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Sandstorm Celebration **By PadmeLeiaJaina**

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SANDSTORM CELEBRATION - written in 2004 for a Christmas Challenge for THEFORCE.NET.

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Part 1

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

At least that was what she had hoped. The plain-looking, tanned woman anxiously stared out of the darkened window across the stormy Tatooine desert floor as the pair of solitary headlamps grew closer and closer to her homestead. The fact that they appeared to be on a direct intersect course for her property must have meant that through the blinding squalls of sand that blasted against her home, their visitors had seen her light.

Just down the hall, her husband pulled a blaster rifle out of its lockbox and verified its loaded charge.

Arching a brow in his direction, she asked, "Is that really necessary?"

Gruffly, he retorted, "You know we can never be too certain. Tuskens don't care if there's a sandstorm brewing or not. They might be out there. Besides, what if it's not the Guerers? If I'm going out there, I plan on being armed...just in case."

Pursing her lips tightly shut, she knew better than anyone as to why he hated and feared the Tusken Raiders so much. She knew better than to argue on that sore subject. However, she highly doubted they needed to worry about being attacked by the fierce nomads this evening, not with a full-blown sandstorm about to kick into high gear.

"Who else would it be? We rarely receive visitors as it is," she reminded him. Noting that her husband's determined expression refused to waiver, she folded her arms across her chest and added, "I just believe it's ill mannered to greet your expectant party while carrying a rifle is all."

Boring his cautious blue eyes in her direction, he huffed, "Yes, well, if they aren't who we think they are, I'd just prefer to err on the side of caution. Stay inside. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Sighing, she watched him trudge towards their home's exit. A blast of icy wind roared through the hallways, signaling that he had exited their abode. Gazing back towards the window, she rubbed the squeaking heel of her fist over the frosty duraglass pane and wiped away the condensation that had formed there from her breath. As the headlamps entered their moisture farm's perimeter her heartbeat quickened in her chest. Anxiously she watched as her husband cautiously walked towards the approaching landspeeder. She witnessed the biting wind cut straight through his many layers of natural clothing, and noted that he had started shivering. Not deterred by the insufferable cold, he shielded his eyes from the glare of the lamps and the gritty sand that pulsated around his body.

"Aunt Beru, what's going on?"

Yelping from fright, Beru Lars's heart raced in her chest at the unexpected sound of her seven-year old nephew's voice. Placing a shaking hand over her heart, Beru scolded, "Don't sneak up on someone like that, Luke. You nearly frightened me to death!"

Rubbing his hands vigorously up and down his arms in attempts to generate some warmth, Luke apologized, "Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. Why's it so cold in here?"

Peering around their modest, home, the flaxen-haired boy noticed that his Aunt had illuminated the entire place with candles. He then noted that the only sound he could hear was that of the howling wind and scratching, blowing sand outside. The usual, reassuring hum of electricity was absent from their house.

Placing a finger up to still any more of Luke's questions and peeking out the window, Beru watched as Owen lowered his rifle and swung it casually over his shoulder after talking with the landspeeder's driver. She breathed a sigh of relief as she watched her neighbors, Truney and Donio Guerer, vacate their transportation device and openly approach Owen. Each carried a couple of overnight bags as they would be staying overnight during the storm. Seeing that all was well outside, Beru blissfully returned her attention to her nephew.

Outside a third human form crawled out of the back of the speeder and advanced upon her husband. The wind sent Owen's angry words away from the house, leaving Beru no wiser that trouble was afoot.

Pulling a shawl off her shoulders she wrapped it around Luke's shivering body. She picked up the candle from the window ledge and gently prodded him down the hall back towards his tiny bedroom. Guiding him into bed, she removed the shawl and tucked him tightly under the sheets. She explained, "Our generator's shifter coil blew out and Uncle Owen contacted the Guerers to see if they had a replacement part on hand. Luckily, they had one. We're without power at the moment. Knowing we'd freeze without it, they wonderfully agreed to come over to help him get the generator back on track."

"Oh." Luke snaked his fingers out of the cocoon of covers and rubbed his cold nose. Already knowing the answer, he hopefully asked, "We're not going to celebrate Emperor's Day, are we?"

Beru's soulful eyes filled with compassion. He asked that same question every year. Technically, being an outer rim planet, Tatooine had no reason to celebrate the Emperor's reign over the former Republic. That fact didn't stop local families from doing it anyway. The day was set aside for everyone living within the boundaries of the Empire to exchange presents, stuff themselves with food, and shoot fireworks off into the sky. People looked forward to the holiday that the Emperor had himself invented. It was the one day a year when everyone was allowed off from work and spend time with their loved ones...and forget their problems.

All of Luke's schoolmates celebrated the holiday.

The Lars family did not.

Each year, Owen would defiantly go outdoors on Emperor's Day and work his vaporators from dawn 'till dusk in protest. It utterly galled him to no end that anyone would actually participate in the manufactured, propaganda inspired holiday. A couple of times Beru tentatively requested that they do some sort of celebration, for Luke's sake. Each time he icily glared back at her and bellowed, "The only celebration we will ever participate in for that tyrant is for his funeral!"

Beru's kindly lips fell into a slight frown. Gently, she stroked Luke's hair. As she gazed into his pleading eyes she shook her head.

"Why not?" Luke whined, jutting his jaw in defiance.

As she examined his pale blue eyes in the flickering candlelight, Beru could almost see traces of his

father in his features. They both possessed similar shaped faces. If only Anakin could see him...she choked back a rising sob and slammed that train of thought closed. She explained, "The Emperor is not a good man, Luke. He is cruel and mean. Your uncle and I refuse to join in and celebrate because we do not support how he rules over his people."

Pale blond eyebrows furrowed together over Luke's eyes. "If he's so bad then why do people celebrate his day?"

Shivers, not from cold but from the effervescent, haunting call of destiny or maybe déjà vu, traveled down Beru's spine. Voice quivering slightly, she replied, "Because they are afraid of displeasing him."

"Why? Why would they be afraid? He's an old man, how could an old man hurt anyone?"

Indecision gripped her as to how to answer his question. He had a right to know the truth...at least certain truths. But in studying the boy, she knew he was still way too young to accept the burden that comes with such knowledge. A seven-year old boy had no need to understand what death and tyranny meant.

There was so much heartache in Luke's past surrounding the circumstances of his birth that she could not justify enlightening him to the truth. Not yet. She wondered if he'd ever be ready for the burden. Although Owen defiantly swore that he would never tell Luke anything regarding his father, Beru knew that one day, Luke would learn the truth. He would have to learn of the events that transpired that brought him into their humble lives. Her heart ached for the boy.

At first it had been easy to pacify his queries. He was so young and could be easily distracted. Now he had grown more inquisitive, and more understanding of how the galaxy worked. Beru constantly feared that one slip of the tongue could irrevocably take away the wonderfully naïve and gentle heart that rested in her nephew's body cavity and soul. If he ever found out that the things they told him about his father were not reality...if he ever learned about a menacing, black figure...

A phantom voice whispered in her head, *I wasn't strong enough to save you, Mom. I wasn't strong enough. But I promise you, I won't fail again.*

She shuddered, now was NOT the time for such memories. Even though Anakin had miserably destroyed his own life, she most certainly wasn't going to mess up his son's.

"I..." before she could begin her reply to Luke's questions, Owen's voice boomed throughout their home, "How many times have I warned you, YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!"

Fear gripped Beru's heart and her palms began to sweat. Only one person could evoke that kind of a reaction out of her normally sedate husband. Luke's eyes widened in terror as his white knuckles tightly gripped his blanket over the lower part of his face. Knowing that he had no real reason to be afraid, she reassured him, "It's alright, Luke. Don't be afraid. Just stay in your room and try to go to sleep. I'll be back to check on you in a while."

"But..."

She lightly shushed him, and brushing his silky hair off his forehead she kissed him. "Just go to sleep and I'll explain everything in the morning."

Before he could protest, Luke watched as Beru picked up her candle and pushed shut the door to his bedroom. Enshrouded in darkness, the boy listened intently for any hints of what was going on in the rooms beyond. His Aunt must've reminded his Uncle Owen that he was trying to sleep because all that Luke could hear were the faint low rumblings of his Uncle's voice that were masked by the howling wind outside.

Exhausted from trying to hear he finally allowed himself to drift off towards sleep, deciding that adult problems meant nothing to him. As his eyelids drooped heavily and he let out one last yawn, Luke desperately tried not to think about the fireworks and presents that all of his friends would be enjoying tomorrow, and that he would not.

Part 2

Owen's livid eyes pierced straight into his uninvited guest's soul. Fists balled against his hips, Owen was not ready to give into this battle without a fight. As he stared at the disheveled man huddled against the far northern wall in his sparsely decorated living room, Owen's cheeks burned, and his heart thundered in his chest from rage.

Speaking barely above a whisper, he seethed, "I warned you never to step foot in my house, again."

"Owen, be reasonable," Truney Guerer advised. The sturdy, gray-haired neighbor woman reached out a timid hand and pressed it onto his broad shoulder. "Donio and I found the poor man wandering in the desert. We couldn't very well leave him out there... not with that sandstorm raging outside. He wouldn't have survived."

"What were you doing out there, old man?" Owen demanded. "Why were you coming here?"

Seven years had not been kind to the object of Owen's rage. Living alone in the arid desert had rapidly aged the former Jedi Master. Ben Kenobi slumped against the cold wall and sighed. Running his fingers through his thinning, gray hair, Ben found himself glad that Anakin's stepbrother had no Force-abilities. Otherwise, he feared that the moisture farmer would have fried him on the spot from his anger.

Softly, Ben stated, "It seemed like a good night for a walk. Apparently, I was wrong."

At that moment, a frazzled Beru entered the room. Narrowing her eyes at her husband, she scolded, "Keep your voice down, Owen Lars. Luke's trying to sleep."

Ignoring his confused neighbors, Owen spat to Beru, "He must've been out there on purpose. He knows that he's not allowed here."

"I do promise you, Owen, that it was not my intention to come here and interrupt your evening. It was as I said, I was out for a walk and got stuck unexpectedly in the storm," Ben coolly replied, never lowering his even eyes from Owen's smoldering glare.

Swaggering towards the former Jedi Knight, Owen ignored Ben's thin excuse and demanded, "I assume

you'll want a bed for the evening, won't you? Guess what? This isn't exactly a luxury hotel you've been dropped off at. We don't HAVE a bed for you."

"Well then I guess that settles it. My presence is obviously creating a problem here. I will go. Again, I apologize for disrupting your evening," he stated. Pulling his hood over his head, Ben made towards the door.

Outside the wind shrieked in fury. Beru charged across the room and physically barred Ben's exit with her body. She defiantly planted her fists on her hips. Glaring at her husband, she ordered, "He's not going anywhere. He will certainly be killed if he leaves."

Under his breath, Owen muttered, "Could I only hope?"

"What?" Beru demanded.

"Nothing." Owen studied Ben's form. Enshrouded in his ancient Jedi robes Ben outwardly looked the same as he did when he arrived on their doorstep over seven years ago. As he stared into the old man's eyes he couldn't tell if Ben was lying or not. It all just seemed too convenient that he happened to be delivered on his doorstep.

Owen jumped as Beru came up to his side and advised, "I know you wouldn't want his death weighing on your conscious."

Grimacing, Owen caved. "Fine. He can sleep in the workshop, on the floor."

"That's fine. I'm sure I will be quite comfortable. Thank you," Ben replied, flashing a soft smile in the couple's direction.

Owen approached his uninvited guest and stood nose to nose with him. In a low voice, he menacingly warned, "Don't even think of going near him. I want you gone before dawn."

Green eyes sparkling, Ben bowed his head and agreed, "You won't even know that I had been here. Thank you."

Growling at Ben's jovial responses, Owen cocked his head towards the door. "Come on, Donio, let's go fix the coil before we all freeze to our deaths."

The shorter man flashed an uncertain, frightened look in Beru's direction. She nodded and he fled from the house after Owen.

Beru's shoulders sagged with relief. Truney quickly apologized, "I'm so sorry, Beru. I wasn't aware there was bad blood between you all. We would've taken him back to our house had we known..."

"Don't worry about it. That's just Owen being Owen," Beru dismissively replied. "I need to make the beds for everyone."

"I'll help you," Truney offered.

"No, I'm fine. Just relax and try to stay warm," Beru hospitably said.

“Well, I don’t much like sitting on my duff and doing nothing. So I think I’ll go make some hot tea for everyone. The men will need it when they come back in,” Truney advised, and quickly headed towards the kitchen leaving Beru alone with Ben.

“I apologize for how he treated you,” Beru remarked to the former Jedi Master.

“It’s alright. I deserve every bit of his anger,” Ben admitted as he followed Beru towards a closet where she extracted a pile of freshly scented, neatly cleaned sheets and blankets. He held out his arms and took them from the compassionate woman.

“No, you don’t. Ben, you don’t understand it but Luke’s the best thing that’s ever happened to us. He’s such a sweet, wonderful young boy. He’s a spot of joy in our otherwise normally dull lives,” Beru reported, as she headed towards their one extra guest room and together they changed the sheets for the Guerer’s bed.

“How does he like living here?” Ben carefully asked, taking full advantage of the little time available to him in order to learn as much about the boy as possible. He knew this reunion would be brief.

“As long as we get him to town to play with his friends often enough, I think he’s content. His best friend, Biggs, is a wonderful boy - he looks out for Luke - rather like a big brother. Luke’s very adventurous, likes to get into trouble...he’s a typical boy,” Beru explained as she shook a new covering over a pillow.

“Does he get angry?”

Flopping the pillow onto a chair, Beru tucked in the sheets and said, “Not really. Don’t get me wrong, he throws tantrums and he whines when he doesn’t get his way, but there’s nothing malicious or evil about him. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Ben exhaled a deep sigh of relief. Over the years, he had tracked Luke’s progress, from afar. But just hearing Beru confirm his suspicions was a weight off of his shoulders. “That’s good to hear.”

Patting down two blankets into place, Beru snuck a glance in her companion’s direction. Much like they looked on that fateful night so many years ago, Ben’s eyes were haunted and filled with regret and pain. She knew that Owen’s enforced separation from him and Luke was hard on the older man. Unlike her unforgiving husband, she understood that Ben Kenobi wanted nothing but the best for her young charge and would never hurt the boy. Turning around, she plopped down upon the bed. She asked, “He would’ve been a Jedi apprentice by now, wouldn’t he?”

Tucking his robe around his body, Ben sat on the corner of the bed and nodded his head, “Yes. We would’ve started training him practically from birth. That’s how it used to work at least.” That far away, wounded look crossed over his features again. “That seems to be so long ago.”

“Times have changed so much that most people don’t even remember the past anymore. Things will never be the same again,” Beru stated. Drooping her neck, she commented, “Luke’s upset because Owen won’t let him celebrate Emperor’s Day.”

Ben snorted. “Emperor’s Day. Well, there’s something that both your husband and I agree upon.”

“Luke feels left out though, because all of his friends celebrate it. Biggs’s family often invites him to join in their festive gatherings, but Owen never lets him go. Luke’s too young to understand the meaning of the holiday. He just thinks he’s being punished for something and not being allowed to have any fun,” Beru stated. “I don’t know what to do to try and get Owen to relent on his strict ways, Luke needs to feel that he belongs. He already feels like an outsider because he doesn’t live with his parents.”

Ben winced as the words pierced his heart. “Well, you do know that Emperor’s Day used to be Life Day. It’s amazing how that even in a few short years the true meanings of celebrations can get lost,” Ben disclosed. “Life Day used to be a time set aside to celebrate the joyous, natural bounty provided to all by the Force. Now it is nothing more than an empty, soulless day set aside for commercialism and honoring a false leader.”

“Owen still wouldn’t go for celebrating Life Day,” Beru guessed.

“No, I don’t suppose he would. He hates the Jedi as much as he despises the Emperor. I can’t really fault him on either point,” Ben mentioned. “However, maybe you can find ways to help Luke to celebrate the day without Owen being aware.”

Reaching into his pocket, Ben extracted an object. His fingers massaged the rectangular, cool item. Every ridge and crease of the small piece was caked in his own culpability. He loathed looking at it, and for what it represented. Even all these years later, his conscious refused to allow him to get rid of the shameful object. Although it was inanimate, it burned his soul every time his skin came in contact with it. For years he had carried it around as a piece of baggage for his never-ending guilt trip. For as much as Owen hated Ben, he loathed himself a thousand times more.

Trying to release himself some from his responsibility, he handed the item to Beru. He said, “It’s not much of a gift, but maybe you could give that to Luke tomorrow.”

As she stared at it she felt a shiver run up and down her spine, “Did it...”

“Yes, it did. Feel free to tell him whatever you want. But he should own something tangible that belonged to him...to them,” Ben explained. “Luke’s old enough now. He won’t lose it.”

Nodding, Beru slipped it into her pocket. Tears welled along her lower lids, knowing how much Luke positively lit up at just the slightest mention of the man they all feared and of whom he knew no better than to adore. “No, he won’t lose it,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

“There is one other thing. Tomorrow evening, take Luke outdoors just before dusk and let him look towards the southeastern sky,” Ben suggested.

“Ok,” Beru blindly agreed. Hearing the familiar hum of electricity surging through the walls again, and seeing the lights flicker back on, Beru knew it was time to settle Ben away for the evening. Standing up, she handed him a couple of blankets and a pillow and guided him towards the back of the house. The workshop was already quite cooler than the rest of the home, but she knew that it would warm up now that the heater was back on. “There’s a chaise over there that you can sleep on. Luke naps on it all of the time...it’s pretty comfortable.”

“Thank you, Beru. You are most generous,” Ben commented and watched her bow her head and run out of the room. Calmly, Ben inhaled the acrid stench of engine oil that permeated the room. Placing the pile of blankets on the chaise, he wrapped his robes tighter around himself and gazed around his quarters. Piles of half worked on electronic trinkets lay on various tables.

He shivered. Something wasn't right about the rounded room. Ben stared at the control panel for an oil bath and reaching out a chilled finger, he touched the shifter switch that would activate the mechanism.

The shifter broke. I used to be good at fixing things. Life's always so much simpler when you're fixing things. Why'd she have to die?

Ben's mouth opened in a gasp. He had completely forgotten that Anakin had been here before. His former Padawan's soul had imprinted itself into the very walls of this place. In his mind's eye, he could clearly see Anakin - proud, yet broken - full of rage, and pain. Bits of Anakin's tantrum and rampage sifted through his mind, *It's all Obi-Wan's fault, he's jealous, he's holding me BACK!...I killed them all, and not just the men, but the women and the children too. They're dead, every single one of them. And I HATE them!*

Knees collapsing, the former Jedi Master slumped to the floor, quivering. If Owen had hoped that by sending Ben to this room that he would view it as punishment, the moisture farmer had succeeded in spades. With the floodgates wide open, other images relentlessly and hatefully pounded Ben's mind, visions of lava and lightsabers crashing...visions of his ultimate failure. They all had their beginnings here.

How could he have known? Or better asked how could he *not* have known? He, more than anyone, should've known Anakin better than all others in the Jedi Order. He had failed to understand the warning signs. Or perhaps he had conveniently, and arrogantly, chose to ignore them.

Covering his face with his large palms, Ben shook his head. His eyes were wet with tears. Every single day of his life since that fateful day, he had traveled on this endless merry-go-round of remorse. What could he have done to change things? Was there anything he could've done? Was it because Anakin had started the program too late in life? Or had his soul just been flawed?

He's jealous, he's holding me BACK!

Ben didn't know, nor did he ever come up with an answer to fully satisfy his insatiable need to continually feed his festering shame.

Across the room he spied a model T-16 Skyhopper. The toy must belong to Luke.

Luke, conceived and born in secrecy, was the child of light...The Galaxy's only remaining hope...their gift.

Luke was Anakin's one great success, and he didn't even know it.

Stretching out with his feelings, Ben could sense that Beru was checking on her nephew who peacefully slept in his small bedroom down the hall. The boy was plenty loved even if that love came from surrogates. In the harsh deserts of this planet, Ben knew that Luke would grow up safe. And from this simple lifestyle, he would never learn of greed, or arrogance. Hard work would sculpt him into a

fine man. For all that Owen appeared callous or unfeeling, it was his stern demeanor that gave Ben comfort and allowed him to sleep at night. Owen's strong, no-nonsense paternal presence would help to mold Luke into a man of honor and courage.

At least that was what he and Yoda were counting on happening.

Years ago, Luke would've been trained early on to develop his Jedi skills. After the great purge, times had changed and necessity required that he remain hidden. Ben Kenobi understood that whenever Luke would eventually tap into his bottomless wells of Jedi potential that he would light up the Force like a beacon. The Emperor would learn of his existence and Luke would relentlessly be pursued.

Right now, Ben couldn't allow that happen. Luke was too young, too impressionable, and too needy.

Rather like his father.

He must remain ignorant of his future.

He must...otherwise all of their careful planning would've been for nothing. He cannot succumb...he cannot become...

Ben closed his eyes and shuddered out a deep breath.

His failure. *Vader*.

He couldn't...wouldn't allow that to happen to this boy. He owed it to his old friend to see to it that Luke was raised well, and to pick up the torch that the Jedi of old once had believed that Anakin was supposed to have carried. One day, Luke would correct the wrongs made in time and set everything right. Of course the future remained clouded, and even Yoda was uncertain of how everything would eventually pan out. Ben could only believe that it was the will of the Force for Luke to eventually succeed.

He must. It was his destiny. He hoped.

Launching to his feet, Ben moved over the chaise and curled up under the blankets. Sleep did not come to him, but he was able to gather a bit of his strength. Then in the dead of night, as the wind still raged outside, and the Lars and Guerers soundlessly slept in their beds, Ben unloaded a bag that he had been carrying into the coolerator. He then vacated the homestead and was immediately swallowed up by the all encompassing sandstorm.

Part 3

Owen woke up, dressed, and prepared himself for battle. Certain that Kenobi would still be lounging in his house, he debated between grabbing his blaster rifle or not. When he entered the workshop, he found it empty. The only evidence that anyone had ever even been there was a pile of neatly folded blankets sitting in the middle of the chaise lounge.

He grunted happily. As he passed by the window he snuck a glance outside and saw that the sandstorm had not lifted yet. He couldn't see more than ten feet beyond the window.

Unexpectedly, his gut writhed with guilt. He'd shamed the old man into leaving while the storm still waged on outdoors. Shaking his head, he wandered into his living room and dropped onto his couch. Things never seemed to go the way he wanted them to. He had been a happy boy when his father, Cliegg had married Shmi. Shmi Skywalker was a kind, good-natured woman, and had adored them both. Although she loved her new family, and her freedom from slavery, she always loved her precious, absent son more.

Growing up all he ever heard about was Ani this, and Anakin that. With the way Shmi carried on about her son, Owen grew to believe he was nearly god-like in his goodness. He knew that she secretly had wished for him to return to her at least one more time, and learn how he was doing as a Jedi. Anakin coldly never even bothered to contact his own mother. That fact triggered a kernel of doubt in Owen's mind about her son's disposition. Every day that Anakin maintained his silence, Owen had observed that a bit of his stepmother's soul had died.

When he finally did show up, Owen believed that his step-brother was everything that Shmi had puffed him up to be. In those impressive dark robes he was proud, strong, and regal in his appearance...a man. Just standing in the same space as him, breathing his same air, made Owen feel small, simple, and unimportant.

Then he came back with Shmi's body. After burying his mother, Anakin and Luke's the woman... Luke's mother...left without a word in his direction. Owen might as well not have even existed in Anakin's eyes. Owen hated him for his dismissive arrogance.

Rumors began to circulate of a destroyed Sand People's village. The remains looked as though a cyclone had descended upon the nomadic city and offered immediate damning judgment upon their sins. He had traveled to the ruins to view them for himself. While peering through the carnage, Owen detected scorch marks, lightsaber wounds on the dismembered victims. Somehow, Anakin had single-handedly killed them all...so much for Shmi's son being sweet and perfect.

When Obi-Wan Kenobi arrived upon his doorstep three years later delivering Anakin's son, Owen knew who the boy needed to be hidden from...and it wasn't the Emperor.

He hated Kenobi and all of the Jedi for turning Shmi's son into a murderer, and for soiling Shmi's memory of her angelic child.

Every time he stared at his nephew, he worried about his blood. Luke was a gentle and sweet kid and was relentless in his pursuit of knowledge about his father. Every question cut Owen like a double-edged sword. He invented lies to cover up Anakin's atrocities. He focused on the stories Shmi used to repeat, and nearly for her sake as much as Luke's, he tried to eradicate Anakin's sins from his memory.

He hated every single untruthful word. With each lie, Luke's hero-worship for his "dead" father grew until, like Shmi, he believed his father to be beyond reproach, a perfect angel. As much as he hated saying those things, one look in Luke's hopeful eyes was enough to convince him to continue with the charade.

Owen feared the day that Luke would find out the truth about his old man. Facing that day ultimately terrified him to no end.

And nothing frightened Owen Lars...nothing.

Luke's eyes snapped open and his stomach rumbled as he inhaled the rich aroma of dewback shanks that permeated the air. Throwing off his covers and jumping into his slippers, he dashed towards the kitchen. They never had dewback shanks unless it was a special day. He victoriously thought, *Maybe Uncle Owen changed his mind and they were going to celebrate Emperor's Day after all!*

Skidding to a stop just outside the kitchen walls he spied Beru and Truney working on putting together breakfast for everyone. He heard Beru whisper, "I don't know. It was all just in the coolerator this morning."

"The old man did have a bag with him when we picked him up. Maybe he brought all of this food?" Truney offered.

A sly smile spread across Beru's lips, as she recalled Ben saying something to her about making the day special for Luke one way or another. Shaking her head, she replied, "Must've been him then. What a wonderful surprise he left us all."

"Are you sure it's safe to eat?" Truney cautioned, eyes wide with worry.

"Yes, old Ben would never hurt us," Beru advised as she pounded together some flatbread.

Forgetting that he was snooping, Luke excitedly demanded, "Ben's here? Where is he?"

Wanting to slap herself for letting that slip, Beru looked at her nephew and reported, "He stopped by late last night. But he's gone now."

Furrowing his brows in confusion, Luke listened to the wind howl outside. "But it's still storming out. He couldn't have left in that."

"He did, Luke. He's not here."

Shoulders slumping, Luke's frown deepened. He moaned, "He didn't even want to say hello to me."

"You were sleeping, Luke. He didn't wish to disturb you. Now go set the table, breakfast is almost ready," Beru advised, hoping to divert his attention.

Shuffling his feet, Luke pulled out plates and utensils and dragged them out towards their large table. Owen and Donio had their heads together and were complaining about the weather as Luke set out the dishes. As he passed by his uncle, Owen deposited his hand on top of Luke's head and affectionately ruffled his blond hair. Blushing, Luke sheepishly dropped his chin, lowered his eyes, and grinned. Heading back into the kitchen he grabbed a pitcher of blue milk and a tower of glasses and delivered them to the table. Climbing into his chair, Truney and Beru then delivered plate after plate of food. Luke drooled at the dewback shanks, but his eyes nearly popped out of his head when he spied the pile

of luscious, fresh, chopped up pallenberries sitting in a bowl.

Owen spied them at the same instance and he demanded, "Where did those come from?"

Sensing that another icy argument might be forming if Owen learned who had provided them the food, Truney interjected, "They're from Donio and I. A vendor in Mos Eisely had them and I just couldn't resist." She silenced any confused questions from her husband with a glare.

"That's a bit extravagant of a purchase you made there," Owen judged, as he watched Beru divide the precious fruit onto Luke's plate, and then offered it to the Guerer's before taking any for herself. Luke attacked a large dewback shank and wrestled it to his plate. The bounty of food helped him to immediately forget the absence of Ben Kenobi, who upon the few occasions when they met would entertain him with the most fascinating stories. Digging into his food like a famished rancor, Luke only came up for air to take a deep swallow of milk.

The adults watched him with guarded amusement. Owen sarcastically commented, "Honest, we don't starve the boy."

Suddenly realizing all eyes were upon him, Luke shamefacedly peered up and then emitted a giant belch. The adults laughed and Luke's cheeks burned in embarrassment.

"He's got a good appetite," Donio stated.

After savoring every bite, they cleared off the table and retreated to the living room to relax. Beru sent Luke off to his room to shower and dress. Full of food and happy to have no chores to do, thanks to the nasty weather outside, Luke dashed back into the room carrying an electronic game. His uncle patted on a table near him, indicating to Luke to bring over the toy, and the three males spent the afternoon playing.

As the day wore on, Beru and Truney began fixing their evening meal utilizing breakfast leftovers to make a thick, hearty stew. Seizing the opportunity, Beru also made a large cake. As the women worked they sang folk-songs, their voices filling the house with cheer. Beru would occasionally check in on the men and by mid-afternoon realized that the storm had passed outdoors. Brilliant sunlight flooded the house, bathing them all in the suns glowing radiance. The males seemed completely unaware that the sandstorm had ended and continued to duke it out over the game. A sly grin formed on Beru's face and she could only hope that Owen wouldn't realize that he could go outside and survey any damage from the foul weather. It was rare for him to spend any quality time with Luke. She couldn't help but think that playtime together was every bit as important as hard work.

By the time Owen noticed that the storm had passed, dinner was ready. With the suns out again, Beru turned off the heat in the house to conserve energy, and relit her candles to illuminate the dining room. Cheery and pleasant conversation infused the room, and was punctuated by brief moments of titillating laughter. It wasn't until dessert came around that Owen finally realized what Beru had done. Without saying a word, she'd managed to incorporate several of the elements that families usually participated in while celebrating Emperor's Day.

Sensing Owen's disapproving stare, Beru raised her glass to her lips to hide a small, satisfied grin that spread across her face. After dessert, Truney and Donio packed up and left for home with several containers of food. Living in the desert, gifts of food, conversation, and spare mechanical parts were as

important as any useless trinkets that could be purchased from street vendors. As the Lars family walked outside and waved the Guerers goodbye, Owen flashed his wife a defeated roll of the eyes and trudged out across to check out any damages made to the vaporators before the suns set for the evening.

Placing her hand on Luke's shoulder, Beru advised, "Why don't we go make sure that Grandma Shmi and Grandpa Cliegg's grave stones didn't get covered up in the sandstorm."

"Ok," Luke agreed and raced off to retrieve a broom. When they approached the four gravestones, Luke carefully brushed aside all excess sand that had welled along the bases of the markers. Hoping that they were clear enough, he turned his imploring eyes towards his Aunt seeking approval.

She smiled softly. "They look great, Luke. Now come here, I have something for you."

In a low whisper he asked, "Is it an Emperor's Day gift?"

"I suppose you could call it that. Just don't tell your uncle," Beru conspiringly said.

Gleefully, Luke promised, "I won't! I swear."

Kneeling down on the sand by Shmi's grave, Beru waited while her anxious nephew settled down at her side. Her eyes fluttered to Shmi's gravestone, it seemed to be the most fitting place to give Luke his gift. Staring back at him, she saw that his lower lip was quivering. "What's the matter, Luke?"

"I don't have anything for you," he moaned.

She felt her heart break wide open. "Oh, honey, you give me so much everyday. You bring immeasurable joy and happiness into my life - every time you smile. And each time you help with your chores or when you do things when you aren't even asked, those are your gifts that you provide for me all year round. I do not need anything else from you."

Beru saw his cheeks deepen crimson under the praise. Smiling, she asked him to cup his hands. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly as she dropped the item into his waiting palms.

When he opened them, he stared at the object with confusion. It was rectangular, off-white, and covered with carved markings. "What is it?" he wondered.

As if willed by the Force, and unaware that every word she said was entirely accurate, she explained, "That is made from a fossilized shell called a Japor Snippet. Your father made it for your mother. It is normally worn as a necklace, but as you can see the hole has been damaged."

Goosebumps traveled down Luke's arms, and tears flowed from his eyes. "This belonged to my parents?" he whispered, not believing his good fortune.

Running her fingers through his downy, sun-bleached hair, Beru fought down an emotional knot in her throat as she nodded her head.

Clutching it tightly as if it were a precious gem, Luke promised in a voice just above a whisper, "I won't ever lose it."

“I know you won’t, sweetie,” Beru said and threw open her arms as Luke crashed against her, buried his head against her shoulder, and clutched her tightly in a strong embrace. Gently, she rocked him as Tatoo I and Tatoo II descended over the horizon line, christening the barren landscape with fiery streaks of brilliantly painted light. Turning her head towards the southeast, per Ben’s request, a smile stretched across her face. Wiping streaming tears from her eyes, she advised, “Look, Luke.”

Flipping around in her lap and following the sound of a loud boom in the distance, Luke’s jaw dropped with joyous wonder as the southeastern sky suddenly brightened in a glorious display of colorful fireworks.

Following the sounds, Owen approached his family from behind and beheld the manmade spectacle of exploding lights. Shaking his head in defeat, he ordered, “Luke, come here, boy.”

Guiltily, Luke trudged to his feet out of the safety of his aunt’s arms and reluctantly turned his back to the fireworks. Owen flashed him a rare smile, squatted, and said, “Hop on, you’ll see better from my back.”

Beaming, Luke clambered up onto Owen’s back and gazed out across the desert. As each firework brightly lit up the sky, he howled merrily with delight. Together as a family they enjoyed the beauty of the brilliant, fleeting displays of shimmering, twinkling light. As his fist clutched tighter and tighter around his parent’s japor snippet, Luke’s heart nearly exploded from happiness. Never before had he felt so utterly and completely loved.

He would remember this Emperor’s Day, forever.

From across the Jundland Wastes, a broad smile stretched across the old man’s lips. He could feel Luke’s joy beaming like a beacon in the Force.

Knowing these happy moments for Luke were fleeting, and standing over the large pile of rockets, Ben placed another into the launcher and sent the blazing firework up into the barren sky.

The rocket exploded, showering him with twinkling, purple stars. Smiling, Ben whispered, “Happy Life Day, Luke.”

The End
