



(Lovely cover by [Altaira](#))

Disclaimer: I own nothing, just playing in God Lucas's sandbox.

Expected length: 4-5 posts.

This Plot bunny arose from when I wrote my first fanfic for this Winter Challenge [Sandstorm Celebration](#). The two stories are a study of contrasts of how the Skywalker twins are faring across the Galaxy in their respective, adopted homes at the age of 7.

When I wrote *Sandstorm*, I had wondered to myself how Leia would've spent the same holiday as her brother.

This is her story.

[Alderaan Blessings](#)

Part 1

The candle in the window could be seen in the distance, a beacon of warmth and welcome to the weary travelers.

“The power must be out, again,” the Prince moaned, as his eyes traversed over the front stonework of his ancestral Palace home. The sparkling glow of the candles peeking through the falling snow, made the windows of the ancient building, shimmer with warming radiance.

His dark-eyed daughter gazed up at him and offered, “Maybe Mommy and Threepio left them on for us because they look pretty.”

A smile broadened on the Prince’s face, instantly highlighting his handsome features. A dull ache surrounded his heart as he gazed into her earnest, intelligent eyes...she was the splitting image of her mother. Snaking an arm down around the seven-year olds shoulder he crushed her protectively into his side in a tight embrace.

The father and daughter sat huddled together aboard their Royal Shuttle as it cruised towards the Palace’s docking station. As the vessel flushed its vents and the repulsor controls shuddered to a halt, signaling that they had landed, the man secured a long, velvet-lined, hooded cloak around his daughter’s shoulders in preparations against the brisk, howling wind and snow.

“Ready?” he asked, shoving his gloves into place, and covering his balding head with his hood.

Stamping her feet, she responded affirmatively, “Ready, Daddy.”

Not thinking twice that someone wouldn’t gather up their shopping bags, the Prince nodded to the royal guards who opened the shuttle’s door. All tendrils of warmth in the shuttle were sucked out into the frigid wind. Hand-in-hand, Father and daughter cautiously dashed towards the Palace’s side entrance, slipping ever so often in the slick snow and patches of ice. Their facial features, hidden in the depths of their hoods, soon became tight and chilled from the abrasively bracing weather conditions. At the door, they spied the animated form of a golden protocol droid directing their path in the darkened bay.

As they neared the droid, they heard his tinny voice wailing over the wind, “Prince Organa and Princess Leia, you must hurry and get inside before you catch your deaths out there!”

Dashing past the droid, the royals and their security detail poured into the Palace. Flipping off his hood, Prince Bail Organa asked, “Why are the lights out, Threepio?”

With the outer doors now shut, the warmth of the Palace embraced the party, and they gladly stripped out of their multiple layers of outer wear. Servants materialized out of the woodwork, gathered the cold, snow-logged apparel and retreated with them into the depths of the Palace.

See-Threepio’s metal feet clattered over the green Alderaanian marble floor as he chased after the royal family members who wandered into the further depths of the Palace. He answered, “Your Highness, the storm knocked out the town’s main generator. The Alderaan Core of Engineers team has been dispatched to correct the problem.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Threepio. Why don’t you go check on their progress and report back to me, alright?” he asked the droid.

Threepio happily answered, “Certainly, Your Royal Highness!” The droid then scampered off into the depths of the building, leaving father and daughter alone in the cavernous, elaborately decorated entryway to the Palace. The surrounding architecture and marble carvings were crafted to depict the simple beauty of hard-working farmers and the Alderaanian goddesses of virtue and nature.

To his daughter, Bail imparted his wisdom, “You would think that with all of the technology that we

have available at our fingertips that we would be impervious to any such problems as losing power, wouldn't you think? Nature and the Goddesses always find ways of reminding us who is really in charge, though. Don't they, Leia?"

"Yes, Daddy," Leia replied, as she gazed adoringly up at her father. Her smile turned into a frightened frown. In a low voice, she asked, "You don't suppose that he cut the power, do you?"

Bail's heart seized for a moment with utter terror, his own untrusting nature had actually pondered the exact same notion when he had first noted the power being out in the Palace. Leia never ceased to amaze him with her astuteness. He found it disconcerting that she oftentimes seemed to be able to pluck thoughts right out of his mind.

Forcing himself to relax, he stroked her thickly braided, sable-brown hair and belayed her fears by answering, "No, Leia. I don't believe that he cut the power."

"What if he learned about...about..."

Lightly holding her shoulders, Bail stressed, "We are very careful, my dear daughter. He is unaware of what we are planning."

"But he has spies," she whispered. Her eyes widened with fear, "Maybe he's coming here tomorrow!"

Exhaling a deep sigh, Bail dropped to one knee, took her tiny hands in his own and promised, "Leia, please do not worry. Tomorrow may be Emperor's Day, but trust me, he will not come here to celebrate."

"Why not?" she demanded.

Bitterness leaked into his husky voice as he explained, "The Emperor never leaves his Palace on Imperial City. In fact, he never even leaves his office, much less that planet. He has isolated himself completely from the rest of the Galaxy."

"But he most likely will be watching us..."

Squeezing her hands tightly, Bail nodded his head, "Yes, Leia. He will be watching our festivities from afar. This is why we must always keep our appearances in check, and put on a great show that we support and love the Empire with all of our hearts."

"I understand," she solemnly replied. Bail opened his arms and gathered his adopted daughter into a tight embrace. Patting her back, he advised, "Come on, let's go find your mother."

His heart swelled with love as he watched the worry dissipate from her eyes to be replaced by joy. His white-clad daughter skipped off through the hallways shouting out a childhood rhyme at the top of her lungs as a way of announcing to the entire Palace that she had returned home.

Even with her happy voice assaulting his ears, Bail's mind briefly lingered to those troubled times... those times at the birth of the Empire...when democracy and freedom were forever crushed out of the Galaxy's existence.

Out of the misery of destruction during the Clone Wars, Bail had sustained personal losses, but the Republic had lost so much more...their golden champion.

Things fell perfectly into place...eerily so, in fact.

His own pregnant wife had died in childbirth at the same time that Padme's twins were born. With the girl's dark hair mirroring both Bail and his wife's appearances, no one would ever question that she was not his own child.

We will hide her in plain sight, Palpatine will never suspect who she really is, Bail had promised to Obi-Wan and Yoda. The Jedi Masters barely gave the girl a second thought as they concentrated their entire efforts on the boy. They more than happily agreed to Bail's suggestion.

Deep in his own personal grief, The Prince of Alderaan never realized how much Padme's little girl would save him from plunging into a pit of emotional despair. With the Republic gone, and no hope seemingly left in the Galaxy, Leia was the one factor that kept him sane in those early years of maddening change. She gave him purpose and instilled in him the desire to one day restore order back to the Galaxy.

The girl was wise beyond her years. She may have looked similar to Bail, but she was Padme Nabberrie Amidala Skywalker's daughter through and through. Leia's intelligence and boundless depths of curiosity marked her as a person to watch for...a power to be reckoned with one day. Never would Bail have dreamed of informing his young charge of his subversive doings behind the back of the Emperor. He had initially desired to do everything in his power to raise Padme's daughter in complete ignorance to his plans of rebellion.

However, Leia always managed to sneak into his private office and overheard his secret conversations with the other Rebellion leaders, and soon the child became a trusted member of the circle. Leia absorbed information like a sponge. And although she didn't comprehend a lot of the political talk that flew over her head, she focused her entire attention on trying to understand every detail, and she slowly was learning to connect the dots. Dolls and other childhood trivialities vanished from her interest as the desire for justice awakened in her veins.

Padme still lived through Leia.

He heard a happy shriek ahead of him as Leia bounded towards her adopted mother.

A broad grin crossed over Bail's lips as his weary eyes rested upon his wife's beautiful face. Her once full head of brunette hair contained streaks of gray. She called them her battle scars.

"Welcome home, Bail and Leia," she greeted her family.

"We're certainly glad to be back and out of the cold," Bail replied, and welcomed his wife with a kiss on her lips.

Catching her breath when they parted, her dark eyes lit up with mild embarrassment as Leia openly gawked at her parent's public display of affection. To the child, she ordered, "Go into the study, there's a fire waiting to finish thawing you out, and there's hot choco, too."

“Yippee!” Leia shouted and crashed through the doors of the study.

Smirking with amusement, Bail hooked his arm around Dorme’s waist and together, followed their charge into the warmth of the room beyond.

Part 2

“Artoo-Deetoo, we absolutely will NOT just barge into the study. Have you no manners, whatsoever? It is very bad etiquette to enter into a room full of humans unannounced...”

A series of annoyed, protesting beeps interrupted Threepio’s speech on protocol.

“I am NOT blathering, you ill-mannered, ill-assembled bucket of...”

“Threepio!”

The golden droid violently swung his attention away from his squat, silver and blue counterpart towards the door of the study, where he was startled to see the Prince’s head poking out between the openings of the study doors.

Bail’s face registered mild amusement as he offered, “Come inside please and tell us the news.”

“Oh my! I am so sorry to have disturbed you, Your Royal Highness,” Threepio stammered as the droids approached the doors.

“Not a problem, remember I was expecting you to return,” Bail amiably reminded the flustered droid.

“Oh yes, I suppose that is correct. Oh dear, I had nearly forgotten that. Blast my faulty circuits...”

Sighing, Bail shut the door to the hallway behind the droids, cutting off the draft that sent the flames in the fireplace dancing. Inhaling the rich, smoky aroma of burning wood, Bail turned to the golden droid and asked, “What news is there from the engineers?”

“Master Organa, they say that the cold managed to crack wide open the main coil in the power generator. They predict that in these adverse weather conditions that it could take upwards of five hours before power is fully restored,” Threepio reported. “They are optimistic that they will be able to get the Palace’s backup generators working shortly, however.”

Brows furrowing deeply, Bail asked, “And how are the people in town faring? Do they have power?”

“No, Your Highness, they are without power,” Threepio relayed.

Dorme’s eyes widened with worry, “It’s the coldest night of the year so far.”

Dark eyes mirroring his wife’s concern, Bail ordered, “Go tell them to double their efforts and to divert all emergency power directly into the town.”

“But Sir, what about the Palace?” Threepio whined.

“I believe we are plenty warm here in the study, aren’t we?” he repeated to his family. Both Dorme and Leia rapidly nodded their heads in agreement. “Luckily, this home is old and was created long before modern conveniences were ever introduced and there are fireplaces in every room. Our staff will not freeze. Inform the engineers that they have one hour to get that power online. If they do not, we will start sending shuttles out to poorer districts the village and open our doors for them tonight.”

“Certainly, Your Excellency. Come along, Artoo,” Threepio commanded as the droids scurried towards the doors.

“Oh and Threepio?”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“You don’t need to knock when you’re done talking to the engineers. I’ll be expecting your return,” Bail advised.

Bristling with happiness at being willingly accepted back into the study, Threepio gushed, “Oh thank you, Your Highness!”

Dorme’s eyes filled with wonder at Bail’s proclamation. She certainly knew that the Palace could sustain housing hundreds of families over the evening. And thanks to their advanced preparations for their Emperor’s Day feast tomorrow, their kitchen was stocked with food. It was doubtful in these adverse weather conditions that their off planet guests would actually arrive tomorrow.

Approaching his side, she laced her fingers tightly into his and cooed, “That was very generous of you, my love.”

“It is the very least we can do. I am not about to stay warm, when our people may be freezing out there,” Bail countered.

Dorme noted that the wheels in his brain were already churning, making plans for how to deal with the possible invasion of houseguests.

“Shall I round up the staff and get preparations started?” Dorme offered.

Swinging their arms, gently, Bail answered, “Not yet. We don’t need to get everyone bustling and in a panic if the engineers are able to get the systems back on line as I asked.”

Dorme smiled up into her husband’s face. Thrown together during times of crisis, two wounded hearts managed to find comfort in each other and mended. Brought together by their combined devotion to Padme they became each other’s rock of support as the tidal wave of tyrannical change washed over the Galaxy. Even now, living under the darkening blanket of oppression, Dorme marveled at her husband’s boundless depths of generosity and commitment to living by the old ideals of a time gone by.

From her place on couch, Leia sipped on her steaming mug of hot, sweet choco watching her parents curiously. Her stomach fluttered with excitement at the thought of their Palace being filled with people. Being a royal, she rarely got to directly interact with many of the locals. Tutors came to the Palace

instead of her attending public school.

Timidly, she asked, “Will there be kids?”

“Most likely, Leia. In fact, come to think of it, a friend of mine, Nicco Salla runs an orphanage on the far Eastern outskirts of town. I’m fairly certain that it would just miss any of the reserves of power. I’ll make sure that we round up his kids first,” Bail responded.

“If the engineers, can’t get the systems online...” Dorme stressed.

“Right, if the engineers can’t get the systems online,” Bail repeated.

Time ticked on and Bail and Dorme paced in the study, absently skimming datanovels to try to fill the agonizing, long minutes. Crackling pops from the wood in the fire provided the only sound in the room. From the chamber beyond, Leia could faintly hear the howling wind and snow as it pummeled the windows. Occasionally, gusts of wind raced down the chimney and sent the bright orange flames fanning wildly in the fireplace.

Bail and Dorme ceased their pacing as Threepio and Artoo finally arrived back, again.

“Your Royal Highness, the engineers report that they may be able to divert the power to the entire town. They believe that the power surge will only support the western grid,” Threepio reported.

Clapping his hands, Bail rubbed them together and announced, “Well then, time for doing nothing is over then. Let’s alert the staff and get this Palace ready to receive visitors.”

Choco forgotten, Leia’s heart thundered wildly in her chest. With the possibility of meeting many children her age and finally getting to behave like a kid, she couldn’t contain her excitement that this would be one Emperor’s Day that she would NEVER forget.

Part 3

The home of the House of Organa burst into high energy gear. The two hundred room palace was expecting a massive influx of overnight guests. Servants and droids worked side by side to assemble makeshift beds by the hundreds. Practically any pieces of fabric, from ornate, out of season draperies, to tablecloths were used as cushioning for rolled cots that were evenly distributed all over the floors.

The kitchen bustled with activity. Still being able to utilize the original coal cookers from days of old, the chefs and cooks busily worked over the ancient stoves creating large steaming pots of choco and lamba stew. Leia worked with the kitchen staff to round up mugs and cups by the hundreds. These vessels were placed on a table just inside side entry, directly off the ballroom, so once the arrivals entered the Palace, they would be given a glass of hot liquid to defrost their freezing bodies.

All three hundred fireplaces were set alit with blazing, roaring fires, and candles were lit from every corner of the Palace to bathe it in comforting light. From outside, the approaching Royal Shuttle drivers fixated upon the blinding glow of the palace, shining brightly like a beacon through the swells of the snowstorm.

Upon entering the Palace, every towns person would first be lead to the ballroom. There they would have their cloaks and extraneous belongings removed and cataloged. Each individual would then go through a thorough security check before being allowed into the Palace. The fourth floor, which belonged to the Royal Family, would be heavily guarded and off limits to the guests.

Leia anxiously waited by the drink table, craning her neck, waiting for the new arrivals. Dorme approached her from behind, ran her hands over her braided hair, and whispered, "This will be quite a treat for the townsfolk to be greeted by their Princess."

Beaming, the young girl replied, "I can't wait to see the kids, Mommy."

Dorme's heart pulled at her adopted daughter's words. She knew that Leia often wished for a normal life. Whenever they'd ride through town in their armored, Royal Shuttles and she would see a group of kids playing in the streets, Leia would always gaze longingly after them. With few of the local magistrate families having kids, Leia infrequently got to associate with children her own age. And for security purposes, Dorme and Bail were forced to keep her as sheltered as possible. Although this particular evening was very risky, Dorme knew that Bail's compassionate heart trusted that nothing bad would come from the unexpected turn of events.

"Ohh they're here!" Leia exclaimed, jumping up and down. In her excitement she knocked over two full cups of steaming choco. Yelping to leap out of the way, Dorme quickly snaked out a hand and sopped up the mess with a batch of napkins.

Chuckling, she reminded Leia, "This is going to be a long evening, Leia. You'll need to conserve your energy."

Her brandy-brown eyes brightened merrily as the children from the orphanage entered the Palace. As suddenly as the light sparked in her eyes, it faded. The children appeared to be utterly terrified of their surroundings. What's more, each was rail thin, pale, and very skitterish.

Leia nearly jumped out of her skin as her father happily shouted, "Nicco! Wonderful to see you again, my friend!"

Flashing her gaze beyond the sea of confused children's head, Leia spied a thin blond-haired man wearing nearly threadbare clothes. A bright smile just radiated over his face when he saw Bail.

"Bail, how wonderful of you to offer us comfort and shelter on this bitterly cold night!" Nicco's strong voice boomed back to his friend. The two men openly embraced and pounded each other on the backs.

The children all gaped their mouths open in wonderment that their orphanage leader knew Prince Organa personally! Turning his attention to the children, Bail chuckled, leaned over and teased, "My goodness, you all look like a bunch of guberfish with your mouths gaping open like that." To emphasize his point, he placed his hands on either sides of his mouth, rapidly puckered his mouth open and shut and rolled his eyes back and forth.

Squeals of laughter erupted from the children's mouths, causing their dour expressions to brighten.

Dorme nudged Leia. Gazing at the children she cleared her throat and offered, "I have hot choco here for you all."

Collectively the orphans turned their heads and stared in wonder at Leia. Smiling brightly, she held out a couple of cups. A little white haired girl, towards the front of the pack, timidly took a single step forward, licking her lips as she stared longingly at the cup. Then as if remembering herself and her manners, she quickly averted her gaze back at Nicco seeking approval. The tall man waved towards the children and replied, "Of course you all are welcome to take a cup."

"Please, we have this waiting for all of you, do not be shy," Bail offered. Together Dorme and Leia distributed mugs into the wondrously grateful hands of the children.

One of Dorme's personal aides then appeared to lead the orphans towards their designated room so they could gather their bearings in the castle.

Leia overheard her father explain to Nicco, "We will be serving dinner in the main reception hall in a couple of hours. But if you take the children to the first floor common rooms, there are plenty of snacks there."

"Thank you, Bail," Nicco earnestly replied before leading his group of kids into the depths of the Palace.

Turning her eyes up to her mother once the children were out of view, Leia asked, "Why are they so sick looking, Mommy?"

Squatting down beside Leia, Dorme answered, "Their orphanage is in one of the older sections of town and isn't very well funded. I'm sure they barely get enough to eat."

Screwing her brows together, Leia demanded, "Why wouldn't they have enough food?"

Sighing, Dorme assumed, "They live off of donations from the public. It's always hard during this time of the year for them because people don't have much extra money to give to others."

Imploringly staring at her father who'd just returned back from talking with Nicco, she whined, "Can't we give them money?"

Sighing, Bail replied, "I actually do give them large donations at the beginning of each year, sweetheart. I don't know if they need more money unless Nicco informs me."

"Why wouldn't he ask for it?"

Pursing his lips together, Bail reasoned, "He likes to try to raise his funding on his own, Leia. He doesn't like continually coming to me for handouts. He agreed to my once a year donation because he knows he needs it. But it's entirely in his hands to ask me for any more."

"Maybe we should just make anonymous donations," Leia suggested.

Smirking at her misuse of the word, Bail responded, "That's a brilliant idea, Leia. Maybe, I will have to put you in charge of that."

Smiling broadly, Leia jumped up and down, clapping her hands. Before they could discuss anything

further, the next round of townsfolk entered the entryway. For two hours, Leia, Dorme, and Bail greeted their weary, and nervous guests, welcoming them into their home. For Leia, who'd spent much of her life sheltered, seeing, and smelling the people from the lower rent districts of the town was an eye-opening experience. She'd never viewed poverty on such a close level before. Even though Alderaan was a peaceful planet, like anywhere that people gathered and dwelled, there were always impoverished folk.

As the last group of townfolk were delivered and showed to their rooms, Bail, Leia, and Dorme breathed sighs of relief. Their rest, however, was short-lived as they now had to move onto dinner preparations.

Leia bounded along after her parents as they chatted with the various people crowding the Palace's many hallways. Enjoying her people watching, Leia observed how the common people would openly gawk at the elaborately carved statues and intricately detailed tapestries that decorated the many walls of the royal home. Seeing the objects through their eyes, she realized that the objects d'art were utterly remarkable. She'd become so accustomed to seeing them on a daily basis that she took their beauty for granted.

Grabbing Leia's hand, Dorme whispered to her, "Why don't we make sure that dinner is ready? I'll then let you sound the dinner gong, ok?"

Her daughter flashed a toothy-wide grin in agreement. Together the two Organa women wove their way through the crowds and entered the large reception hall. At the far Southern and Northern ends, 2 massive fireplaces were alit with raging fires. Leia gasped as three of the large chandeliers that hung overhead were alit and sparkled with candlelight. Tugging on Dorme's dress sleeve she wondered, "How did they light those, Mommy?"

Chuckling, Dorme explained, "I believe they sent a cleaning, hover droid up there to light them all."

The rose-colored marble walls and rich mahogany wooden floors glowed with warmth in the radiant firelight. Leia had never seen the place look so beautiful. Her nose detected the fabulous aroma of cooking food, mingled with the earthy, fresh scents of the large herbal and floral arrangements situated throughout the entire chamber. She even marveled at the fact that the family's best, Nubian china and crystal goblets were placed at each seat.

"Why did they put out the good stuff?" Leia inquired.

Flashing her daughter a sly grin, Dorme answered, "Because it's nearly Emperor's Day. We were already planning on setting these out for visiting dignitaries, so why should our townsfolk be any different? They are our welcome guests as much as anyone."

Nodding her head in comprehension, Leia added, "Give them a real reason to feel like royalty, right?"

"Right!"

The meal for the evening would not be a full course meal, as the kitchen did not have proper time to assemble such a glorious feast. It would consist of various salads, soups, and stews with mountains of breads to help fill the stomachs. Throughout the night the chefs would diligently work on creating a feast to end all feasts in celebration of Emperor's Day.

Holding a fork in his left hand, and waddling across the vast hall, and weaving through the rows of tables, Threepio carefully examined the place settings, verifying that every seat contained the right number of utensils, napkins, and knives. Artoo followed behind him carrying a large tray atop his domed head. On it held several pieces of silverware in case any of the utensils were missing. So far, Threepio had not found any missing.

Artoo beeped in protest to their task.

“I am well aware that this is time consuming, Artoo. But it would be ill-advised not to double check all of the settings. It would be quite a protocol faux-pas if someone had to ask for a knife for a fork,” Threepio wearily explained.

Huffing his reply, Artoo spun in a circle.

Jolting upright, Threepio demanded, “And precisely what did you mean by *fork you?*”

Detecting a possible legendary bickering tirade mounting between the two droids, Dorme called out, “We’re ready to let in the guests, Threepio. Get out of there.”

Turning his golden head in Dorme’s direction, Threepio reluctantly placed his fork back onto the tray on Artoo’s head and answered, “Certainly, Your Highness.”

Once the droids vacated the room, Dorme’s eyes twinkled with delight. She cheerfully told her daughter, “I think it’s time, Leia!”

Squealing with delight, Leia dashed towards the front of the room and approached a large triangular gong. The ancient Alderaanian instrument was connected to a series of tubes that allowed its sound to resonate throughout the entire Palace. Picking up the large, and heavy mallet that rested on a red velvet cushion below the gong, Leia exhaled a deep breath, lifted the mallet high over her head and crashed it against the gong.

Teeth rattling in her head from the reverberations of the gong, Leia giggled uncontrollably. She loved that funny feeling of the after affects when her nerves shuddered under the rattling of the gong. Sweeping the doors open, with a flourish, Bail welcomed all of the guests into the reception hall. Most of the common people openly gaped in amazement at the spectacularly decorated room, never having witnessed such splendor in their entire lives. The orphans all sat around the royal table with Nicco situated directly to Bail’s left. Dorme sat to his right, with Leia at her side. The nervous, white-haired girl from earlier sat beside Leia. Her eyes flashed all over the room, trying to take everything in at once.

Leaning over, Leia squeezed the girl’s hand and whispered, “What do you like the best?”

The girl’s eyes widened with wonder that the planet’s Princess would actually deem to speak to her, much less hold her hand. In a whisper, she croaked, “I think I like the lights, they’re all twinkly.”

Proudly, Leia explained how the candles up there got lit. Dorme watched in amusement as several of the orphans sitting within ear reach gasped in wonderment.

“You have droids here?” one of them asked. “Real droids?”

As if sensing the question posed, Threepio and Artoo arrived at the table. Artoo dragged a large floating dolly behind him that held an enormous pot of lamba stew. From the pot, Threepio distributed the meaty soup to each of the guests at the royal table. The children stared in amazement at the glittering gold droid.

“He’s beautiful!” the white haired girl exclaimed. The other children voiced their agreements.

Head swelling by the moment, Threepio answered, “Oh thank you! I see that you are a child of great taste!”

Bail and Dorme rolled their eyes as they shook their heads. The last thing Threepio needed was his already over-inflated ego to be further increased. From below, Artoo emitted a sarcastic whine and trudged further down the table.

Chasing his domed counterpart, Threepio’s prissy voice melted into the storm of the crowd, shouting back, “Maybe YOU should get YOUR visual cortex examined, Artoo. I would certainly trust a human’s perception of beauty over yours....”

As the meal continued, people finally got accustomed to the opulent surroundings and began to enjoy themselves. Folks introduced themselves to each other and began networking. Several people who were recently unemployed took advantage of the time and asked around for any job openings.

Leia and her new friend, Winter, spent the entire meal chattering away and getting to know each other. Each found fascinating differences in their own lives, and similarities in the most common of places, like favorite colors, foods, smells, and dreams.

When the meal wore down towards the end, Threepio approached Bail with a request from three of the guests. “You Royal Highness, the gentlemen over there would like to express their gratitude for your boundless generosity by filling this music with song.”

Beaming brightly, Bail knitted his fingers together and proclaimed, “I think that would be a marvelous idea! Please bring them forward.”

The trio deeply bowed to the Prince and awaited for his approval on what they should play. Signally them closer, Bail whispered to them a few suggestions. Nodding in agreement the minstrels happily agreed to the choices. Oblivious to what was going on at the Royal table, the crowd continued to enjoy their lively conversations. Content with his gathering of information from the band, Bail then leaned over and asked Leia to hit the gong. Grabbing her new friend Winter’s hand the girls dashed to the large device and banged it together.

In an instant all conversations died with the only sounds filling the chamber was the remaining echoes of metallic device and the high-pitched, squealing giggles of the two girls.

Rocketing on his feet, Bail addressed the room, “Tonight we celebrate as one on the eve of Emperor’s Day. We have feasted together. And now I am delighted to say that we are going to share in a tradition that used to grace these halls from so long ago. My grandfather’s grandfathers did not have holonets or holoVIDs to entertain them during the long, cold winter months. Instead they were entertained by the

skillful songs of talented bards who often traded their gift of music and song for shelter out of the bitter cold. We are all truly blessed for this evening for this wonderful trio of singers would like to fill this hall with their music and treat us with traditional Alderaanian song! Please give your complete attention to the *Galactic Travelers!*”

The wandering group of folk minstrels was well known over Alderaan. The excited audience couldn't believe their luck that they would be treated to such a marvelous and unexpected gift. None of them knew what they did to deserve such a fabulous evening, but they refused to question anything, in fear that they would wake up only to discover it had all been a dream.

Collectively holding their breaths, everyone waited to hear what song the band would perform...

Part 4

Nervously shifting in their seats, the audience waited in anticipation for the minstrels to begin their song.

One man tuned his wind instrument, while the other two adjusted the strings on their bandoleen and chellios. Each man nodded to each other to signify that they were ready.

The owner of the bandoleen stepped forward and announced, “Tonight we sing you a song of Alderaan legend. It is a story of hope and compassion. I am certain you all know of it, for it is a favorite tale of ours...it is the story of King Bail Ban and Branwen.”

Cheers erupted in the hall, the folktale was a cornerstone of Alderaanian folk traditions and for this simplistic crowd, the choice could not have been better.

When the voices leveled off, the musician holding the wind instrument expertly breathed life into the soulful sounding device. It's hauntingly, lilting tunes sent chills running up and down all of the guest's arms and over the backs of their necks. And then the chellioist began to strum out lower toned notes out of his large instrument. The singer then added his higher pitched rhythms with the bandoleen.

The beautiful music brought tears to the eyes of many listening in the hall. Then the singer's true and beautiful baritone voice filled the room with song:

*King Bail Ban was beloved by all
Fair and just he ruled the land
In times of plenty and times of less
He gave his entire soul to those less fortunate.*

*As the times passed, he longed for something of his own
A wife he desired to have and to hold
But alas, no fair maiden crossed his path
So a quest he began to locate his fair lass.*

*All over Alderaan he searched high and low
From the highest of noble courts*

*To the poorest of hovels
He just knew his beloved had to exist.*

*For two years he searched and searched in to no avail
His heart remained empty as he crossed the Wellinian Plains
Sitting heavily upon a stone he openly wept
His heart broken, his soul bereft.*

*The sky then drowned his sorrow with rain
His despairing soul realized that his quest had been in vain
From out of the clouds a single ray of sun shined
Gazing into the light, the King's sight nearly went blind.*

*Light as air, in the sun's blinding beam a raven flew
The King longed to be as free as the crow
His eyes widened in horror as a bolt of lightning
Struck the bird out of the sky
Where it plummeted to the ground, and died.*

*Rushing to the bird, the King cradled the creature in his arms
To see a free thing struck down in its prime
Made his heart weep and weep,
He cried tears of sorrow and of loneliness, and dismay.*

*As his tears rolled down his face they splashed onto the bird's corpse
And magically they turned her black feathers white.
Through his own misery and longing,
He failed to see the bird's transformation and altering.*

*Suddenly, the bird slipped through his hands
When he opened his eyes the skies had cleared
Before him was a sight of marvel and wonder
A maiden of enchanting beauty had materialized out of thin air.*

*With hair and skin as white as new fallen snow
She looked like no other woman he'd ever gazed upon.
Tentatively, he asked for her name
And from where she came.*

*Smiling brightly she replied, "I have answered your cries. I am what you seek.
Only a man of great character and compassion could cause me to wake."
Full of wonder, he asked, "Who are you, enchanted lass?"
Smiling brightly she replied, "Do you really need to ask?"*

*Beaming, King Bail Ban already knew her name
From the beginning of time her legend was keen
She embodied the Alderaanian spirit of virtue and peace
She was Branwen, goddess of beauty and grace.*

*Weeping in delight, the King had finally found his perfect bride
And then they were married and all celebrated their union with pride
That their King had finally located a woman worthy of his blessed persona
And his generosity still exists today, in the hearts of the House of the Organas.*

There was not a dry eye in the house. The thunderous applause that followed after the final notes could have leveled a less structurally sound building than the Palace. From her side, Leia's young friend's eyes were wide with wonder. All her life she had hated her white and unusual hair, but no longer. When the applause ended, Winter timidly asked, "Was she really real?"

Prince Organa, tickled by the new twist that the singers added to the end of the tale, absently pulled apart a piece of dark bread, and flashed the inquisitive child a smile. He explained, "Well, maybe you need to judge for yourself, legend says that King Ban and Branwen were the founders of the House of Organa. If you look above the Southern mantel you will see the carvings of two people. Do you see them?"

Winter and Leia turned their heads and studied the ancient carvings of a man and a woman with flowing, long hair. They nodded their heads in unison. Bail continued, "Those carvings are of King Ban and Branwen."

Goosebumps erupted all over Winte's body. She whispered, "She did exist."

Flashing his wife an amused wink, Bail shoved a lump of bread in his mouth, not wishing to spoil the magic of the moment for the little girls. As Leia continued to stare at the carvings, she tilted her head and realized that the man's cleft in his chin resembled her fathers. And the set of the woman's eyes was the same distance apart as his as well. She believed, in that moment, that the legend had to be true.

After sweetmeats were passed around for dessert and the *Galactic Travelers* had churned out their entire repertoire of songs, everyone dispersed to head to bed. The Royal family got to leave first, and after much nagging and whining, Leia was allowed to bring Winter along with her.

The two little girls headed towards Leia's bedroom. Winter's eyes popped out of her head when she spied the mountains of toys that lined the walls and filled the toy chests in Leia's bedroom. The feminine, pale yellow room was a Palace all into itself for the starving young orphan's eyes.

Following her new friend's gaze at all of her untouched toys, Leia wondered why her new friend seemed so fascinated by the dolls and stuffed creatures. Snatching up a ragged doll, Leia handed it to Winter and asked, "Don't you have dolls and toys at the orphanage?"

Gulping and holding the doll carefully, like it was made of glass, Winter answered, "We have some toys. Most are very dirty and old, though. I've never seen so many toys in one place before."

"Don't you get to go to toy stores?" Leia wondered.

Winter shook her head. "Master Nicco says we would just be sad if we saw that many toys in one place. And that we would want them and we cannot afford them."

Sitting on the edge of her bed, Leia asked, "So what do you play with if you only have old, dirty toys?"

“We play with them anyway, and we play imaginary games,” Winter replied.

Leia’s brows furrowed in confusion and she inquired, “Imaginary games?”

Nodding, Winter responded, “We pretend... pretend that we’re Galactic explorers, that we live on faraway planets... pretend that we belong in families and have siblings.”

In that moment, Leia realized the full magnitude of the differences between them. Her new friend had nothing, nothing but dreams and she had everything, but none of it mattered to her. She decided to try to make this time together memorable for her new friend.

“Why don’t you show me how you play Galactic explorers? That sounds like fun,” Leia offered.

“Okay...can we play with your dollies?”

“Sure... go ahead and grab whichever ones you want to play with,” Leia urged.

“Any of them?” Winter squeaked, seeing mountains of dolls that looked too fragile to breathe on, much less play with.

“Yup,” Leia agreed. Snatching down armloads of dolls, they sat on the floor and began roll-playing. For Leia, the toys had always just been pretty, useless objects. With her friend’s imagination to help breathe life into the globs of plastique, and yarn they turned into so much more; they became instruments for telling stories that only children could create; naïve, full of wonder, and of hope.

An hour later, Dorme rounded up the girls, gave them baths, changed them into pajamas and they crawled into bed together. And for the first time that they could recall, Leia and Winter had the best night’s sleep they had ever experienced.

As dawn’s gray light crept over the horizon, the snow continued its relentless assault of Alderaan on Emperor’s Day.

Throughout the night the engineers worked diligently in the frigid conditions to restore power to the town and Palace. Little by little they managed to amp up enough energy to maintain a constant flow of power to the folk who remained in town, but they were still struggling to get the systems back on full. They were optimistic that the power would be restored by midday.

The staff in the Palace worked through the night to keep the fires roaring and the food cooking for the Emperor’s Day celebration.

Shortly after sunrise, Bail awoke from his slumber and wrestled his arms into a bathrobe. Yawning, he discovered his morning pot of caff waiting for him as usual. Without power, no one had been able to download the latest news. He snorted happily. Last thing he needed was to get his blood pressure boiling about the Emperor, on this “holiday.” As he scanned the darkened, snowy, dreary landscape he couldn’t help but reflect on bygone times. It wasn’t so very long ago that this day was properly called Life Day. Emperor Palpatine, however, outlawed any festivities that held even the fleeting reference to

the Jedi Order, and had instead declared that the day belonged to him alone. Bail remembered that he had a difficult time keeping his lunch down upon hearing that proclamation that day in the Imperial Senate.

As he thought of the people sleeping in his spare rooms, he wondered how many other leaders on planetary systems would have done the same thing. He wondered if there was still an ounce of compassion out there, anywhere, for fellow man. If things had been left entirely up to the Emperor, he doubted that anyone would be allowed to receive even the slightest bit of charity on this day- or any day for that matter. Over the course of dinner the previous evening, Bail had counted over seven hundred heads seated at the tables. Seven hundred people who lived in the poorest district of town. He'd never had that many impoverished souls living in that district before, that fact plagued his heart with worry.

"Troubled times we live in," he mumbled, taking a long draught off of his steaming mug of caff.

"We most certainly are," Dorme replied from behind. Tightly, she wrapped her arms around his waist and snuggled into the small of his broad back.

Bail smiled, dropped a hand and laced their fingers together over his waist. Icily, he seethed, "I hate that we have to pretend, Dorme. Every year we pretend to be loyal to that puppet master of a tyrant and all the while more and more people are falling between the cracks. He sends out false messages that the Galaxy is thriving and prosperous, but that is only to a chosen few- the wealthy. How can he not see what we see? Does he not see that common people are needlessly suffering? Where is justice in this Galaxy that we live in?"

Dorme's eyes took on a faraway look. Flickers of golden days, bright with Democracy and freedom teased them and then bounded forever out of reach. She sighed, "I don't know, Bail. The real question is how long before things can be restored? He can't live forever."

Stroking Dorme's hand, Bail nodded, "That's true. However, there is the other who would easily take his place."

Stiffening, Dorme's breath quickened, and a stray tear escaped from her eye. "Milady..."

Putting aside his cup, Bail turned and wrapped his arms tightly around his shaking wife. Even now, seven years later, she was still plagued by nightmares... nightmares of a love gone sour... riddled with pain and deceit. And the black figure that continually loomed in her dreams, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake.

"I'm sorry, Dorme. I shouldn't have mentioned anything," Bail hissed, ashamed at himself for not thinking before he spoke.

"She can't ever know the truth, Bail... she just can't," Dorme stressed.

Immediately following her train of thought, and stroking her hair, Bail whispered, "She won't know. How can she? We're the only ones who know the truth."

"There are others."

“And they want nothing to do with Leia,” Bail reiterated.

Shaking her head, Dorme disclosed, “It would kill her if she knew. She’d hate him.”

“And she’d have a right to, he doesn’t deserve one ounce of compassion. Do not worry, Dorme. She has long ago accepted that we are her parents. She’ll never have a reason to go looking for her past,” Bail remarked.

“I hope you’re right, Bail. I hope you’re right.”

Curled up together in Leia’s bed, the Princess whispered to her new friend, “Do you remember your parents?”

Pursing her lips together, Winter shook her head. “They died when I was a baby. I’ve been at the orphanage most all of my life.”

“I don’t remember my mother either... well much of her, anyway,” Leia disclosed.

Winter looked confused. “But wasn’t that your mother sitting beside you at the table?”

“She’s my adopted mother, same as my father isn’t my real father,” Leia explained. Sadness crept into her voice as she continued, “I never knew my real parents. And they never talk about them.”

“Did they even know them?” Winter asked, amazed that this girl could’ve been so lucky to have been adopted into a Royal family.

Eyes widening, Leia nodded. “I think they did. All they will tell me was that they were very much in love and then they died.”

“That’s so sad,” Winter consoled.

“I know,” the Princess replied. Furrowing her brows, she concentrated deeply. She called into the farthest, darkest corners of her memory and brought forth a singular image. “I remember her... a little bit. She looked a lot like my Mommy... but she was prettier. She was so sad...”

“I wonder why,” Winter remarked. Then she suggested, “Maybe because your Daddy had died?”

“Maybe.” As Leia stared into Winter’s eyes she realized that this was the first time she’d ever discussed her real mother with anyone. Her nursemaids and Palace staff utterly refused to speak of the subject to her. And her parents rarely ever divulged anything beyond the merest of basics.

“At least you have people who love you,” Winter sadly pointed out.

Suddenly feeling guilty about whining about her own petty problems to a girl who had nothing, an answer sprung into her head. “So do you,” Leia stated.

“I do?”

Smiling, Leia answered, “Yes, you have me. *I* do. And I will always consider you to be family.”

Winter smiled, not knowing what to make of the Princess’s strange proclamation. She decided that she didn’t care and closed her eyes. Both of the girls snuggled deep under the covers of bed and fell back to comfortable sleep, only to reawake when Leia’s nursemaid entered the room to rouse the girls for the day’s activities. Once dressed and sighing deeply, both girls decided to make the most of their last time together and headed downstairs hand in hand.

Part 5

As the crowds gathered again into the reception hall at noon, they were salivating from the enticing aromas of exotic blends of foods. Spicy, sweet wafts of meats, breads, and fruits assaulted their noses. Each person in the room’s eyes nearly bugged out of their sockets upon seeing the great mountains of food just waiting for them to dig into. They couldn’t believe their good fortune to be able to partake in such a wonderful feast.

Dutifully, Bail rose to his feet and the crowd silenced. A floating newsdroid, delivered to the Palace in the weeks prior to Emperor’s Day, hovered over the tables, fixating upon the Prince as he got ready to make his speech. Each word would be recorded and sent back to the Emperor for careful examination.

Clearing his throat, Bail attempted to fight down the rising taste of bile that he always choked on when he was forced to give these speeches to his false leader. Clenching his hands together across his chest, he began, “Today we give thanks. We give thanks to the man who brought unity and prosperity to our Galaxy.” His mouth dried upon speaking the lie. Still he pushed forward, “We were but lost, scattered souls, wandering aimlessly in the desert before the birth of the Empire. The Emperor’s superior intellect and his vast stores of knowledge and wisdom became the water of our soul’s salvation.”

From her seat, Leia’s chin dropped low and out of camera range. She scowled menacingly at the floor. Dorme noted her daughter’s defiant glare and snaked a hand under the table and love tapped Leia’s leg encouragingly. Sighing deeply and knowing her duty, Leia forced a smile onto her face and stared at her father. She wasn’t going to fail him.

Bail noted Leia’s struggle and felt his heart swell with pride. He concluded, “This bounty before you is but a taste of the wealth that he blankets our Galaxy with. Please, partake and enjoy! All hail The Emperor!”

Hoorays filled the hall. And as Bail slunk into his chair, the poorest people of Alderaan dug into the greatest meal of their lives. As the final courses were consumed, the entire castle suddenly flooded with blinding light...the engineers had gotten the power back on.

The townfolk received this unexpected turn of events with a mixture of joy and bitter resentment; happy to see it restored, sad to realize that they would be back in their own dreary homes and back to their dull lives soon.

Sensing the depressed air dampening the spirits of the room, Bail rocketed to his feet and declared, “The power may be back on, but please know that I do not expect you all to immediately depart after

eating. There will be dancing and games in the great ballroom. From the bottom depths of my heart, and from my family's hearts, I thank you all for helping bring some extra cheer into our homes on this Emperor's Day."

The townsfolk clapped and praised their kind Prince. Then conversation turned to murmurs, as they wondered what kinds of entertainment lay ahead.

Clearing his throat, Bail added, "I would also like to say that I have greatly enjoyed this day and would like to make this a yearly tradition. Every Emperor's Day from this day forth, the House of Organa will open our doors to our town and share in the joy of the occasion with each of you. You are the cornerstone of Alderaan's society. Your hard work and dedication keeps the wheels of commerce turning and help us to maintain our peaceful and prosperous way of life. From the bottom of my heart, I thank each and every one of you."

Bowing deeply, Bail sat down. His cheeks burned as collectively the people launched to their feet and gave him a standing ovation. Leia's hands blurred together as she clapped her hands in pride for her Daddy.

The engineers who had put all of their strength into getting the power back online were brought into the Palace, defrosted, were fed, and joined in on the after dinner fun. At the reception recordings of traditional Alderaanian folk music played and the people enjoyed coming together in rapid, rhythmic, ritualistic dances.

Leia and the orphans wove their way in and out of the crowds of kicking and stomping feet playing hide and seek. Their squealing laughter punctuated the festive air.

As the afternoon wore down to a close, Bail noted that the storm had finally broken. The entire world was blanketed in a crisp layer of fresh fallen snow. The fading sun turned the white blanket a warm orange glow. After gathering their cloaks, the townsfolk stood outside waiting to reluctantly climb into the Royal Shuttles that would take them home. Before the doors of their rides opened, Bail had one last surprise to share to all. From the roof of the Palace a glorious display of fireworks erupted into the night sky. The rockets launched so high that they could be viewed by those in town who were fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to have had their power throughout the night and had missed out on the other Palace activities.

Before entering the cabs of the shuttles, each towns person was handed a box filled with food, and a steaming mug of choco. Bail Organa's reputation for being the most generous of planetary benefactors grew to astronomical levels after that night. For all that he had been forced to give that speech about the virtues of the Emperor, his people knew who really supported them, and it wasn't some distant political figurehead. And from that day forward, each person took a little more pride in his or her step as they headed to work, knowing that their Prince appreciated their efforts, and that next year, they would be graced by his generosity, again.

The Organas gathered around the roaring fire in their study after the townspeople had all left. The Palace seemed deathly quiet. The rich, calming, earthy smells of the fire reassuringly tickled Bail's nose. He lifted a steaming cup of caff to his lips and took a long swallow of the bitter, but addictive drink.

Threepio placed the final box on the floor next to Leia and stared at the Princess with confusion. Waddling over to Prince Organa, he asked, "Is Her Highness feeling unwell? Mistress Leia appears to not be interested in her gifts. I will gladly bring her a cup of pallenberry juice, if she needs the fluids."

Gazing at his daughter with understanding he responded, "Thank you, Threepio, but she's not sick. She'll be alright. You can go now."

"Oh, alright, come along Artoo," Threepio said, gesturing to his silver and blue counterpart. Stopping at the door, he added, "Master Organa, may I say that you gave a wonderful speech to the Emperor today. He will be most pleased."

Bail's eyes darkened and he scowled. Before replying he took another long drink from his mug and then answered, "Yes, Threepio, that is what is important. I'm sure he will be pleased."

"Yes, Sir," Threepio agreed, and then he and Artoo left the study.

Absently raking the soft yarn strands in the carpet with her fingers, Leia's head drooped in misery; she missed her new friend.

Bail and Dorme shared a knowing stare. A pile of unopened gifts sat on the floor beside their depressed daughter.

Dorme decided to tackle the issue. "Don't you want to open your presents, Leia?"

"No," she growled.

"Why not?"

"I don't need anything."

Bail's eyebrows rocketed towards his receding hairline at that statement. "But you haven't even opened them, yet, How do you know if you need them or not?"

"I have more stuff than I can ever need or use. There are others out there who have nothing. Give these to them," she proposed, pulling her knees tightly up under her chin.

"They were purchased for you, Leia," Dorme stressed.

"I DON'T WANT THEM!" Headstrong Leia roared. A trail of tears traveled down her cheek.

Venturing into a territory ripe with heartache, Bail asked, "And what do you want, Leia?"

"I want you to adopt Winter," Leia stated, pouting.

"Leia..."

"But we have plenty of room for her, you'd never even notice she was here!" she reasoned.

“Honey, we can’t adopt every child who needs a home. As much as I would love to do that, we just can’t,” Bail explained.

“Why not, you’ve done it before,” she spat, chin jutting up defiantly.

Dangerous waters churned, one misstep, and they could all be pulled under by an emotional undercurrent.

Coughing, Bail’s mind churned. He knew that with her exposure to the plans for the Rebellion that Leia’s youth was quickly slipping away. Bail knew that he needed to do everything in his power to keep her young and innocent, for as long as possible. So, he opted for a compromise. “Perhaps we could arrange to have the children brought here a couple of times a week so you could play with them all. That way you’ll get to see your friend on a regular basis.”

Face brightening, Leia whispered, “You would do that for me?”

Heart breaking, Bail answered, “Yes, Leia. I could do that. I’m certain Nicco would be very pleased to have the children brought here.”

“Can we send them some of my toys? I’ll never use them all,” Leia offered.

Reaching down her hand, Dorme stroked Leia’s soft, silky loose hair and answered, “We can certainly send away some of them. Instead why don’t you decide which toys you’d like to use with the children and we’ll take one of the rooms in the Palace and convert it into a large playroom for when they come over.”

Mulling over the idea, Leia nodded. “Just make sure it’s on the first floor. Some of the kids can’t walk very far.”

Shaking his head, Bail never failed to be impressed by the endless depths to his daughter’s observation skills, and generous spirit. Simply, he said, “I think that can be arranged.”

Leia beamed. With her heart now lightened, she flickered a glance at her pile of gifts.

Grinning delightfully, Bail ordered, “Go ahead and open them.”

Gleefully, Leia tore into the packages, marveling at the new cloaks, hair accoutrements, datajournals, and dolls that emerged out of the boxes. In her excitement as she tore open the packaging, her heart embraced her age as she reveled in the joy of discovering the contents of her gifts.

Dorme crawled back onto the couch next to her husband and nestled the top of her head onto his shoulder. Lacing their fingers together tightly, their hearts melted with joy at the sight of Padme’s daughter tearing into her presents. They could never have asked for a greater treasure than the girl who had been dropped into their care so long ago. She was the gift that continued to give. With each passing day, more and more of Padme’s gracious spirit shined even brighter from Leia’s soul. And with the values that they continued to instill into the child, Bail and Dorme had little doubt that one day, she would be strong enough to pick up her mother’s torch and would help to banish darkness from the Galaxy, forever.

The End
