

IN THE YEARS BEFORE
STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .

STAR WARS®



BLOODLINE

CLAUDIA GRAY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE FORCE AWAKENS

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away....

An entire generation has prospered during an era of peace. The New Republic, governed by the Galactic Senate, has held power for more than two decades. The wars that divided the galaxy are fading into legend.

Yet conflict has begun to take shape within the Senate. In the absence of MON MOTHMA, former leader of the Rebellion and first chancellor of the New Republic, two unofficial but powerful factions have formed—the POPULISTS, who believe individual planets should retain almost all authority, and the CENTRISTS, who favor a stronger galactic government and a more powerful military.

Only the greatest heroes of the war are still honored by all. A ceremony honoring the memory of BAIL ORGANA has drawn the Senate together in rare harmony. It is a day of celebration, but even now, the divisions among the worlds of the galaxy are growing wider....

CHAPTER ONE

“When we look back upon the war against the Empire—upon the billions of lives lost—sometimes it seems as though nothing could ever have been worth the terrible price we paid. But when we think of those people who perished in the conflict, let us remember that they died for justice. For liberty. For the extraordinary peace we now enjoy.” Senator Tai-Lin Garr held out his arms, taking in the entire celebration on Hosnian Prime: the brilliant sunshine, the aquamarine sky, the countless citizens of a thousand different species gathered together beneath the colorful flags of their worlds. The beauty and promise of the New Republic seemed to be laid before them all. “*This* is what we fought for.”

Everyone applauded. Many cheered.

Senator Leia Organa clapped along with the rest and thought, *Too bad it’s falling apart.*

To the majority of the observers, most of them among the enormous number of citizens who had traveled to Hosnian Prime for the dedication ceremony and concert, the many senators clustered in the stands would appear to be a sign of solidarity and strength. Planets from the Core Worlds to the Outer Rim were represented; humans wore the cloaks, robes, and ceremonial gear of countless different cultures as they watched the ceremony alongside species from the Aqualish to the Ithorian, from the large-eyed Mon Calamari to the small, woolly Ashaftan, in what looked like perfect unity. Leia’s sharper eyes traced the invisible line between the two halves of the gathering: Centrist senators on one side, Populist senators like herself on the other.

The physical gap couldn't have been measured, but the philosophical one widened every day. Soon that gap would broaden into a crevasse, one deep enough to reveal how fragile the peace really was.

Stop it. Leia forced herself to think positively. Rationally. *Galactic politics has always had its parties, factions, divisions. It always will. Not every ideological conflict leads to a complete governmental breakdown.*

But the unease that stirred just beneath the glossy surface of this ceremony reminded her of the final days of the Imperial Senate. Polite words cloaking implied threats, a near-complete lack of trust among worlds: The mood felt all too familiar.

Then again, the Imperial Senate actually made decisions once in a while. See? History isn't repeating itself after all, she thought sourly.

Leia took pleasure in exactly one aspect of this gathering: the new statue they had come together to dedicate. The seventy-meter-high statue had been carved of Jelucani fogstone, which sparkled transparent as diamond in bright light, then turned a pale, opaque gray-green in darkness. As Tai-Lin finished his speech to applause, a cloud passed in front of the sun. The fogstone's glittering dimmed to reveal the fine detail on the statue of Bail Organa, portrayed in his robes of the office of viceroy of Alderaan and with a hand outstretched toward all peoples, in classic hagiographic form. Yet his face had been as accurately and lovingly carved as the most intimate portrait. Maybe the different senators and planets could agree on little any longer, but at least her father's legacy endured.

Tai-Lin nodded to Leia as his pod hovered back into place; for ceremonial functions, such pods were allowed, though their use in the Senate was now considered "overly hierarchical." His nod served as both an acknowledgment that her turn had come and genuine encouragement. She gave him a quick smile before she pressed the controls that would bring her pod forward from the stands and focus the amplifier droids on her voice. A warm breeze fluttered the dark-blue folds of her cape and gown as Leia stood before the gathering.

"I stand before you not only as a senator, but also as Bail Organa's daughter." Leia's voice rang out, clear and strong, revealing none of the doubts that had haunted her day. "And yet everything I have done in my career as a senator has been rooted in the valuable lessons he taught me about courage. About strength. About leadership."

Leadership was something the Senate badly needed at present. Mon Mothma had remained hugely influential even after her term as chancellor...more so than Leia had realized before Mon Mothma's illness. Without someone able to bridge philosophical gaps and create consensus, the political process they'd forged for the New Republic was showing its weaknesses.

She continued speaking smoothly as the flags flapped in the strong breeze. “He stood as viceroy of Alderaan at the beginning of a dark time for our entire galaxy.” A hush fell over the crowd at the mention of her dead planet’s name. Leia pretended not to notice. Her pod hovered so high above the ground that the hundred thousand people from a thousand species and worlds, vibrant in their individual skins, scales, and furs, were indistinct to her now—a mass of color and noise, hard to connect with. But Leia tried. “He helped Mon Mothma create the Rebel Alliance, even while still fighting valiantly to preserve what little integrity and authority the Imperial Senate had left. I have no doubt that he would have continued the battle alongside our rebel soldiers if he had not so cruelly been taken from us in the destruction of my homeworld.”

She continued, “It was my privilege to know him as both a leader and a father. As proud as I am to think of his courageous stand against Palpatine’s tyranny, I also smile every time I remember how he used to get down on the floor to play blocks with his little girl.” Fond laughter rippled through the audience.

Good. She’d woken the crowd, won them over. Time for Leia to say the words her listeners *wouldn’t* want to hear.

“He taught me so much about politics, leadership, and war, but above all he taught me that no price is too great to pay for our ideals. Bail Organa was willing to die if that meant the Empire would fall. He believed in the New Republic we have been able to create, and in the promise of fair, equal government for everyone under the law.” Applause welled up, and Leia paused to let it subside before continuing, “He believed in unity, and he knew that unity came at the cost of compromise. Mon Mothma, one of his earliest and most enduring allies, shared those convictions and let them guide her leadership of the Senate. She wanted the worlds of the New Republic to find balance, and to always seek the middle ground where we can work together for a better tomorrow.”

This won more applause, but the sound was muted, now. Populists and Centrists agreed on only one point these days: Compromise was for the weak.

Leia looked at the statue and imagined herself speaking directly to Bail Organa as she concluded. “My father gave us one legacy more precious than any other—a galactic peace. All of us here today have inherited the responsibility to preserve that peace from this day forward. Only by doing so can we truly honor and remember him.”

Applause and cheers welled up, deafeningly loud, in a display of enthusiasm greater than any Leia had seen in a long time. Had people actually heard her message? Did they understand how fragile peace had become? Would they now urge their senators to overcome their endless petty bickering and finally give the galaxy the leadership it deserved?

Then she heard the high, silvery sound of X-wing fighters overhead. The military air show had begun. *That* was why the crowds were cheering. They hadn't heard her last words at all.

That was...a disappointment. But not a surprise.

As the X-wings split into a dramatic new formation, Leia sighed and hit the control that would levitate her pod back into the senatorial stands. If nobody was listening, she might as well enjoy the show.

—

"You're such a pessimist, Leia," Senator Varish Vicly insisted after the ceremony, as various leaders milled around the base of the glittering statue of Bail Organa. Like all Lonerans, Varish had long, silky fur the color of gold and a quartet of thin, extended limbs that allowed her to walk on two feet or all fours with equal ease. Now she ambled along on only two, the better to keep waving and shaking hands. "Of course people cheered for the air show! X-wing maneuvers are more exciting than the best speech ever made."

Leia tucked a stray lock of hair back into her one long braid. "I just wish we could get people to listen."

"Look at it this way." Varish's golden fur fluttered in the breeze, and her long, narrow face split in a wide smile for someone waving in the distance. "People love the X-wing pilots because they think of them as the great fighters of the Rebellion. See? People haven't forgotten the war. It's just that it was all so very long ago."

"I suppose it was." Leia remembered sitting in the Senate as a fourteen-year-old junior legislator and feeling sure she was the youngest person among all those thousands; these days, she sometimes felt like the oldest. The war had taken a toll on her generation, culling so many who would otherwise have gone on to lead. Among the crowds and the Senate itself were many who hadn't even been born when the Battle of Endor was fought.

Leia ought to have felt that her obsolescence stood as a badge of honor. The populace couldn't have become so complacent without decades of relative peace, which had been given to them by the New Republic. But she couldn't relax. Couldn't stop worrying. That was what happened when someone grew up on the run, under siege, always expecting capture or death at any moment. Paranoia became the only way of seeing the world, unable to ever be fully set aside.

"Come, now. If you don't cheer up before dinner, I'll seat you next to Count Jogurner, see if I won't...oh, Feleen, over here!" Varish squeezed Leia's arm once before darting into the crowd to greet yet another of her political friends.

Leia shook her head in fond resignation. Behind her seemingly frivolous interests, Varish Vicly was a person of integrity, as staunch a Populist as Leia herself, and one of the very few senators it was actually fun to spend time with. (Unlike, for instance, Count Jogurner, who meant well but could not converse at length on any subject other than Cheedoan whiskeys.) But she wasn't a good audience for Leia's darker fears.

Nobody wants to hear about the war any longer, Leia told herself. No one wants to be afraid of more chaos and turmoil. Isn't this what I fought for—so they wouldn't have to be afraid?

She scanned the crowd, picking out friend and enemy alike. Tai-Lin Garr, conspicuous in his trademark scarlet cloak, listened gravely to a group of spectators who had apparently come all the way from Tai-Lin's home planet of Gatalenta. His thick black hair was pulled back into a topknot; his dark eyes were thoughtful, even solemn, in a way that did not conflict with the gentle smile on his face. Nearby stood a cluster of Centrist senators fawning over one of their movement's rising stars, a young politician from Riosa named Ransolm Casterfo. Certainly Casterfo cut a dashing figure. He was tall, handsome, charismatic, and only thirty-two years old—an age that had once sounded mature to Leia, and now seemed impossibly young. Too young to have fought in the war, or to have any substance whatsoever, but apparently the Centrists chose their new figureheads by asking themselves who would look best in their propaganda. Leia's mood brightened when, in the far distance, she spied Admiral Ackbar. He'd made the voyage all the way to Hosnian Prime for the ceremony, though he was now in his eighties—but of course he wouldn't have let anything keep him from honoring Bail Organa. Leia began pushing through the throng toward him, hoping for a chance to catch up with someone else who remembered the old days.

"Princess Leia?" The melodious voice calling Leia's name would have sounded alluring to most people. Only Leia's diplomatic training allowed her to keep from cringing. "Princess Leia, if I could have a word?"

Leia managed to put on a convincing smile before she turned. "Lady Carise. What can I do for you?"

Lady Carise Sindian, senator from the Centrist world Arkanis, was of the same generation as Ransolm Casterfo but came across as even younger. Perhaps that impression of immaturity came from Lady Carise's priorities, rather than her lovely face. Her long silvery robes were embroidered with jewels, displaying her world's wealth and power, in a contrast with Leia's simpler and more elegant blue. Lady Carise began, "We must discuss the governorship of Birren. As you know, Lord Mellowyn has passed away—"

"Of course. I was sorry to hear of it." Lord Mellowyn had been a distant kinsman to

Bail Organa. Over the years, Leia had made a few trips to visit him, since Mellowyn had been one of the few people who still remembered her father and had called him friend.

(When she thought of her father, she thought only of Bail Organa. He had been her father in spirit, and surely that was more important than anything else.)

“Well, the governorship passes down through the elder bloodlines—” Lady Carise began, her dark-brown eyes alight at the thought of royal titles. Virtually no one took the concept of hereditary nobility seriously any longer, not even the other members of the Elder Houses. However, Lady Carise seemed unable to imagine any greater honor. “But as Lord Mellowyn had no children, the title has now passed to you.”

Leia covered her mouth as if in surprise. Really she hoped to conceal her dismay. One of the few things she remembered about Birren was that their rituals invariably lasted for several weeks. Birren was a small, sleepy Inner Rim world that might provide an excellent vacation spot...but a frustrating exile for a senator with important work to do. “The title is purely ceremonial now, isn’t it? I can’t imagine that the people of Birren are in any hurry to replace a figurehead governor.”

“But the *title!*” Lady Carise’s eyes widened. Maybe unconsciously, she shook her head—*tsk, tsk*. “How can we deny the people the certainty, the reassurance, of knowing that this ancient tradition is being upheld?”

“I’ll task my staff with looking into this immediately.” This was Leia’s stock escape for official conversations she wanted to end; it sounded official but promised nothing. Lady Carise smiled and nodded as she turned away, satisfied for now.

The X-wings streaked overhead again. Although the air show had ended, the pilots were still showing off, enjoying themselves. For now they required no greater purpose, no sacred duty, only the sheer exhilaration of flight.

How long has it been since I was that carefree? Leia thought. *Was I ever?*

Probably not.

—

The brief window between the ceremony and Varish’s dinner for the Populist senators gave Leia no chance to relax. Instead, she needed to meet with her staff. Fortunately, there she could at least count on rational conversation.

Mostly.

“What a marvelous celebration!” C-3PO shuffled through the broad oval of Leia’s state office. Afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows, gilding the white-on-white furnishings; the droid’s golden metal plating shone as though he were new.

“Such an illustrious gathering. I daresay everyone in attendance will share the memory with their grandchildren someday.”

“Never imagined this,” Han had murmured, sitting up in their bed late at night, Ben’s tiny head resting in the crook of his father’s arm. “Having a kid. Even wanting a kid. But now he’s here, and—”

“And you’re a dad.” Leia had leaned closer, unable to resist the chance to tease her husband. “Just think, hotshot. Someday you might even be a granddad.”

Han’s chuckle had warmed her. “Speak for yourself, sweetheart. Me, I ain’t ever getting that old.”

“Princess Leia?”

Leia snapped out of her reverie, back into the here and now. “I apologize, Greer. It’s been a long day. You were saying?”

Greer Sonnel, Leia’s assistant, continued as smoothly as if her boss had not just spent several seconds lost in thought. “You’ve been invited to the reception for Senator Bevicard on Coruscant, which I said you would consider. Shall I refuse immediately or tomorrow?”

“Give it until tomorrow.” It didn’t do to become too predictable.

Greer nodded, her fingers dexterously working on her datapad. Her thick, blue-black hair had been tucked into a simple bun, and the coarsely woven shawl she wore over her bodysuit came from her rugged homeworld of Pamarthe. Greer preferred the plain and practical, always; Leia knew she was finding her transition to work in the Senate difficult, probably because there was so much formality and even more nonsense. However, Greer had always risen to a challenge, and she had sharpened her diplomatic skills in the past several months. “Shall I refuse with ordinary politeness or extra courtesy?”

“Extra, I think. Honesty deserves courtesy. Bevicard’s a snake, but he doesn’t lie about what he is.” Leia shook her head ruefully. “That’s about as much as you can expect from a Centrist these days.”

“But—” Korr Sella—Sondiv’s daughter and the office intern, only sixteen years old—caught herself and shrank back. “Excuse me, Princess Leia. I spoke out of turn.”

“You’ll find I’m not a stickler for protocol, Korrie.” From the corner of her eye, Leia saw C-3PO swiveling his torso toward her, no doubt appalled to think of anyone, anywhere, ignoring protocol. “What is it you were going to say?”

At first the girl looked so stricken that Leia feared she’d put her in an awkward position. Before she could withdraw her question, however, Korrie found her courage. “I was going to say, shouldn’t you accept the invitation? To help build friendships and consensus between Centrists and Populists?”

“In an ideal galaxy, yes. Unfortunately, that’s not the galaxy we live in.” Leia sounded so jaded she even disgusted herself. More gently, she said, “The invitation was symbolic, not genuine. If I actually accepted, Bevicard would be mortified.”

Korrie nodded, but her expression remained uneasy. “Are the two parties really that far apart?”

Leia leaned back in her chair, rubbing her sore neck. If only Varish weren’t hosting a banquet tonight, so she could let down her hair. “I’m afraid they really are.”

“Oh.” Korrie bowed her head, but not before Leia caught a glimpse of the girl’s confusion and dismay.

I was that young, once. I believed so strongly in the power of government to accomplish anything. Leia had joined the Imperial Senate at fourteen; she hadn’t completely given up on the rule of law in the Empire until the moment she saw Alderaan die in front of her eyes. *How I miss that feeling—the sense that justice would always win in the end.*

“I’ve prepared a statement on the dedication for us to send to the planetary news services. You can take a look and let me know what edits you’d like, if any.” Greer tapped her datapad, sending the document to Leia. There was no need. Leia knew exactly what it would say, just as she knew the precise, subtle shades of spin the Centrist senators would put on their own statements. “That more or less wraps up our business for this afternoon, Princess Leia. You have another hour before Senator Vicly’s banquet. What would you like to do next?”

Leia realized the answer only moments before it came out of her mouth. “I want to quit.”

Korrie frowned. Greer paused before she said, “I beg your pardon, ma’am? You want to quit—having this meeting, or—”

“I want to leave the Senate. To leave government completely.” An exhilarating, unfamiliar sensation blossomed within Leia. Maybe this was what freedom felt like. “*I want to quit.*”

CHAPTER TWO

Han said, “Now, this I gotta hear.”

The uplink between Hosnian Prime and the Theron system was clear tonight: no static, no delays. Leia could see her husband’s face clearly, and behind him the broad window of his temporary quarters on Theron. His gray jacket lay across a nearby chair, and the amber liquid in a slender glass on the table was most likely Corellian brandy. Small, darting lights in the night sky behind Han were no doubt podracers getting some practice weaving in and out of the planet’s famous spiral stone formations.

None of that mattered compared with the sight of Han’s smile. Despite the skeptical tone of his voice, Leia recognized the light in his eyes.

“The Senate is turning into a political quagmire.” She folded her legs beneath her on the sofa and began unbraiding her hair, a lengthy process she had always found calming. “And it’s our own fault. After Palpatine, nobody wanted to hand over that much power again, so we don’t have an executive, only a chancellor with no real authority. Mon Mothma got things done through sheer charisma, but almost every chancellor since her has been...”

Han finished the sentence for her: “Useless.”

“Pretty much.” At the time, Leia had been grateful for Mon Mothma’s leadership, but now she realized that one individual’s ability had disguised the fundamental flaws in the New Republic’s system. If Mon Mothma had stepped aside earlier, might they

have realized their errors? Amended the constitution in time? At this late date, it was impossible to know. “The conflict between the parties gets worse every day. Most Centrists and Populists are still polite to each other, but barely. Every debate on the Senate floor turns into an endless argument over ‘tone’ or ‘form’ and never about issues of substance—”

Han kept nodding, but his eyes were starting to glaze over. By this point in their marriage, Leia could predict down to the nanosecond when Han’s patience for all things political would run out.

Now, finally, she was just as sick of it as he was.

“So why shouldn’t I quit?” Leia loosed the final strands of her long hair, allowing it to tumble free to her waist. “Nothing keeps me from resigning in the middle of my term. I could announce that I’m stepping down sometime in the next few weeks, which would give me time to tie up loose ends before an interim election has been called. Greer already agreed to draft an announcement—well, she kept calling it a ‘hypothetical’ announcement. She doesn’t think I’ll actually follow through.”

“Neither do I,” said Han, not unkindly. “Listen, Leia, I never understood exactly what you got out of politics, but you must get *something* out of it, because it’s been your whole life.”

“Since I was fourteen.” As a girl she had been so proud to represent Alderaan. So impatient for her chance to do something meaningful. Why hadn’t she taken a little more time to simply be a kid? Even princesses could have fun sometimes—her mother had tried to tell her that, from time to time, but Leia had never listened—

Han continued, “You’ve been fed up with the Senate before. I’ve heard you gripe about factions and deadlock a thousand times. But it’s not like you to give up.”

“This isn’t giving up. It’s just...facing facts.” Leia sighed as she took up her hairbrush and began working out the few tangles at the ends. By now a few strands of steely gray shone in her brown hair. “I can’t do this forever, Han. Eventually my time in the Senate has to come to an end. Why not now?”

Han’s face filled more of the screen as he leaned forward, perhaps to study her expression. Although he still looked skeptical, she could tell he had begun to play with the idea in his mind. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but—what would you do with yourself?”

It was a fair question. Leia had given so much of her life to the Rebellion and then the New Republic that even she had sometimes wondered whether she had anything left.

But she did, of course.

“I’ve been thinking.” She pretended to mull the question over. “What if I decided to

go flying around the galaxy with some scoundrel?”

Han raised his eyebrows and pointed toward his own chest.

Leia laughed. “Unless you had another scoundrel in mind.”

“Hey, hey. I’m the only scoundrel up for the job.” He shook his head in—surprise? Disbelief? Leia wasn’t sure. What mattered most was the warmth in his smile. Even if Han wasn’t convinced she intended to do this, he liked the idea.

Down deep, buried where she could almost ignore the fear, Leia hadn’t been sure he would.

They’d been apart too often in their marriage. Too long. Han’s restlessness had been a large part of that, but he couldn’t take all of the blame. Leia had remained stuck here, mired in the political muck. Now she could finally do her part to change things for them.

“You really think you’d enjoy the life of a racer?” Han asked. “Bouncing around from one system to the next, working on ships, never knowing where you’re headed next?”

“Doesn’t sound that different from being a member of the Rebel Alliance.”

“Maybe not,” Han conceded with a tilt of his head. “Still, it’s a pretty wild ride. You sure you’re ready?”

This was something of an exaggeration. Han often raced for charity, and he was as likely to sponsor a match as he was to compete in one. He’d traveled to Theron to oversee the prestigious piloting championships known as the Five Sabers, which tested skills on everything from starfighter atmospheric runs to hyperspace orienteering. In other words: Han Solo was in charge of *enforcing the rules*. Although he ran his shipping company on the go, he was a far more vigilant, responsible owner than he liked to let on. The life he led these days took him all around the galaxy, but it was a far cry from the dangerous existence of a smuggler.

Compared with stagnating in the Senate? Han’s world sounded like *paradise*.

“Freedom and adventure.” She sighed. “Yeah. I’m ready.”

Han studied her for a few moments, then began to grin. “You realize—after three months on the same ship, we’re gonna kill each other.”

Leia leaned closer to the terminal so he would see the wickedness in her smile. “But won’t those three months be fun?”

She was thinking of a sublight run they’d undertaken together early in their marriage, which had begun with a great deal of bickering. However, all that time alone, with no one to interrupt them, had eventually led to much more enjoyable pursuits. Given the timing, she was fairly sure those pursuits had directly led, some

months later, to Ben's birth.

"Oh, we'll have fun." Han brushed his fingers near the holocam, as if he could touch her face. "You better believe it."

The next day, in the Senate, Leia found herself remembering the way Han had said that, turning it over and over in her mind like a young girl daydreaming. Of course she was being ridiculous, and she was rarely so easily distracted while the Senate was in session.

Then again, the Senate gave her very little worth concentrating on, these days.

Clapping from the Centrist benches drew her back into the here and now. Via the console at her position in the broad, flat, and utterly maddening Senate chamber, she could see screen images and holos of Ransolm Casterfo as he bowed to the cheers of his colleagues, ignoring the stoic silence of the Populists. Leia mentally replayed the last few words he'd spoken...yes, he'd been complaining about the number of Populist speakers at the statue-dedication ceremony. In other words, he'd said the exact same thing every other Centrist senator had said so far today, albeit more eloquently. For all their applause, the Centrists were no more interested or engaged than the Populists; they responded by rote. As she scanned the vast chamber and all its representatives from its multiplicity of worlds, Leia thought they looked like a theater audience struggling to endure the last act of a dull play.

"How many Centrist speakers have there been now?" she murmured under her breath to C-3PO, who occasionally accompanied her to record the proceedings—not that there was much worth recording.

"Seventeen, all of whom addressed irregular protocol during the dedication ceremony," C-3PO said with his usual cheer at being able to supply an exact answer. Then he turned his golden head toward her and added, in a lower tone, "I must say, their attention to these points of etiquette seems...excessive."

Leia nearly groaned. *C-3PO* thought they were overdoing protocol? That was a very bad sign.

She touched the small screen in her pod that would show her the order of business for the day, then straightened. For once, the senators would be expected to stop talking and listen.

The speaker droids intoned at once, "Acknowledged on the floor, Yendor of Ryloth, emissary to the Senate."

Leia sat up straighter as Yendor walked in. Tall for a Twi'lek, he made an imposing figure with his long blue lekku hanging from his head down the back of his deep-

brown cloak. Although the Senate floor was more than a hundred meters in front of her, she could see him well thanks to the various screens and holos displaying his image on her console—some in different wavelengths, for those species whose eyes differed greatly from those of humans. She had known Yendor slightly during the war, when he had served as an X-wing pilot. Although Leia doubted they had spoken more than two dozen times, right now the mere sight of someone from the days of battle cheered her.

“To the esteemed representatives of the Galactic Senate, greetings.” Yendor stood tall and straight, despite his advancing years and the long staff he used to steady himself. “The history of my planet and my people is well known. For centuries, we suffered under the oppression of the Hutts and their criminal enterprises. The Empire’s domination doubled our difficulties. Only in the past few decades, in the era of the New Republic, have we been able to assert our own independence and our own rule. Though we stand apart from you, we salute you, and appreciate the peace the New Republic has given to the galaxy.”

Leia applauded, as did many others—both Populists and Centrists. Ryloth was an independent world, apart from the New Republic, and so one that could not be said to belong to either party. Besides, the Hutts had earned bipartisan loathing.

Yendor bowed his head briefly, acknowledging the response, before he continued. “Now, however, our independence is again endangered. The Hutts have lost much of their old power, which means others are rushing in to fill the gap. Of these, the most dangerous are those cartels run by the Niktos.”

“The Niktos served the Hutts for centuries,” C-3PO said to her. Leia understood this perfectly well, but she didn’t waste time interrupting him to say so. She knew the droid well enough to be sure he’d keep talking anyway. “They’ve never had a truly independent government of their own. Hardly even a world of their own, really.”

Then Emissary Yendor’s tone took on a sharper edge. “Among the many promises the New Republic made after Palpatine’s fall was that organized crime would never again become as powerful a force as it had been during the age of the Empire. Financial regulations and comprehensive patrols of the shipping lanes were meant to protect Ryloth and every other world in the galaxy from large-scale criminal corruption. But those regulations are enforced only sporadically, and the patrols have yet to materialize, even though more than twenty years have passed. In that time, the cartels have begun to assert their power again.” Leia felt ashamed for her part in this and hoped others in the Senate did as well. By bickering over the minutiae—who would enforce what, and when, and how—the Senate had once again failed to take the bigger picture into account. Now the price of their inaction had come due, and it would be smaller, poorer worlds like Ryloth that had to pay most dearly. “One cartel

in particular has become a risk to the commercial shipping lanes in our sector,” Yendor continued. “Although our information is incomplete, we believe this criminal organization already rivals that of any of the most powerful Hutts at the zenith of their influence. We know only that our pilots are being raided, that our merchants have been pressured for protection money, and that the cartel is led by a Kajain’sa’Nikto known as Rinnrivin Di, operating at least in part from the planet Bastatha.”

Low murmurs went through certain sections of the Senate chamber, from both parties. *More of us should have heard of this guy*, Leia realized, sitting up straighter. *We should’ve been alerted to a cartel of such size long ago*. But of course nobody had been paying attention to anything that really mattered. Frustration made her clench her jaw.

Yendor held up his hand, both calling for their renewed attention and signaling the end of his address. “Today Rinnrivin’s cartel presents a danger to Ryloth’s future, and to free trade in our part of the galaxy. Tomorrow, however, it could threaten the rule of law in the New Republic itself, as the Hutts did in both the Old Republic and the Empire. Therefore, I ask for the Senate to investigate the reach and influence of Rinnrivin Di’s cartel and to take the actions necessary to restore order, on behalf of the Twi’leks of Ryloth—but for the benefit of us all.”

The silence that followed lasted for only a few seconds...and then the Senate dissolved into an immense amount of talking, and very little listening. Senators jabbed commands into their terminals, and the sorter droids programmed to display viewpoints equally weighted from both parties flashed different ones onto the main screens.

An Ottegan speaking through a vocoder that translated his words into humanlike speech: “How can we be sure the emissary’s information is accurate?”

Senator Giller, an elderly, mustachioed Centrist who still wore his war medals every day: “There have been rumors of Twi’lek criminal enterprises as well! Maybe this is merely an attempt by the Twi’leks to force us to eliminate their rivals!”

Lady Carise Sindian, with a jeweled hairband atop her head: “Senators are not lowly planetary constables to be sent out on every possible minor law enforcement errand. We must think of the dignity of our office. Are we to be reduced to mere investigators?”

Varish Vicly, brushing back her golden fur: “This is an intrasystem matter. Even if the worlds involved belonged to the New Republic, as Ryloth and Bastatha do not, the Senate would be overreaching its authority by interfering.”

Leia found herself remembering the stench of Jabba’s palace, where every breath had smelled of grease and smoke from half a dozen illegal substances. In her mind

flickered the anguishing memory of Han frozen in carbonite, his grimace of pain as hard as stone—the raucous sound of laughter from those watching Luke fight for his life in the rancor’s den—and the heaviness of a metal collar tight around her neck.

Ultimately she had hated Jabba the Hutt nearly as much as she’d hated Emperor Palpatine. But her loathing for Jabba had come to a far more satisfying conclusion.

Leia saw Yendor of Ryloth leaning on his staff and realized, with a jolt, that he was wearier than he’d let on. He’d made this journey across the galaxy to speak to a governing body most Twi’leks still distrusted, all in the hope of changing something for his people. And the best response the Senate could give him was yet more bickering?

Leia felt a galvanizing sense of purpose rush through her as the idea took shape in her mind. Maybe she could do one last bit of good before she resigned and left the government forever.

She rose to her feet, a signal to the moderator droids that a senator urgently wished to take the floor. Senators were not allowed to overuse this privilege, but Leia had not bothered to avail herself of it in months. Almost instantly, the hovering holodroids rushed toward her. From the corner of her eye she could see herself in her long white dress, graying hair roped in its braid down her back. How august and official she looked. How dignified. Nobody would have any reason to expect her to say anything that deviated from the party line.

So it was with great satisfaction that Leia proclaimed, “Honored members of the Senate, it is my opinion that the emissary from Ryloth has brought an important matter to our attention, one that demands further inquiry. Therefore I volunteer to lead the investigation myself...and as such, will leave Hosnian Prime for Bastatha immediately.”

Silence followed—out of what Leia expected was sheer astonishment. How long had it been since somebody in the Senate had stood up and actually offered to do something useful?

Too long, she thought. But damn, it feels good.

CHAPTER THREE

Leia knew her proposal to lead the mission to Bastatha was sensible, useful, and direct.

Obviously, the Senate didn't know what to do with it.

"We could hardly be certain of assuring your safety, Princess Leia," said Lady Carise Sindian, the only senator who called Leia by her royal title, rather than her elected one, while on the Senate floor. "We couldn't put you at risk."

"Have you no faith in the soldiers of the New Republic, Senator Sindian?" This objection actually came from another Centrist, Senator Arbo, one of the war hawks of Coruscant. "Senator Organa will travel with an entire squadron of guards to protect her at all times. Do not doubt their ability or their valor!"

Tai-Lin Garr shook his head. "We could hardly expect Senator Organa's investigation to run smoothly if such a large military presence accompanied her. The people of Bastatha would consider it an intrusion, perhaps even an invasion."

This was the first useful thing someone had said since Leia had volunteered for the mission. Given that the tone of the overall conversation was turning toward safeguarding her trip to Bastatha, rather than objecting to it, she was beginning to feel encouraged despite herself.

And if she'd realized what a charge she would get out of the mere idea of being out in the field—the chance to work with ordinary people instead of politicians, to evaluate a situation for herself without any committees in the way—she would've come up with another potential mission a long time ago. The journey to Bastatha

would be the perfect way to end her career in the Senate: doing something interesting and meaningful again, at last. Then she could walk out with a sense of satisfaction that at least she'd been able to accomplish some real, tangible good before she left.

Who knows? she thought. *Taking on one of the spice cartels—I might even wind up with some stories to rival a few of Han's.* Already she couldn't wait to tell him about this.

However, Lady Carise wasn't done speaking. "The question of this mission's worthiness remains. As others have stated, we have only the testimony of the emissary of Ryloth to go upon. What has been characterized as criminal activity may be no more than the Niktos attempting to rebuild their economy after escaping the influence of the Hutts. Furthermore—and forgive me, but it must be said—such an investigation could not be left to a Populist senator alone. Although Princess Leia is no mere conspiracy theorist, some of those on the Populist benches are determined to see the worst in any larger organization, whether governmental, military, or economic."

"I can be objective," Leia began, but her voice was almost immediately drowned out. Protests bubbled up from the Populist senators, and it was all Leia could do not to groan. Now her own party would keep her from being heard.

C-3PO's gold head swiveled from side to side as he attempted to record the entire debate. "I should have thought the Senate would welcome your generous offer," he said. "Oh, dear."

"'Oh, dear' is right." Leia kept her chin high, determined to wait this out. Now that she'd tasted even the hope of going into action again, she wasn't going to give it up easily.

One of the moderator droids intoned, "The floor is granted to Senator Casterfo of Riosa."

Even as his name was announced, Ransolm Casterfo had already risen to his feet, all the better to look impressive for the holodroids. The dark-green velvet cloak he wore testified to his wealth and privilege. Leia wondered sourly whether he'd chosen the clothing to make it seem that he was from a more powerful, prestigious world than Riosa, or because the colors suited his complexion. There was a touch of the celebrity about him...as there was with too many of the younger senators, for whom government was more about fame and influence than duty.

"My fellow senators," Casterfo proclaimed. His narrow, aristocratic face looked out from the screens and holos; he'd already mastered the politician's trick of seeming to make eye contact with everybody at once. "Senator Sindian has raised a valuable point. This should be a bipartisan mission. In fact, I am ashamed on behalf of my own

party that one of our own did not volunteer first—because as Centrists, we value law and order, do we not?” Murmurs of agreement rose from various Centrist senators. Casterfo went on, “Not only is there a need for both Populist and Centrist perspectives on the question of the Nikto cartels, but we should also be more generous than to repay the courage of the esteemed Senator Organa by requiring her to make such a potentially hazardous journey alone.”

Smooth, Leia thought with grudging admiration.

Casterfo continued, “I therefore volunteer to accompany Senator Organa on her mission to Bastatha. We will work together to present a comprehensive, objective set of findings to the Senate upon our return.”

The sensation in Leia’s chest then felt a bit like riding on a sailboat in full furl only to be jerked to a stop by an anchor. Her great last adventure had just turned into a... babysitting job.

“I knew it was too good to be true,” she muttered.

“I beg your pardon, Princess Leia?” C-3PO gestured toward Casterfo’s image on the holos. “I failed to record your last comment. If you would like it to be part of the record—”

“It doesn’t matter, Threepio. Forget it.” Leia heard other voices rise up to debate further points of protocol, but she knew how the Senate worked well enough to know how this would all end: She’d go to Bastatha, but with Ransolm Casterfo by her side.

—

“You could’ve let us know you were planning on doing this,” Greer said in Leia’s offices afterward.

“I would’ve let you know I was going to volunteer if I’d had any idea myself.”

“So, you’ll be taking the *Mirrorbright*?” Greer’s tone was casual as she worked with her datapad, but she couldn’t disguise the small smile on her full lips.

“I’ll give you the answer to the question you’re really asking, which is, yes, Greer, you’ll get to pilot the ship.” Leia paused. The Bastatha mission had a small but genuine element of danger. This might not be a mere pleasure cruise. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.” Greer beamed. As good as she was at her office duties, she hadn’t entirely lost her love of piloting. *A pity Greer had to give up racing*, Leia thought, not for the first time.

Next Leia would have to verify as accurate every datapad containing visual, sound, and sensory records of the day’s Senate session, just one more layer of New Republic

bureaucracy she had to sort through every day. “Let’s get through this as soon as possible. I want to head to Casterfo’s office right away.”

“But—” Korrie looked from Leia to Greer and back again, a stack of datapads in her arms. “Shouldn’t he come to you?”

“Indeed he should!” C-3PO sounded delighted to have something meaningful to contribute. “Proper senatorial protocol demands that the junior senator should always be the one to call upon the senior senator. No doubt Senator Casterfo will be here first thing in the morning.”

“No doubt,” Leia agreed. “Which is why I’m going to his office instead, before he has a chance to leave for the night. I want him to understand that we’re not standing on ‘protocol’ on our mission to Bastatha, and I want to catch him off his guard.”

Greer caught on immediately; she usually did. “He’ll be surprised. Flattered. You’ll get a chance to see what he says and how he acts when he doesn’t have a Centrist script to go by.”

“Exactly.” Leia began verifying the datapads one after the other—a thumbprint here, a retinal scan there. Korrie overcame her surprise to keep the datapads circulating speedily. “Besides, this way we can start making concrete travel arrangements right away. The sooner I get off Hosnian Prime, the better.”

She pretended not to notice the glances Greer and Korrie shared.

Before long, Leia was able to leave her offices for Casterfo’s. Over C-3PO’s objections, she went alone. If Leia had no staffers with her, she could reasonably ask Casterfo to excuse his own. Taking the measure of a man would be far more easily done if he had to answer every question himself, and if he was divided from his usual sources of support.

The senatorial complex on Hosnian Prime was a vast structure, mostly housed in a single long, flat building only one story tall. This had been done to avoid any sense of offices on higher towers being “more prestigious” than others—which had seemed to make sense at the time—but it meant Leia would need to travel nearly a kilometer and a half to reach Casterfo’s office. She stepped onto one of the automated sidewalks, drawing her white hood over her head. It wasn’t as though this would prevent anyone from identifying her, but it might delay recognition long enough for her to avoid getting pulled into any inconsequential conversations that would only waste time.

Broad transparent panels revealed wide slices of the twilight sky overhead. Leia glanced up at the statue of Bail Organa—cool white in the encroaching dark—as she passed it by. Her father seemed to be watching her go. The numerous citizens of various worlds milled around, both on the mobile sidewalks and around them: a group of Bothans growling to one another in front of one office’s door, a Gungan having an

animated conversation via the comlink in his hand, and two Wookiees far ahead of her on the sidewalk, being propelled forward past the throngs of politicians, workers, lobbyists, and visiting constituents that perpetually filled the complex. Only the sight of the Wookiees made Leia smile.

I wonder how Chewbacca's doing. Her husband's old Wookiee partner had settled back into a peaceful domestic life on Kashyyyk. As difficult as it was for Leia to imagine Chewie being content at home, he'd remained there long enough that she had to conclude he was enjoying himself. *Han never passes along Chewie's holos; I need to make some time to catch up, and soon.*

The planet Riosa was a faded center of manufacturing in the Inner Rim, one still struggling to rebuild itself. Accordingly, it had been assigned senatorial offices at the far edge of one of the building's wings. So much for the supposed "equality" of the office arrangements; status could be carved out of any substance people desired—and in Leia's experience, they always did desire. This meant almost nobody witnessed her walking into Casterfo's offices. When she entered, for a moment his staffers simply stood there, agog.

"I take it Senator Casterfo is still here?" Leia asked pleasantly, clasping her hands in front of her within the wide white sleeves of her robe. "Can you ask him if he has time to meet with Senator Organa?"

To Casterfo's credit, he hurried out of his private office almost instantly. "Senator Organa?" He smiled as he finished shrugging his green cloak back on; apparently he'd already begun unwinding from his day. "I had expected to visit you in the morning."

"When there's work to be done, why delay?" Leia returned his smile as politely as she could manage.

"My opinion exactly." Casterfo had the same sort of aristocratic accent Grand Moff Tarkin had spoken in, the one so many senior Imperial officers affected, the one she'd mocked when she and Tarkin last stood face-to-face. She tried not to let that put her on edge. "Please, do come in and sit down. Can I offer you tea? Water? Anything?"

Leia waved off refreshments as she followed Casterfo into his personal office—and then stopped in place, as though frozen.

On the walls of Casterfo's office hung artifacts from the Empire.

A stormtrooper's helmet. The black control box of a TIE pilot's atmospheric suit. Flags and banners of the Empire, the individual stormtrooper legions, and one—faded, slightly torn, but still searing to Leia's eyes—dedicated to Palpatine himself.

It was one thing to see such items in a museum...not that Leia would have ever gone to such an exhibit, but she would have understood its historical purpose. This adulation, however, was grotesque.

“Senator Organa?” Casterfo stared at Leia, somehow completely oblivious to the source of her discomfort. “Are you well? You look pale. Perhaps you should sit down.”

“In here?” Leia held out her hands, gesturing to the array of artifacts surrounding them. “In the middle of your shrine to the glories of the Empire?”

Casterfo *smiled*. How could he dare smile? “Now, now, Senator. Don’t overreact. These are historical relics, no more.”

As though the war against the Empire had taken place millennia before, rather than the space of one generation. Leia wondered if Casterfo thought of her as a historical relic, too.

“You consider yourself a collector, then.” Her tone remained cool, but she took a seat in one of the chairs. As she’d anticipated, Casterfo didn’t go sit behind his desk—which would have been an assertion of his authority. He didn’t want to insult her in that way, but he wasn’t sure what else to do, and so was left standing in front of her, slightly at a loss.

But he remained eager to talk about his hobby. “Yes, exactly. I was only a small boy when the war ended. The adventures you all must have had! When I look around at these things, I imagine the battles so vividly I feel as if I had been there.”

If Casterfo had *really* been able to imagine himself in the great battles of the war, he wouldn’t have enjoyed the experience. Leia had dealt with enough shell-shocked former Rebellion troops to know that much. However, his guileless enthusiasm soothed her somewhat. *All right, he’s not a warmonger. Just an overgrown kid who thinks he missed out on all the “excitement.”*

She had never been so close to Casterfo before, and saw now that his polished appearance was not entirely perfect. His sandy hair had perhaps been grown longer in order to hide his ears, which protruded somewhat sharply from his narrow face. But he’d practically lacquered his hair in order to make it look sleek, no doubt because it otherwise would have curled tightly. Even the flowing cloak was probably meant to disguise how reed-thin he was. Before, Leia had seen Casterfo’s obvious concern for his appearance as vanity; now she realized it was at least partly vulnerability, evidence that Casterfo wanted to look older than his years, more prosperous than his planet. He wanted to stand in the Senate and look as if he belonged.

Her judgment of him gentled...for the remaining second it took him to add, “Besides, even if we cannot respect these soldiers’ methods, we can at least honor their dream.”

“Dream?”

“The dream of empire, of course.” Casterfo smiled like a man remembering the

best days of his childhood. “If the galaxy truly could have been united under a wise, authoritative leader, such an empire might have stood for a thousand years, to rival the Old Republic itself.”

Leia realized she was gaping at him, mouth open. “You wish the Empire were still standing?”

“Not the Empire we had, led by a man so corrupt as Palpatine. But if the Empire could have been *reformed*, perhaps, turned over to better and more responsible leadership—”

“You mean, if the Rebellion could’ve been defeated,” Leia snapped. Her temper had heated beyond the point of restraint. “I regret that we so disappointed you, Senator Casterfo, by fighting and dying to set the galaxy free.”

His face flushed. “Oh, don’t misunderstand me, please. I would never have wished for the Rebellion to lose the war. I only wish that the war had not been necessary.”

“You think Palpatine was the only problem with the Empire? Think again. That kind of power structure bred corruption from the highest levels on Coruscant down to the smallest outposts on border worlds. When the people with authority don’t have to answer to citizens of the galaxy, the result is tyranny.”

Casterfo’s boyish dismay had faded and was now replaced by anger as poorly concealed as Leia’s own. “So the answer is to give power to no one? In order to ensure that no evil can be done by those in authority, we make sure no good can be accomplished by them, either?”

“What ‘good’ do you think the Empire had to offer?”

“Very little, it seems. But if the Old Republic had not been flawed in its own right, Palpatine could not have come into power in the first place.”

This made a certain degree of sense, as Leia was uncomfortably aware. She had heard her father’s stories about the final days of the Old Republic too many times not to have absorbed his warnings about how liberty came to die. But Casterfo had never learned these lessons; he only wanted to excuse the rise of the Empire. “A republic can be changed as needed, because it remains answerable to its people.”

“A wise and just Emperor would listen to his people as well,” Casterfo insisted. “The only problem was that we had the wrong emperor.”

The only problem? There was a limit to the amount of stupidity Leia could tolerate in one day, and she’d just hit it. She got to her feet. “I don’t have time for a conversation about galactic politics with someone so profoundly ignorant of their greater implications.”

Casterfo drew himself up to his considerable full height. “Nor do I have time to discuss these matters with someone so intolerant of other points of view.”

By that point Leia's temples were throbbing, hinting at the headache her anger was carving within her skull. "I'll have my protocol droid come by tomorrow to exchange details about our travel." She wouldn't dream of forcing Greer or Korrie to deal with the man one moment longer than necessary. Besides, C-3PO would be thrilled to have something to do. Never had Leia been more grateful for a protocol droid. "My assistant can handle all other details of the trip. There's no need for us to see each other again until it's time to depart—if, of course, that's all right with you."

Casterfo folded his arms. "Believe me, I would find that arrangement a great relief."

"The feeling's mutual." Leia strode out of his office, through the thicket of staffers pretending not to eavesdrop at the door, and back out into the corridors.

As she stepped back onto the moving sidewalk, she covered her face with one hand. Her temper had gotten the better of her often enough in her life, but not many people had incensed her as quickly as Ransolm Casterfo and his collection of "historical items," which insulted everything she had fought for. Soon she'd be stuck with him for days, or even weeks—however long it took to get to the bottom of the situation with the Nikto cartels on Bastatha.

So much for an exciting last mission. It looked like her final days as a New Republic senator were going to be a royal pain in the ass.

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