

# CHAPTER 01

The Day of Demand had been announced months before. Guests had already arrived from worlds across the galaxy, and delicious aromas from the banquet being prepared wafted through the palace halls. The weather had failed to cooperate with the celebration plans—low dark clouds hung heavily over the city of Aldera, threatening a downpour—but even the impending storm felt dramatic and grand, in a way.

It was the perfect setting for a princess to claim her right to the crown of Alderaan.

“Ow.” Leia made a face. “That pulls.”

“And it’s going to keep pulling,” promised WA-2V, Leia’s personal attendant droid. Her bluish metal fingers swiftly wove one final braid in the complicated traditional style. “Today of all days, you must look your best.”

“You say that every day.” As a little girl, Leia had only ever wanted to tie her hair back in a tail. Her parents had said she was free to do as she liked. But 2V had held firm. Her programming demanded that she present the

princess in grand style, and not even the princess herself could say otherwise.

“It’s true every day,” 2V insisted, coiling the braid in a loop and pinning it in place. “Standards are even higher for special occasions!”

Leia felt a small quiver in her belly, equal parts nerves and anticipation. This was the biggest day in her life since her first Name Day, when her parents had taken her into the throne room and declared her their daughter by adoption and by love—

She shook off the thought. That time all she had to do was be a baby in her mother’s arms. This time she’d have to stand up for herself.

Once the hairstyle was done, Leia gratefully slipped into the clothing she and 2V had compromised on: a simple white dress for her, bold silver jewelry for 2V. Just as she toed into her satiny slippers, the orchestral fanfare swelled from the throne room, echoing through the palace’s corridors. It felt as though her parents were personally knocking on her door.

“One more thing!” 2V pleaded. She rolled to the cabinet on the small sphere she had for a base, then swerved back with a silver headband, which she neatly fitted into the braids so its pearl charm hung at the center of Leia’s forehead. “Yes. *Yes*. That’s it. You look absolutely stunning! I work miracles, I really do.”

Leia shook her head in amusement. “Thanks a lot.”

Oblivious, 2V shooed her charge toward the door. “Hurry! They’re all waiting.”

“It’s not like they can start without me, TooVee.” Still, Leia picked up the tail of her gown and hurried into the corridor. She didn’t want to be late. The princes and princesses who had made their demands in ancient times had sometimes had to fight their way to the throne room. It was meant to be a moment of strength and command—in other words, not a moment to prove you couldn’t even show up on time.

Alderaan’s royal palace had been the work of more than a millennium. Their monarchy was one that dedicated itself to serving its people, so they’d never built high spires or commanding towers to dominate the landscape. Instead, new chambers were added every few decades, creating a sprawling labyrinth where modern data centers and holochambers existed side-by-side with ancient rooms hewn from stone. Leia knew each hallway, each door by heart; as a small child she’d reveled in exploring some of the most shadowy, out-of-the-way passages. Sometimes she thought she might’ve been the only person in centuries to have found every single room in the palace.

Fortunately she knew the shortcut through the old armory, which got her to the antechamber of the throne room in plenty of time. The royal guards smiled when

they saw her, and she grinned back as she straightened the cape of her gown. To the taller guard, she whispered, “How’s the baby?”

“Sleeping through the night already,” he replied. Leia mimed applause, and he ducked his head, almost bashfully.

Really she didn’t know much about babies, except that parents were very proud of them even though they kept everybody up at night. But if the guard was happy to have a sleepy baby, then she was happy for him.

*“We’re lucky on Alderaan,” her father had said as they sat by the library hearth. “We are loved by our people. We have their loyalty. That’s because we love them and are loyal to them in turn. If we ever cease to appreciate those around us—from the highest lord to the humblest laborer—we’ll lose that loyalty. We’ll deserve to lose it.”*

Leia was jerked back into the moment by the rustling of the velvet curtain at the door. Swiftly she went to the wall where the Rhindon Sword hung, grabbed it by the hilt, and took it in hand. She’d practiced with it a few times, but its weight surprised her every time.

Position: doorway center. Sword: both hands on the hilt, arms close to body, blade upright. Speech . . .

*I remember the speech, she told herself. I definitely remember it. I’m just blanking on it at the moment and it’ll absolutely come back to me when I’m standing in front of hundreds of people—*

The curtain was tugged to the side. Brilliant light, tinted by vast panes of stained glass, fell on her. Two

hundred guests turned as one, all of them standing on either side of a blue-and-gold carpet that traced a line directly through the room to the golden thrones where Breha and Bail Organa sat.

Leia marched forward, sword held high. A low rumble of thunder made her grateful for the candelroids projecting light through the windows; otherwise, the room would've been nearly pitch-black. She'd practiced this but didn't think she could do it with her eyes closed.

*I don't know, it might've been easier if I couldn't see all the guests staring at me.* Leia had spent her entire life appearing before crowds, but today was the first time they would hear her voice in an official capacity, as their future queen.

Breha Organa wore a dress of bronze silk, her hair piled high atop her head in braids woven through with strings of beads. Next to her, Bail Organa wore the traditional long jacket of the viceroy. The crown itself had been brought back from the museum to sit atop a marble pillar, illuminated by a candelroid of its own. Her parents looked even more regal than usual—almost forbidding. Were they enjoying the charade?

Leia thought she was, or she would be if her parents had invited fewer people. Usually only a handful of off-worlders would be present, but this time her father had asked many of his diplomatic allies in the Imperial Senate—Tynnra Pamlo from Taris, Cinderon Malpe of Derella,

and both Winmey Lenz and Mon Mothma of Chandrila. Mon Mothma smiled wider as Leia passed her. Maybe she meant to be encouraging.

As long as she didn't think Leia looked *cute*. The Day of Demand wasn't about being an adorable little kid. It was about growing up.

When she reached the front of the throne room, only a few meters short of her parents, Breha called out the first line of the ceremony: "Who is this, who disturbs the queen in her seat of power?"

"It is I, Leia Organa, princess of Alderaan." Sure enough, the speech had come back on cue. "I come before you to hear you acknowledge that on this day it is known that I have reached my sixteenth year."

The "it is known" was an addition to the simplest form of the ritual, one used only when the eldest child of the king or queen was adopted. Leia had turned sixteen three or four days ago; she didn't know her birthday for sure and didn't much care. She'd become a princess of Alderaan on her Name Day, and that was the anniversary they were marking.

"We acknowledge that you are of age," said Bail. Only the slight crinkling at the corners of his eyes betrayed the smile he was working to hide. "Why then do you come before us armed?"

"I come to demand my right to the crown." Leia knelt

smoothly and held the sword overhead in one hand. Distant thunder rumbled, sending a small tremor through the floor. “On this day, you will acknowledge me as heir.”

Breha’s voice rang throughout the throne room. “The crown of Alderaan is not merely inherited. It must be earned. The heir must prove herself worthy in body, heart, and mind. Are you prepared to do so?”

“I am, my mother and queen.” It was a relief to stand again and lower the heavy sword. “I have chosen three challenges. When I have undertaken these challenges and succeeded in them, you must invest me as crown princess of Alderaan.”

“Reveal these challenges, and we will decide whether they are worthy,” Bail said, as though he didn’t already know each one. For a moment, she was tempted to make something up on the spot. *I’m going to learn to juggle and take to the stage as a feather-fire dancer. Aren’t you proud?*

But she’d practiced her speech so many times that it poured forth almost automatically. “For my Challenge of the Body, I will climb Appenza Peak and reach its summit.” That mountain was visible from her bedroom window, spectacularly silhouetted against every sunset. “For my Challenge of the Mind, I will no longer merely assist my father in the Imperial Senate but will also represent our world in the Apprentice Legislature. And for my Challenge of the Heart, I will undertake missions

of charity and mercy to planets in need, paying all costs from my share of the royal purse. Through these challenges, I will prove my right to the crown.”

Breha inclined her head. “The challenges are worthy.” She rose from her throne, and Leia stepped up on the dais and brought the sword back into position in front of her. Breha’s hands wrapped around the sword hilt, their fingers overlapping for the instant before Leia let go. “May all those present bear witness! If my daughter fulfills these challenges, she shall be invested as crown princess, heir to the throne of Alderaan.”

Applause and cheers filled the room. Leia curtsied to her parents, who were beaming so proudly that for a moment it felt as if everything had been put right. Like the ceremony really had made them *see* her again—

—until the guests crowded closer with congratulations and her parents turned away to greet them instead of congratulating their daughter.

Bail was in conversation with Mon Mothma and her fellow Chandrilan senator, Winmey Lenz. Breha had taken the hands of Senator Pamlo, clearly thanking her for her presence.

Already, Leia was forgotten.

“Leia, my dear girl!” Lord Mellowyn of Birren came to her, smiling beneath his bushy white mustache. They were cousins through intricacies of Elder House lineage nobody



bothered tracing any longer. “You were wonderful.”

“Thank you.” She returned his smile as best she could.

*It’s true. I’m not imagining it. They don’t pay attention to me anymore.*

*Did I do something wrong?*

*Or do they just not care?*



She didn’t think she’d made them angry. They hadn’t turned from her in one moment of displeasure. Instead they had . . . ebbed away these past six months.

Leia had never had very many friends her own age. As egalitarian as the Alderaanian monarchy was, there would always be a dividing line between those within the palace and those outside its walls. She’d gamboled around on the rolling grounds with some of the cooks’ children, but for the most part, her companions had been her parents.

Bail and Breha Organa had waited a long time for a child. They had told her that many times, often as she went to sleep, as part of the story about when her father came home from a mysterious mission to surprise her mother with the baby girl in his arms. Leia would’ve known it even if they hadn’t told her, though. No matter how many questions she asked, her parents never tired of looking up answers. When she had bad dreams in the wee hours of the night, they never left her to a human nurse or caretaker droid; one of them always came to her,

sometimes both. Every time she entered a room where they were, they smiled. She felt as if she made them happy merely by existing.

Many children would've become hopelessly spoiled. But Leia always wanted to be helpful, especially to those she cared about, and she loved her parents more than she could imagine ever loving anybody else. So she tried to interest herself in everything they did. Breha planted Malastarian orchids; Leia planted orchids and learned to care for them so they sent forth pale pink blooms. Bail liked dancing; Leia studied dancing and would practice with her father until her feet were sore.

With her mother's queenly work, she hadn't made as much progress. Breha Organa had charge of the royal books, balancing the many accounts and personally overseeing funding of all public works on the planet. Leia had gamely tried to get the hang of basic accounting, doing well enough but hating it the entire time. Within a week her mother had released her with a hug and a laugh.

*"But don't I need to learn, if I'm going to be queen?" Leia had protested.*

*"Not if you fall in love with someone who likes bookkeeping." Breha had winked. "Then you can make your viceroy do it."*

Her parents had arranged their duties so her mother tended to matters on Alderaan itself while her father represented Alderaan in the Imperial Senate and handled their diplomatic efforts. In the Clone Wars, he'd been

their military leader as well, and as a little girl Leia had thrilled to his stories of adventure—and as she matured, she heard some of the darker, sadder stories that formed the largest part of any great war.

But there had been no major wars in a generation. The galaxy was unified in the worst possible way, under the tyranny of Emperor Palpatine. As a representative of one of the most influential Core Worlds, Bail Organa served as one of the few voices in the Imperial Senate that could moderate Palpatine's autocratic rule. Politics involved its own kind of battles, and Leia discovered early on that she liked a good fight. Interning in her father's Senate offices the past two years had meant proofreading his speeches, practice-debating with him on various issues, and unwinding after sessions as they traveled home on the royal yacht or the *Tantive IV*. She'd felt she wasn't only a daughter to Bail Organa but also a partner in his work, and that had made her prouder than her crown ever could.

She'd done her part. She'd been a good daughter. So why had they stopped caring about being parents?

It wasn't like they hit her or were mean to her. It was worse than that.

They ignored her.

Her father began having more and more private sessions in his offices, discussions with senators from Uyter or Mon Cala that Leia couldn't take part in. There had always

been conferences like that, but they went from a few each month to sometimes several a day. Afterward Bail would be distracted for hours. If Leia tried to sound him out about them, he'd sternly tell her to attend to her own duties. It was as though power-brokering had become more important to him than anything else, including his own daughter.

Her mother was even worse. She'd suddenly turned into a society hostess, inviting dignitaries from around the galaxy to sumptuous banquets where the revelry lasted until nearly dawn. Sometimes Leia would even catch Breha dozing over the account books the next day. Her responsibility to her people didn't matter anymore, not compared to throwing a fabulous party.

Leia felt her corner of their world shrinking tighter and tighter until she could hardly breathe in their presence. Nothing she said or did seemed to affect them in the slightest. Although she was too old to call out for her parents when she had a bad dream, every once in a while she wanted to do it anyway.

But she never called for them. She never wanted to find out for sure that they wouldn't come.



"Come away from that window," 2V scolded as she rolled to Leia's bed and spread the silk coverlet over it. "You could be struck by lightning."

Leia didn't budge from her seat. The open windows let the stormy breeze blow through, stirring her long hair as it hung loose down her back. Her billowy white nightgown covered the knees she hugged to her chest as she watched the horizon flicker bright with another thunderbolt.

2V rolled toward her, jointed arms on the stiff apron that passed for her hips. "Your Highness, please! It's not safe."

"I'm not going to be struck by lightning," Leia said. "Besides, I like the storm."

2V rolled ominously close. "My programming allows me to forcibly remove you from any major physical risk."

"All right, all right. I'm going. See?" Hopping down from the window seat, Leia went to her bed. It was one of the artifacts of a grander age, carved of priceless Glee Anselm hardwoods and inlaid with thin, curling lines of pure gold and silver. Royalty no longer wasted money on splendor like this, but Breha always said it was silly not to use a perfectly good bed, or tiara, or palace.

"The protocol droids inform me you were splendid today." 2V tidied up the vanity table, putting each brush and comb back in place. "I'm sure your appearance was much admired."

Leia had to smile. "Everyone saw what good work you did, TooVee. You should be proud."

Gleaming with satisfaction, 2V did a little half bow,

then rolled out of the room. As soon as the door was shut, Leia threw back the coverlet and returned to her window. Another lightning bolt struck the ground, half-hidden by Appenza Peak; for one second, the mountain was sharply outlined against the brilliant light.

*It was so beautiful, she imagined saying to her parents over breakfast—though of course they never breakfasted with her any longer. They were already busy planning their next party before the sun even rose.*

Leia threw open the window again and let the wind flow through the room. Her cheeks and arms felt the coolness of a few small raindrops. The ceremony hadn't lived up to her childhood dreams, but a storm like this could never disappoint her. She liked the wildness of it, the unpredictability, even the distant danger. This was something she'd only discovered about herself recently, her love of storms, and she treasured it because it was one of the few things she hadn't shared with her parents. This belonged to her alone.

Still, she wanted to tell them someday, once things had finally gone back to the way they used to be.

*Tomorrow, she promised herself. Tomorrow I'll take up my first challenge. I'll prove myself.*

*I'll do something too great for them to ignore.*

## CHAPTER 02

Three weeks remained before the next session of the Apprentice Legislature would begin. Leia ought to have been preparing—reviewing top issues, drafting potential bills to introduce. That was what her father always did before returning to the Imperial Senate; she’d helped him for two years now, more than long enough to know how to handle the work on her own. So she should’ve been holed up in the study, surrounded by political materials.

Instead, she was dashing through the principal Aldera spaceport, 2V whirring along at her side.

“You need to show respect for the Imperial officials there,” 2V insisted as they swerved around a Gozanti freighter where worker droids levitated crates of cargo into the hold. “You’re traveling as a diplomat on a humanitarian mission and must present yourself accordingly. A princess must always dress for the occasion.”

“I will, I will,” Leia sighed. It had been years since she’d protested wearing dresses or putting her hair up, but 2V remained convinced that as soon as she let her charge out of her sight, Leia would immediately change

back into her childhood play coveralls and a ponytail. “This occasion is providing rations to starving refugees on Wobani. So I don’t need to braid my hair with pearls.”

2V pulled back her upper torso in a move Leia could only describe as *prim*. “There’s no need to be ridiculous. Pearls are so passé.”

The royal family preferred to use Aldera’s central public spaceflight facility. Countless times, Leia had come here with one or both of her parents to be ushered aboard, but this was the first time she’d ever personally commandeered a vessel for an interplanetary trip. Putting the request through the palace majordomo, Tarrik, had felt almost routine. When she saw the *Tantive IV* waiting for her, however, the ship’s size struck her anew. The thought of it being at her disposal—the knowledge that more than two dozen crewmembers awaited her orders—thrilled her to the core. For months, even years, she’d been eager for some real responsibility. That began today.

She recognized the gray-shirted man walking toward her, so she drew herself up and clasped her hands together within the wide bell sleeves of her dress. “Captain Antilles. Thank you for readying the ship so quickly. When can we be under way?”

“Within the hour, Your Highness.” He smiled down at her, his head tilted slightly to one side. “You can count on us.” With that, he gave her a sharp salute and strode



back to his work. Leia was left standing there wondering why she didn't like that reply. Captain Antilles had been polite, deferential, even friendly. She had no doubt of his loyalty and willingness to serve. But the tilt of his head—

*He doesn't think of me as a leader. He still thinks of me as a little girl.*  
She frowned. *He thinks I'm cute.*

It was silly to be surprised by that, much less offended. The captain had known her since she was a toddler, and she'd only just had her Day of Demand. Leia hadn't grown to her full height yet, either . . . she hoped. As her mother liked to say, *Authority can be given, but leadership must be earned.*

Today, she would begin to earn it. Soon neither Captain Antilles nor her parents would doubt what she was capable of.



The trip to Wobani was swift and uneventful. Leia spent her time in the cargo holds, making sure all the rations were stored correctly and that the officers had clear instructions for distribution. When they reached the planet, she'd only need to look over the layout of the resettlement station to decide precisely where to set up.

“Easy as dunking a Mon Calamari,” she murmured to herself. (It was an old saying, but she'd learned by playing with Mon Calamari children at the senatorial complex

pools that the real trick was getting them to surface first. You couldn't dunk anyone who was still underwater.)

Wobani would require no special climate gear; it was a temperate Mid-Rim world, humid but otherwise unremarkable, and they'd be close enough to the equator not to have to worry about snow. The planet had never been especially prosperous or heavily populated, supporting itself primarily through basic manufacturing of small parts and armor, and growing grains and spices that thrived in marshy conditions. Like many other worlds across the galaxy, it was prosperous just past the point of subsistence, engaged in intragalactic commerce only to a modest degree, and ambitious for no greater position in the galaxy.

Then, six years ago, Palpatine had begun the "Commodities Enhancement Program," which promised better market access galaxy-wide for food and other organic raw material. Like so many of the Emperor's other promises, it was a lie designed to conceal other plans; her parents had taught her how to see through such things. Wobani was given impossible quotas to fill, and when the planet's farmers fell short, they were fined. Large areas of common land were instead parceled out to various Imperial officials who would, supposedly, "put them under better management." Really this meant they could now profit while the native Wobani became ever poorer and hungrier.

Every world targeted by the commodities program suffered, but Wobani had entirely collapsed. Famine was now widespread. As the agricultural sector faltered, the factory cities became overcrowded with desperate migrants in search of work, which in turn meant that the factories could pay lower wages and force people to labor in more dangerous conditions. By now the Wobani would do anything to stay alive. There was talk of building Imperial work-camp prisons on the planet; that was virtually the only industry it could sustain any longer, and the populace was demoralized enough to accept such prisons in their midst. Free movement between star systems was the norm, but the Empire had put Wobani under strict travel restrictions, to “prevent its exploitation.” In the Senate, it was widely believed the restrictions were primarily an attempt to cover up how bad the situation had become.

Leia thought that was ridiculous. Every senator and staffer knew about the mess on Wobani, but they didn’t say so. If people had just spoken the truth, the news would’ve spread to everybody on every planet, everywhere, and then there would’ve been no point in covering things up in the first place.

Even her father had remained quiet. His silence angered her even more than the blockade.

So she hadn’t told her parents where she was going on

this mission. Leia, familiar with travel protocols, sought diplomatic landing clearance first. For someone representing the royal house of Alderaan, approval was very nearly automatic. Captain Antilles might think of her as a child, but he'd never question her commandeering the *Tantive IV* for a preapproved mission. Probably he assumed her parents had put in the request, but his assumptions weren't her problem.

She imagined herself returning to Alderaan, strolling into the palace's dining hall, and casually explaining to her parents that she'd been to Wobani herself, yes, that political hotspot even members of the Senate—like her father—hadn't dared to speak out on. *That* would show them. . . .

But Leia didn't really want to show them up. She only wanted to make them see her again.

This melancholy turn of thought vanished when Captain Antilles's voice came over the comm: "*Your Highness, we're beginning our landing approach.*"

"Thank you, Captain. I'll be right there." With that, she brought the hood of her dress up over her braids and headed for the boarding ramp. Only moments stood between her and her first, maybe boldest, humanitarian mission, and she felt nothing but the burning desire to do something that would matter, both to her parents and to the entire galaxy, and the confidence that she could.

That lasted until the *Tantive IV*'s doors slid open to reveal hell.

Leia's lips parted in shock as she walked out. The rolling countryside, which once would've been covered with fresh green stalks of spring grain, now was only mud and a few yellowing stalks of plants that could no longer thrive. Wobani's sky had taken on the dingy tint that came only from pollution, a haze that might never clear again. However, the desolation of the planet itself didn't come close to that of its people.

Surrounding the landing field, stretching out to the horizon in every direction, were cheap, prefab shelters, like what someone might take on a long hike to sleep out in the wild. They weren't meant for daily use, but from the looks of things, thousands of people had been living in these for months. Deep ruts scarred the muddy pathways that served as roads between the shelters. Every single one of those ramshackle shelters housed a family, or perhaps two. Surrounding them stood gaunt people with stained, worn clothing and a febrile neediness in their eyes that scared Leia as much as it moved her. Even before she stepped off the platform, people had begun to shout and call, pleading for help.

Yet not one stepped forward, because the platform was surrounded by stormtroopers, blaster rifles in hand, their white armor grimy and mud-spotched.

An Imperial official climbed the short ramp that led to the *Tantive IV*. His eyes were as dead as his tone. “The ‘humanitarian’ mission from Alderaan?”

“Yes.” Leia had prepared a few things to say—some lofty, some defiant, depending on their reception. Any of those careful speeches would’ve sounded so hollow spoken in front of this hungry crowd. “We, ah, we’re ready to get started.”

The official shrugged. “Fine.” With that he made a swift hand motion, and all the stormtroopers went into resting stance.

What happened next seemed to Leia like an avalanche in the Grindel Range, or maybe a flash flood. A rush of people, vaster and faster than she’d ever imagined, surged toward the landing platform, cresting at the edges where they climbed or jumped or pulled others up. Within seconds she and her crew were surrounded by wide eyes and outreached hands. She could hear nothing but their shouts—“We need food!” “Water purification systems? Do you have those?” “Anything, please, give us anything!”

Captain Antilles was trying to push them back. From the corner of her eye she saw another crewmember struggling to set up the first of what would’ve been her many orderly distribution tables—and at the ramp, the Imperial official standing like a stone amid the struggling crowd and smirking at the melee.

It was the smirk that got her. Leia's fear burned to ashes in a blaze of anger. She leapt onto the table and shouted, at the top of her lungs, "Everybody *STOP!*"

Everybody did. Probably that was only due to their surprise at a tiny teenaged girl giving orders, but Leia would take what she could get. Captain Antilles snapped a loudhailer module from his belt and handed it up to her.

"Listen to me," she said, module set to full projection so that even the crowds in the far distance would hear. "You don't have to rush. You don't have to fight. We have food here for everyone."

Barely. She'd thought the rations they brought might feed people for a season or more; this community was so large and so impoverished that they'd devour these supplies within a couple of weeks at most. Still, it was better than nothing . . . and nothing was all these people had.

She continued, "Give us a few moments to set up our distribution platforms. Maybe—maybe you could spend those moments finding the people in the most need, like the elderly and the sick. You could bring them forward so they can go first and not have to stand around waiting, because you'll still get everything you need. Everything we have. Got it?"

Murmuring went through the crowd, and at first Leia wondered if they would storm the *Tantive IV* after all. Then the closest individuals began shuffling back to give them

space. In the distance, she spotted people bringing forward a few small children and an elderly woman, with more surely to come.

“All right.” Leia hopped down from the table, skirts flying in a way 2V would certainly have called inelegant. Shouting at the top of her lungs on top of a table would count as inelegant too; it wasn’t exactly how she wanted to be perceived as a leader.

But as she handed the loudhailer module back to Captain Antilles, he looked at her differently. There was no more tilt to his head. Apparently, every once in a while, leadership meant abandoning decorum and yelling as loud as you could. The captain said, “We’ll be set up within minutes, Your Highness.”

Leia acknowledged him with a nod and got to work.

They could’ve programmed droids to do the distribution, but she left them for the labor of hauling out the crates of rations. She wanted these people to see a living face smiling at them, living hands giving them something. *You aren’t forgotten*, she thought as she held ration packs out to person after person after person. *The Empire won’t let us save you, but we can still help.*

Such things couldn’t be spoken aloud while she was surrounded by armed stormtroopers. Yet she felt the message came through.

After the rush of distribution, a few people stayed



behind to be seen by the ship's medical droid. The 2-IB could repair broken bones or stitch up wounds, and Leia was grateful for that much, but what these people truly needed was relief from desperation. She had only been able to provide the smallest measure of that, for what would be a very short time.

“Terrible scene, this.” Captain Antilles stood next to her, his hands clasped behind his back. “It reminds you how fortunate we are on Alderaan.”

“Yes, it does.”

Leia had always imagined herself very aware of the wrongs in the galaxy. Her parents had been honest with her about the cruelty of Palpatine's rule. However, knowing about the suffering was very different from witnessing it. Coming here, she'd felt righteous; being here, she knew herself helpless.

*How am I supposed to turn away from this? How am I supposed to fly away from Wobani knowing that these people are left behind?*

It came to her in a flash: *I won't leave them behind.*

The Empire had given her permission to land. Next, they'd give her permission to load the *Tantive IV* with as many refugees as it could hold, and fly them away from this place for good.