”Governor Tarkin, I should have expected finding you holding Vader’s leash,” Leia’s words dripped with barely veiled anger. “I recognized your foul stench when I was brought onboard…”

“Charming, to the last…” the old Moff replied with a dry smile, the young princess’ insults merely proving they were breaking her. He merely needed to push her a little bit further and the location of the Rebel base would soon be theirs and the Empire once again in full and undisputable control of the galaxy.

“You don’t know how hard I’ve found it signing the order to terminate your life,” Tarkin continued, cupping the princess’ soft chin like assessing a prize bantha.

“I’m surprised you’ve had the courage to take the responsibility yourself…” Leia quipped in return, unfazed by what she had known to be her fate the moment her ship had been boarded.

“Princess Leia, before your execution I would like you to be my guest in a ceremony that will make this battle-station operational. No star system will dare oppose the Emperor now.”

“The more you tighten your grip, Tarkin, the more star systems will slip through your fingers,” she replied with a calm coolness that did little to impress him.

“Not after we demonstrate the power of this station,” Tarkin retorted sharply, his lips a tight line. “In a way, you have determined the choice of the planet that’ll be destroyed first. Since you are reluctant to provide us with the location of the rebel base, I have chosen to test this station’s destructive power on your home planet of Alderaan.”

“No! Alderaan is peaceful! We have no weapons. You can’t possibly…” her protests were cut short as the Moff turned to face her.

“You would prefer another target, a *military* target? Then name the system,” Tarkin’s voice was harsh and unyielding as durasteel. His cold blue eyes bored into hers with a deathly stare as the two fought for a moment in a duel of wills.

“I grow tired of asking this, so it’s going to be the last time…” the Moff declared, closing the distance between himself and her as Leia backed away only to find Vader’s unyielding bulk directly behind her. “Where is the Rebel base?”

For a moment, she held his gaze. The labored breathing of Darth Vader pounding in her head, the clawing fear of what would happen to her people, her family, weighed against death of the Rebellion she had fought to build. The blue pearl of Alderaan filtered in through the view port beyond Tarkin’s shoulder and in that fateful moment, Leia made her choice.

“Dantooine,” she acquiesced, bowing her head in shame. “They’re on Dantooine.”

“There. You see, Lord Vader? She can be reasonable,” Tarkin quipped dryly to the Sith lord who had tried, and failed, to extract the location of the Rebels from her despite arduous torture and his Force talents. Vader remained as passive as ever while Tarkin turned to address his gunnery officer.

“Continue with the operation, you may fire when ready.”

“WHAT?!” Leia’s outburst was genuine and full of shock as she realized what was happening.

Turning to face her with a smug grin, the Moff’s words spilled forth with thinly veiled sadistic glee. “You’re far too trusty. Dantooine is too remote to make an effective demonstration, but don’t worry. We’ll deal with your Rebel friends soon enough.”

Leia let out a pained grunt as she felt a desire to assail him, for what little good it would do, but the icy cold grip of Vader’s hand descended upon her shoulder and easily kept her at bay while the Moff turned to witness the fireworks.

Leia watched in pained anticipation as the orders were relayed to the gun crews and the station below burst into a hive of activity. Painful seconds slipped by as the Moff waited for the firing to commence, Leia’s mind racing as she contemplated the fate that was to befall her homeworld. Each moment could be their last and she wondered if anyone below was even aware of the dreadful danger they were in.

Surely, they had noticed the Death Star approaching. A station its size was hard to conceal and even Alderaan had scanners for detecting incoming vessels. There had to be panic down below. Seeing that massive looming shape of a mechanical moon moving into orbit, its baleful weapon dish pointed at the peaceful planet with murderous intent.

The dreadful terror of a million souls, trapped in purgatory as they held their collective breaths in fear of the executioner’s blow, clutched her heart like frozen claws. She could take no more. Closing her eyes, Leia waited for the inevitable.

She waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened. The tenseness of the inaction was palpable as officers exchanged nervous gazes, Tarkin still staring at the planet with the faintest hint of a twitch in his eye, visible from the viewport reflection. Seconds dragged on to minutes, which then inched by painfully slowly until Leia broke the silence of the airconditioner’s hum.  
  
"Erm, Tarkin? You, uh, you were going to do something?" she could not believe she was actually prompting him to get on with the destruction of her homeworld, but the moment was too absurd not to take advantage of. No matter what she said, the planet was doomed either way.

"..." The Moff remained silent, his posture unmoving as he continued to stare at the planet with a gaze that might well have destroyed it on its own.

"It's ok if your super weapon doesn't work. For men in your age, that's a common occurrence," Leia continued, earning herself a minute shift in Vader’s rasping breathing, something almost akin to amusement.

"..." Tarkin’s hand trembled with barely contained rage, but through force of will he managed to keep his back straight and a stiff upper lip as the Princess took her petty victories where she could. Any moment now the planet would be rendered space dust and all her mocking words would be lost under the magnitude of her failure.

"I hear they have medical aids for that by now," she pressed on, “Or maybe another planet?”

The comment finally snapped his considerable restraint as he turned around with eyes ablaze with hatred. "I've been under a lot of stress, you hear?! Surrounded by incompetence and witless goons…" he rubbed his temples with a migraine looming just around the corner.

Vader shifted minutely.

“Yes? You think you are excused, Vader? You are as blunt an instrument as they come only suitable for the legwork. Had the Emperor deemed it worth his time, he would have sent me someone who has skills beyond application of force and perhaps an eye for tactics…”

Vader shifted once more, not-so-minutely.

“Or would you rather I send you back to Tatooine and sift through the sands with your Stromtroopers?” Tarkin spat, sensing the rising ire in the Sith Lord.

Vader stopped moving.

“I didn’t think so…” the Moff scoffed.

A young gunnery officer approached him with a hurried pace, nodding in salute before beginning. “Sir, we have isolated the cause for the Super laser’s malfunction. Apparently, the feedback heat was being vented out through the reactor chute which, and you will not believe this, comes out through a tiny hole along the equatorial trench. The whole thing’s entirely unshielded and…”

Tarkin’s expression of supreme disinterest and cold anger silenced the man before he could finish his explanation. Swallowing thin air with a gulp, wondering if the temperature had suddenly dropped by several degrees, he hurried on to his point. “W-we’ve managed to circumvent the, uh, heat bleed off. The weapon is now ready to fire.”

“Then fire! What part of, You may fire when ready, do you not understand?!” Tarkin snapped, a vein gently pulsing in his forehead.

“R-right, right away, sir.” The officer disappeared from his sight as a tremble went through the station. Finally turning back to the view port, he felt the familiar shift as on Jedha and Scarif as the Super laser powered up. Several decks below his very feet, massive beams of emerald green power surged forth until emerging from the rim of the emitter disk in a octagonal pattern of focused might.

Beams melting into one singular whole, the Death Star unleashed its full might in one terrible blow as the flash of light almost blinded everyone on the observation deck, the beam flashing into Alderaan in a matter of seconds and cracking the planet like an egg. The sight of the planet’s utter annihilation was punctuated only by Leia’s pained screams as she watched her homeworld turned into ashes before her very eyes, daughter and father both feeling the death screams of a millions of voices that were suddenly silenced.

Turning to face the Princess who simply stared at the smoldering debris with a dead gaze, tears running down her soft cheeks, Tarkin allowed himself a smug grin. “Take her away and set course for Dantooine. Let’s see if we can’t perform a bit better the second time around…”