joined him, when Coruscant was more than he wanted to handle. Those who fought Luke and those who followed him often reported seeing strange apparitions at his side,

occasionally a heavily scarred man, occasionally an older man with a twinkle in his eye, and occasionally a young man with long hair and flowing black robes.

Luke too found a great love and she joined him, in his travels and missions in the solar systems of the Galaxy.

Queen Leia garnered a not incorrect reputation as the recipient of spiritual aid. She often conferred with Qui Gon, Yoda, Windu and Kati Al Mundi (who had recently appeared) as well as Anakin himself. They provided historical facts as well as perspective, and sometimes just a willing ear that allowed her to work out solutions on her own.

After six years, Leia, as promised, removed herself from the role of Queen of the Galaxy and none other took it up. She had accomplished much in this time, and she knew that the New Republic was just beginning a long, peaceful and prosperous Golden Age.

She and Han moved to Naboo and had several children. Han would occasionally see Obi Wan watching over them, and the children became aware of presences they called Ben and Calgon. More than once, Han sighted one of his children nearing disaster, only to be inexplicably caught up and kept from injury.

One day, they all realized that they had not seen Anakin, in any of his forms, for some time. Leia hoped that he and Padmé had found each other, if such a thing was possible.

Many years later, Leia was asked to contribute to a great history of the Old Republic, the Jedi and the New Republic. She contributed the writings of Padmé and wrote a great deal herself. Writing did not come naturally to her, so this was a difficult, if worthwhile task. Artoo was of tremendous assistance in this endeavor, providing far-flung bits of history that no one else, including Threepio or the Jedi, seemed to know about. She knew how she would end her portion, and when the day came that she completed her work, she was very, very glad to be able to write: "They were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Naturally, they became heroes."

The End