

"My Mother's Dreams"

by Brandon Rhea

A feeling of renewed hope rolls across the hills in which the Resistance built its base. My base. Its halls and the men and women who fill it are filled with a joy I haven't seen in years. The Starkiller is gone. The Republic is avenged. The Resistance lives to fight another day.

I want to share in their excitement. They need to see the great Leia Organa, the woman who stood up to the do-nothing Republic and lost her reputation because of it; the battle-tested general; the icon I let them believe I am so they follow me on the road to war. They need to see me happy and free of the fear of the First Order.

How could I be?

The man I love is dead. Our son...something far worse happened to him. But that's not what the men and women around me are thinking. To them, a terrible fate that had fallen on a distant world would never be suffered by another. All I can think about is Han Solo—pirate, husband, father—becoming just another casualty in a war that never ends. Yet the celebration goes on. Pilots and soldiers hug one another. They welcome the returning pilots and mourn the dead. All while another hero passes into legend, just as I will one day.

In the middle of it all, as the celebration clears, is one solitary girl. Her eyes are wet with the tears of a heartache that no one so young should ever feel. Yet even in her mourning, there's a hope that never seems to die. I don't know her, but I feel like I've known her forever. And so we embrace, comforting one another with the love we have for our friends and family, those we've lost and those who may still be found again.

In her eyes, I see myself, the woman I used to be. I see the hope that burned so bright that it fueled the fires of rebellion. And in this moment, my mind wanders.

I see Endor. I feel the freedom in the air, like the Resistance does in their moment of glory.

I see myself wander the forests away from the celebrations in the Ewok village, where my friends celebrate our hard-fought victory. Before rebellion turned to resistance, and victory to defeat.

Even then something didn't sit right with me. It wasn't the feeling that we hadn't truly won. It was something deeper. Something that went beyond politics and war.

I knew I should focus on the joy of the night; on the last pieces of the Death Star burning up in the atmosphere; on the orange glow of bonfires dotting the forests; on fireworks set off by screeching X-wing fighters high above the trees, lighting up the night sky like the promise of a new dawn.

Instead my mind wandered to Naboo. I was there a few years earlier, looking for the last of my people before they could be snuffed out by the hate of the Empire. I was a different person then, a more reckless one. I'd run off without the support of my friends and allies because I knew I had to lead my people out of darkness. And I succeeded.

Yet as much as I should have felt the same vindication on this night, as much as I should feel like the death of a man so universally despised meant that I could rest even a little easier, one memory stuck out from Naboo, from when I first arrived, and when I saw a mural etched into the walls of the starport. It was of a woman named Padmé Amidala. I heard my adopted father speak of her once, about how she was a young queen who saved her world from evil, but something about the mural spoke to me in a way I couldn't understand. There was something familiar about her, something I couldn't piece together.

That image was in my mind as I found the outskirts of the village, away from the jubilee of the night. I'd been in the village, beaming with pride for what my people had fought for; finding comfort with Han and Luke; taking in all of the emotions of a moment I'd worked for a lifetime to see. The freedom of Endor, I thought, would be the freedom of the galaxy, but somehow I felt empty inside.

I didn't realize it at first, but I lost a bit of my own freedom that night: my own peace of mind, now imprisoned in the truth that was my real parentage. I always knew I was adopted, that Bail and Breha Organa were not my real parents, but they never told me where I came from. Everyone always just assumed I was one of the millions of children left orphaned by the Clone Wars. But I didn't need to know. I didn't care to know. Bail and Breha were all that mattered to me.

Now I knew the truth. Could I live with it? Could I ever accept that the monster who imprisoned me, who stood by while my homeworld was snuffed out, who tortured the man I loved, was my real father? A man whose very name was cursed across the stars?

I tried to ignore it. I tried to let myself feel comfort in the gentle touch of the evening breeze carried through the forests. But I couldn't. Not yet. My heart ached with the truth about Darth Vader, and my mind couldn't shake the image of that young queen.

Then a voice came from behind me. "You look worse than the Empire tonight."

My heart skipped a beat. I wasn't expecting to see anyone out here, away from the village, let alone Mon Mothma. The chancellor of the Rebel Alliance stood before her as I turned. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised to see her there, her regal, flowing white robes oddly out of place in the wooded landscape of the Ewok forests. Mon was always like a surrogate mother for me, especially after losing Alderaan, and she always had a way of knowing when I needed her company and counsel.

"Chancellor," I said, my voice taking on that air of formality at the sight of the rebel leader. "No one told me you would be on Endor."

She smiled, with a warmth that only she could bring. "Oh, my guards certainly protested, but I've been fighting this war for twenty-five years. I think I've earned the right to be at the victory party."

I couldn't argue with that.

"What's wrong, Leia?" Mon asked. "And I know you're going to say it's nothing, but I know you better than that."

"It's..." Did I really want to say it? Though I guess I could never lie to her. "Luke told me something. Something I wish I never knew."

Mon stood there, silently. Her shoulders sank, like she was burdened with a horrible truth, yet somehow also freed from a lie. "I know."

I was stunned. "You... You *know*?"

"I didn't know your brother told you, but I know *what* he told you."

Should I have been angry? Confused? I didn't know. "How?"

"Bail told me, shortly before he died."

My fath- the man who raised me *knew*. "And neither of you ever said a word. Why didn't you tell me?"

Mon walked past me and leaned up against a tree, letting out a deep breath like she was a normal person. It was such an odd thing for me to think, but here was this woman who was larger than life, a legend in her own time, someone who the Emperor was willing to destroy entire worlds to kill, and she was doing something so incredibly pedestrian. I guess even Mon Mothma needed time to relax, to think, to find the courage to say what she'd held back for so long.

Finally she came forward again.

"When Bail sent you to find General Kenobi, he knew it wouldn't be long until you discovered the truth. He also knew the Empire wanted him dead, so he told me. That way, there was someone to answer your questions about Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala. Your real parents."

Years of questions clicked into place. "Padmé Amidala was my mother." I couldn't even finish saying her name before the tiniest flicker of a smile crept across my face. "That makes sense of a lot of things. You knew her?"

"Yes," Mon told me, her eyes looking to the stars, fondly thinking back on the days before all of this. "Padmé Amidala and Bail Organa were my closest allies in the Republic Senate, and two of my dearest friends. We

started this together. Did you know that? The three of us. Your mother died before there was an Alliance, but those early days, at the end of the Republic, were the first sparks of rebellion."

"What was she like?" I may not have needed to ever know the truth, but that didn't mean I didn't wonder, especially about that kind young woman I could see in the fog of dreams ever since I was a girl.

"She was a passionate defender of democracy. I've never seen anyone able to rouse a crowd the way she could. Her idealism was contagious. Even her enemies in the Senate, of which there were many, couldn't help but admire her."

My heart grew somber as I got to know the woman who brought me into this world. "I wish I'd known her."

"You do," Mon said as she wrapped her arm around my shoulder, hugging me tightly. "In so many ways, you do. Every time I look at you, I see her. Her spirit, her conviction, her heart. Padmé may not have raised you, but Bail made sure you'd never forget her."

Now I wrapped my arms around her. In only a few minutes, she'd answered questions I struggled with for years. I knew in that moment why I was so drawn to that mural on Naboo. It wasn't just the familiarity of my own mother. It was something deeper. It was about the type of person I always wanted to be. I always struggled with everything I was supposed to be. Princess. Rebel. Soldier. Lover. I always wanted to be the person Mon and Bail said Padmé was. Now I knew I always was.

"Thank you," I said, stepping away again. "I needed that."

A silence fell over us, as Mon thought to say the thing she dreaded. "You didn't ask about your father."

I recoiled at the mere idea of it. "I know everything I need to know about Darth Vader."

"Do you?"

"You agree with Luke, don't you?" Thinking about what Luke said, about how he was able to forgive our father, could be met with only a sigh. "You think I should try to forgive him."

"I don't think anything about it," Mon said as she gently threw up her hands in a surprising display of indifference, though that wasn't too surprising considering what Vader meant to her as well. "All I know is this. I've known many Jedi in my life, and I know that the dark side isn't easily beaten. It takes an inherent goodness to do that."

I shook my head. "That doesn't change anything."

"Maybe not," Mon said as she sagely nodded her head - was she agreeing with me? "But the Jedi used to say that the simplest gesture of kindness can fill a galaxy of hope. One kind gesture doesn't absolve someone from decades of wickedness, but it's a start."

Now, my head sank. My heart sank deeper; the confusion over my mother was gone, replaced with torment about my father.

"Maybe," I told her, "but I don't think I can ever forgive him."

"You don't need to forgive. Just try to understand."

"Easier said than done."

"Believe me, that's something I grapple with everyday," Mon said as she turned to look back towards the Ewok village, where they could just make out the sight of people dancing around the bonfires. "Look at them. What do you see?"

"People?"

"*Ordinary* people," she told me. "The Emperor only came to power because ordinary people let him. If we are to build a new Republic, we need to understand why they did that and make sure it never happens again. Only then can we be truly free. Free of the past. Free of our burdens."

I didn't want to admit it, but she was right. It was easy to hate Darth Vader. Hate was always easier. If Luke had been here he would've said that was the path to the dark side. That's when I realized he was right too. Even if I couldn't forgive Darth Vader, I had to understand Anakin Skywalker. Understand why he did what he did, and how I could avoid his mistakes. Would that free me from my past, from my burdens? I hoped it would.

"You always know what to say," I told her.

"I learned that from your mother," Mon said. "Leia, accepting Anakin Skywalker isn't something you're going to be able to do any time soon. Just know that I'm here for you, for whatever you need."

She smiled again as she started to walk away, back towards the Ewok village. No doubt to join Admiral Ackbar and the other leaders of the Rebellion in thanking the men and women who made this night possible. But I couldn't let her go. Not yet.

"What was he like?" I asked. The question stopped her in her tracks, and for a moment I could a light in her eye that might have otherwise been an 'I told you so' if she spoke it aloud. "My father, I mean."

"He was the greatest hero the galaxy had ever known," she said. She came back towards me, placing a hand on my shoulder as she stared straight into my eyes. This was her most important lesson: "Anakin Skywalker believed in people. Your mother did too. I think that's why they loved each other. They gave that to you, and to your brother. But Anakin stopped looking for the good and saw only the bad. Don't make his mistakes."

A lifetime passed since Mon told me about my parents. I don't know if I ever accepted my father, but I think I came to understand him. I understood the selfishness of his good intentions, of trying to save my mother for his sake more than hers. It's a lesson I carried with me in the Republic, when I asked - no, begged them to understand that turning a blind eye to whatever was left of the Empire would only lead to the very darkness they were trying to avoid.

I didn't understand the darkness quick enough. My son... I couldn't save him from Anakin's fate, no matter how much I tried. But I always remembered what Mon said to me, about not making Anakin's mistakes. So I kept fighting. As the years went on and the Empire became the First Order, I never stopped remembering Padmé's hope. I never stopped believing in people, even when they stopped believing in me.

My father was my warning, but my mother was my guide. I learned everything I could about her, about her childhood, her family, her dreams of a future free of war. Ever since the night on Endor, I hoped my mother's dreams would be realized through me. Now I know that this isn't my story anymore, nor is it my brother's.

The future belongs to that girl with the staff, whose embrace I still share, and all the others like her.

In this moment, amid all the heartbreak, I find that peace enough.