Suicide Run

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Summary

Having kept his promise to Han and Leia, Luke returns to Dagobah to resume his training with Yoda. Scarred by the fallout from the Cloud City debacle, he confronts the truth of his heritage and the failures of his teachers. Luke must decide what kind of Jedi he'll become -- and what will happen when he faces Vader again.

An extended character study of Luke Skywalker through the middle section of Return of the Jedi.

Notes

This fic is a logical follow-up to my earlier fic Training Montage and makes frequent allusions to some of the events covered there, not all of which are included in canon. You may also appreciate another Luke character study of mine covering some events between ESB and ROTJ.

That said, I've tried to make this particular fic accessible to everyone, regardless of how familiar they are with the details of the original trilogy or whether they've read my other works.
Chapter 1

As the *Millennium Falcon* rocketed away from the pull of Tatooine's gravity, Luke Skywalker's tiny X-wing starfighter was right on the freighter's tail. The desert planet shrank in size until it was a round orb in the mirror, the rocky wastes and vast salt flats reduced to uniform smears of brown and tan. From his perch in the cockpit, Luke couldn't help but stare out the portside window even as Artoo and the ship's computer both whistled for his attention.

In this case, the view was especially poignant. He'd spent the first nineteen years of his life on that dusty rock, yearning with all his heart for adventure, eager to be exactly where he was right now--piloting his own ship and heading somewhere else. He'd finally gotten his chance to see Tatooine from space for the first time when he and old Ben Kenobi had chartered a flight out on the *Falcon*. However, with Imperial agents in hot pursuit, they hadn't had time to linger in orbit.

Four years later, here he was looking down at the planet, but everything was different in ways he couldn't have possibly imagined. What was bright and simple and clear back then had turned murky and confused. He'd been so eager, so earnest, so very, very young. He wasn't that much older now, chronologically, but he felt light-years removed from his past self, unable to completely recapture than innocent faith in a just and benevolent universe.

*Sometimes I wonder if I know too much to be happy ever again...*

Back then, he'd dreamed of following his father Anakin's footsteps to the stars, only to learn that Anakin was more than just a pilot--he'd been a Jedi Knight, a guardian of peace and justice in the galaxy--a legacy that Uncle Owen had hidden from him. So Luke began his training in the Force--the all-encompassing universal energy from which the Jedi derived their powers--first with Ben, and then with Ben's teacher Yoda when Ben was killed by Darth Vader, a fallen Jedi who had betrayed and murdered Anakin Skywalker two decades earlier. One year ago, Luke had walked away from his training to confront Vader, only to find himself overpowered and outmastered, trapped on the edge of a precipice with certain death on every side. He'd managed to escape, but not before Vader had sliced off his right hand at the wrist--and revealed that Ben, too, had lied about Luke's heritage. Far from murdering Luke's father, Vader *was* his father, now transformed into the most feared servant of the Empire.

That memory made his hand and his heart ache--never mind that the hand in question was no longer with him, replaced by a simulacrum of synthflesh and wires. It still ached, especially when he was distraught, and the pain never seemed to lessen with time or repetition. The meddroids said it was all in his head and there wasn't much to be done until the neural pathways finally re-routed correctly.

*I always wanted my life to be just like those holo adventure serials, full of action and excitement, with no end to drama. I wanted to be a hero, save the galaxy, and find my real family. Yet here I am, with all that and more under my belt--and it's nothing like I thought it would be.*

*I didn't expect it to hurt this much.*

He wished he could dismiss Vader's claim as a trick or lie, a ruse to put him off balance and doubt his mentors, but it was impossible. He *felt* the idea to be true in a way that defied all rational explanation. Once glimpsed, he couldn't unsee it; now that the veil was lifted, he couldn't ignore the connections that bound him to the grim, dark-masked figure who still stalked his nightmares. The only reason he hadn't seen it before was because he'd never thought to look. It had been waiting for him his entire life, but until now, he'd lacked the capacity to perceive what was directly in front of him.
In hindsight, it was far too obvious. There was Uncle Owen's skittish reticence at any mention of Anakin Skywalker's existence, and Ben Kenobi's own vague account, which seemed incredibly suspect in light of Vader's revelations. More recently, there was the vision Luke experienced in an underground cave while training with Yoda in the swamps of Dagobah, where he'd seen his own face under Vader's broken mask. He hadn't understood what that meant at the time, but he did now, all too well. It had been the clearest message he could possibly receive--a warning of the darkness that lurked inside him, just waiting to break free.

_Much anger in him. Like his father_, Yoda had complained when they met--Yoda, who must know Vader's identity, yet never shared that knowledge with Luke. He felt that anger now: at Ben, for outright lying to him; at Yoda, for omitting the truth. Never mind that Luke had never suspected enough to ask the right questions; Yoda had known Luke was going to face Vader, and had let him walk into that conflict unprepared.

To be fair, Yoda had warned him, over and over again, that he wasn't seeing the whole picture. _"You will be ready when you know who you are,"_ had been the all-too-common refrain of those exchanges. Luke just hadn't understood what his quiet, subtle, borderline-crazy-but-genuinely-good-hearted teacher had been trying to tell him.

It all came back to Luke's own faults, the same ones that Yoda had pointed out right from the beginning. It was his own impatience that had ensnared him in the cave, his own recklessness that had driven him to abandon his training, and his own arrogance that had betrayed him on Bespin and cost him his right hand.

So he was angry at himself, as well. There was plenty of blame to go around, and he couldn't ignore his own part in this, even though he knew he could never have said idly by and let his friends suffer on his behalf.

That said, things could have gone much, much worse than they had. He was alive, and so far, he hadn't become the agent of evil that Yoda had feared. His friends had more or less rescued themselves, and come back for _him_ when he needed them (the irony was not lost on him), but he'd been able to pay it back and then some with this campaign against Jabba.

And it had been healing in its own way to come back to Tatooine now. Before confronting Jabba, he'd taken a speeder out to Ben Kenobi's old hut on the edge of the Judland Wastes, hoping to find something, anything, that might help him resolve the inner turmoil that threatened to overwhelm him. He hadn't found it there, but his flight plan had taken him over the ruins of his former home--desolate and abandoned since its destruction by Imperial stormtroopers four years earlier--that had allowed him to finally say good-bye at the grave of his aunt and uncle and make his peace with his childhood.

Watching the sunrise from the old knoll above the Lars' homestead, he'd realized the futility of fighting the past--only by focusing on the present moment, on the things he could change, would he find a way forward through these tangled knots of pain. And it was that deep, abiding sense of calm at his core that had stayed with him ever since. He might become distracted and forget it was there, but it wasn't something he could lose now that he had experienced it.

But peace wasn't a static state; it was something that needed to be made anew in each moment. Despite his new insights, he found himself faltering as his emotions threatened to overwhelm him at the times when he needed to be calm and settled. The anger he felt at his teachers' deceptions still burned underneath the surface like a ground fire, occasionally sending up flares of smoke and flames. If he wasn't careful, the conflagration would grow and consume him utterly.

And as the ache in his missing hand reminded him, such anger would have dire consequences,
both for himself and for the people he loved. That, at least, he had no intention of forgetting ever again.

Despite Luke's ambivalence towards the place where he'd grown up, and the recent revelations that had shattered everything he thought he knew of his past, he had to admit that Tatooine, seen from above, was amazingly beautiful. No matter how many times he traveled through space, he never got tired of the intricate dance of all the moons and planets suspended like colorful jewels against the backdrop of a million glowing stars, never ceased to marvel at how something so big could become so small just by a change of perspective. It was comforting to confirm that Tatooine was no exception in that regard.

*Would that all of my other problems could be so easily resolved...*

Well, he'd done what he came here to do--retrieve his friend Han Solo from his imprisonment in the stronghold of the crime lord Jabba the Hutt. It had been touch and go for a few moments there, but they'd made it through; Jabba was dead and most of his hangers-on with him. No lost love there. He doubted there would be reprisals--all of the witnesses were dead, and the gangster's death was one less problem for the local authorities to deal with. Fortunately, Jabba didn't have any kin who might care to avenge him, so the feud would end here, with an explosion at the Great Pit of Carkoon and Luke and his friends speeding away in a stolen skiff.

*I wish it hadn't ended this way.* I warned him--I offered to pay--and he didn't listen. He refused to bargain when he had a chance, and that didn't work out so well. And I told him that. Repeatedly. Right until the very end.

Luke and his friends had made it through those exchanges remarkably unscratched, considering all the things that had nearly gone wrong. He'd managed to kill Jabba's pet rancor with a few bones and a falling dungeon door--though it had been a closer call than he cared to think about. He'd gotten a blaster bolt in his hand when he'd failed to dodge in time, but it was his artificial hand, and it was a superficial wound, enough to hurt but not enough to interfere with its functionality.

Chewie and Han had spent the night in the dungeons--which couldn't have been much fun--and Lando had had a miserable few weeks as a guard, but Luke knew for a fact they'd all been in worse scrapes over the years and most of the complaints were just for show. Happily, nobody had bothered to mess with the droids. Artoo wouldn't have put up with it--and Luke had put in safeguards, just in case-- but Threepio had managed to survive his stint as Jabba's translator, despite the Hutt's notoriously hair-trigger temper. The protocol droid might resent the indignity, but Luke had known Threepio long enough now to know that he wasn't truly happy unless he had something to complain about.

Leia had suffered the worst. He hoped she was all right, anyway. She felt normal enough when he reached out to her with the Force, though Leia was good at hiding things when she wanted to and he wasn't sure he could penetrate her defences even had he cared to do so. Lando had made sure Jabba's goons hadn't assaulted her, and assured Luke *sotto voce* that the female slaves--who had dressed her in one of the outlandishly skimpy outfits that the crime lord favored--had been kind to one of their own. Jabba had been so preoccupied with executing Luke and the others that he hadn't had time to lavish any personal attention on her. Aside from a few bruises and a blow to her ego, she was probably fine. If being tortured by Vader--twice (he winced at the thought)--hadn't been enough to break her, then maybe a few hours with Jabba wasn't so bad. He hoped.

"Why did you break cover?" he'd wanted to ask when he saw her up on the dais next to Jabba with that chain around her neck. But he couldn't let himself break his own cover, that facade of Icy Detached Jedi, even though he knew Jabba was smart enough to infer the connection between them. But one look at Leia's stricken face, and the whole story was revealed: she couldn't let Han-fresh out of carbonite, blind, stunned, and helpless--believe he was alone in the hands of his
enemies. Because she loved him, enough to put herself in danger and suffer the consequences of a single moment's comfort.

Luke wished somebody someday might love him with the same fierce intensity that Leia so clearly felt for Han. Long ago, he'd hoped he might be the winner of the princess's affections - but that was another way in which life hadn't gone the way he thought it would. Not that he was complaining, mind you--Leia was like the sister he'd never had now, and he wouldn't change that for the world. From the moment Luke had seen her holographic figure requesting Ben Kenobi's aid, he'd been drawn to her; she in turn seemed to feel that same compelling tug that had become a close and abiding friendship.

Their shared grief over Han's capture in the fallout from Bespin had ultimately cemented their bond into something deeper. Luke cared about Leia more than anybody else in the world. But it wasn't like what she felt for Han. It wasn't like that at all.

But despite a few missteps along the way, Jabba was dead, Han was free and all of their gambles had paid off. He ought to feel triumphant, or pleased with his accomplishment, but a dull, grey numbness gripped him and he couldn't even manage that. Despite his newfound insights to living in the present, he couldn't seem to savor the moment. No matter how he framed the situation to himself, he could only manage a vague melancholy. It was strange.

They'd made it through this ordeal and come out alive, but he couldn't stop his mind from rushing headlong into the future, towards what he knew was coming next. What fate had in store for him now was infinitely harder, and there was no guarantee of a positive outcome.

The gasping rattle of mechanical breathing fills his ears as Vader lies at his feet, too tired to struggle any further. Yet this is no battle; there is no sense of hostility, only a dull, quiet calm. "Luke, help me take the mask off," Vader whispers. "Help me..."

Luke blinks. He wants nothing more than to help this man - his father - but still he hesitates. "But you'll die," he says stupidly, though he had no idea how much of the armor is life support and how much of it is only for decoration.

"Let me look on you with my own eyes," Vader says, eerily slow. Alarms echo in the distance and stormtroopers rush by, paying the two of them no heed. Is the respirator slurring Vader's words or is he about to lose consciousness? There's blood trickling down Luke's face and he can't see clearly--or are they tears? Everything is confused and nothing is stable, like a dream--

But his father's right, it's time. The mask has to come off for Vader to be whole again. So Luke reaches forward, and pulls the helmet away, exposing a tangled mesh of wires across the crown of Vader's head. There's still the dark, skull-mask clinging to his face; Luke has to fumble to find the right place to put his fingers, before the mask comes away in his hands and he's face-to-face with Anakin Skywalker, Darth Vader no longer--

--and suddenly, Luke is collapsed on the floor, screaming in pain, "Father, father, please--" though he knows this isn't Vader's doing. Somehow, Vader is nearby, watching him flail helplessly as the pain shoots through him again, every nerve of his body is on fire, it will never end, it will never end--

"Father, please--"

--the crackling hum of an ignited lightsaber as his green blade clashes against blood-red--

--and the pain vanished and he was back in the X-wing again, gasping and trembling as the vision left him, but otherwise none the worse for wear. According to the ship's chronometer, he'd only
been out for a moment or two, but it was always disorienting to be yanked so abruptly into another
time and space. He had no doubt that this was another vision of the future--or at least a possible
one.

*Difficult to see,* Yoda had said about this particular gift of the Force. *Always in motion is the
future...*

Since then, Luke had learned the hard way that his visions, while they might be true, didn't
necessarily paint a full picture of reality. And just because he saw something didn't mean that it
meant what he expected, or would happen in the way he expected.

But in the process of opening himself to the Force under Yoda's tutelage, he'd dreamt for weeks
on end of Vader torturing his friends in a mysterious city in the clouds. When he'd experienced his
first waking vision during one of Yoda's exercises, he'd learned they were glimpses of possible
realities rather than the nightmarish figments of Luke's over-active imagination. Vader had taken
advantage of Luke's burgeoning Force skills, knowing that the echoes of Han and Leia's pain
would drive Luke straight into his arms.

And Vader was right. Luke came directly to Cloud City, knowing he was walking into an
ambush, but determined to do what he could to save his friends. He'd found himself trapped
between surrender or death, and he'd chosen death.

But Leia had saved him and somehow he'd managed to survive anyway.

"How did you find me, Leia?" he'd asked her a few days later in the medwing, his mouth dry and
his mind still fuzzy from the drugs they'd given him for the pain.

She frowned, unwilling to meet his gaze, as if she were ashamed. "I don't know. I heard your
voice somehow, in my head. I knew you were in trouble. I knew we had to come back from you."

There was a long pause as the silence stretched out between them.

"I'm sorry," she said at last. "He knew you would come somehow. He tortured us and--" Her
voice broke. "We didn't know why until Lando told us. He wasn't even interested in the Rebellion
anymore--just you."


Startled, Leia's eyes flickered up to meet his--and an electric connection flickered between the two
of them for a moment before abruptly fading. "So that was you then! I thought I saw you in the
room with us--just for a second--and then you vanished--"

The revelation was unsettling, and it was clear that Leia was equally disturbed, though she was
quick to hide her expression and change the subject. They hadn't spoken about it since.

Yoda had told Luke that he'd seen future, but that couldn't possibly be right if Leia had been able
to see him, too. Had he somehow leapt across the gulf of well-nigh everything in defiance of all
the laws of physics to bear witness to that moment? Or had Leia's present somehow been Luke's
future? Or had Yoda been wrong?

Time didn't appear to work the same way on Dagobah as it did in the rest of the universe--

The computer on his X-wing had crashed when the ship had gone down in the swamp and Artoo
had to completely reboot it, so there was no objective record of how long Luke had spent on
Dagobah. Artoo's own internal chronometer had been off from galactic standard time, something
he'd noticed when he plugged into the municipal systems on Bespin. In all the chaos, Luke hadn't
had time to investigate, and then he'd spent weeks in the Alliance medwing, in and out of consciousness. Even once he was well enough to catch up, Luke's own conception of how much time had passed since he left Hoth was vague and fuzzy, and it didn't match Leia and Chewie's accounts. Something strange had happened on Dagobah, and Luke wasn't entirely sure how to explain it.

Maybe Yoda would tell him if he asked. Or maybe not. Yoda was not the most forthcoming being in the galaxy, particularly when it came to esoteric Jedi secrets like this. Or anything Luke needed to know, like the true identity of his father.

Not that I ever thought to ask him that, of course. But would he have given me a straight answer I had? Or would he have refused to answer? There was no way to know now.

Luke sighed. He'd promised Yoda that he would return and complete the training, once he'd rescued his friends. Now that Han was a free man, it was time to return to Dagobah at last. But despite his desperate need for answers, he was not looking forward to this particular reunion.

There were things that he needed to know, things that only Yoda could tell him. He didn't want to linger in the past, tormented by blame and anger, but he couldn't ignore his jumbled feelings either. They had to be faced, lest they consume him.

And this time, he wouldn't let his wily teacher slip away from telling him what he needed to hear. He would make certain of that.

"You will be ready when you know who you are," Yoda had said, over and over again. Well, perhaps he was finally ready now. Only time would tell if Yoda accepted that or not.

A few days ago on Tatooine, Luke had reached out to the past, hoping to catch a glimpse of his father. He'd succeeded at seeing something that might have been the past--there had been what looked like a younger Obi-wan Kenobi screaming Anakin's name in a field of fire, for one thing--but he wasn't sure what to make of it all yet. The next day he'd led the assault on Jabba's palace and there simply hadn't been time to process it all until now.

All this time and training, and I still don't understand the Force. What it is, and what it can do. There's so much I still don't know...

But even as the doubts washed over him, there were constants.

I am Luke Skywalker. Jedi Knight, and friend to Han, and Leia, and the Rebellion. Anakin Skywalker is my father. And I will bring him back to the light if it possible to do so.

He clung to that knowledge, chanting those words over and over again, holding them up as a talisman against the dark. It was comforting to remember all this, to know that this, more than any clever trick or exotic weapons, would save him.

So far, so good, anyway.

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Instead of settling into high orbit and preparing for lightspeed alongside the Falcon, Luke veered off with his X-wing in the opposite direction. The comm crackled as the crew of the Falcon noticed what he was doing.

"Luke, where are you going? Sullust is the other way," Lando said with a chuckle.
Luke had intended to inform the others of his plans before now, but in all the chaos there hadn't been time. Though they'd left the smoking wreckage at the Great Pit of Carkoon under cloudless blue skies, a sandstorm had come up abruptly, and it had taken all of Luke's piloting skills to get them back to where they'd stowed the ships a few days earlier.

(Han claimed the whole way back that he could have done it in record time if he hadn't been temporarily blinded by carbonite sickness. "And that sand had better not be scratching the paint on my ship!" he complained, while Lando helped Leia find some protective gear to keep the wind from ripping her skin to shreds and Chewie kept Han from flopping over completely when the skiff jerked unexpectedly.)

"I'll meet you back at the Fleet," Luke said into the comm, his voice even and upbeat despite his own inner turmoil. He'd spoken briefly of his need to complete his Jedi training to Leia before the rescue, but hadn't gone into very many details, even with her. Now was not the time or place for discussion or argument.

"Hurry," Leia said in his ear. "The Alliance should be assembled by now." It was masterful how much she could pack into a single sentence, encouraging him to return with a reminder of how much he was loved and needed, at the same time as she accepted the other obligations that pulled him away from her.

Before he'd left with Leia and the others on this rescue mission, something big had come in from the spies - as big as the Death Star, the rumors went, a second Death Star, even. Personally, Luke was skeptical - no way the Empire would be dumb enough to try that sort of thing again - but the Emperor was ambitious and stubborn enough that it just might be true. Whatever the news, High Command all was riled up these days, mustering a massive fleet in preparation for--something. They'd find out the details at the upcoming rendezvous at Sullust.

Given the buzzing rumors, he'd half-expected High Command to protest this madcap venture to Tatooine. But to their credit, they'd recognized that "Captain Solo" was an important resource--a skilled and experienced pilot at a time where every fighter counted--as well as a good friend, both to them personally and to the Rebellion. More importantly, they all remembered Han. They liked him. And Leia could be very persuasive when she needed to be.

(For that matter, so could Luke, though he preferred not to use the Force for that sort of manipulation if other options were available. Fortunately, it hadn't come to that. Messing with Jabba's minions to get a quick audience was one thing, but it smacked of the Dark Side to use it on other matters.)

"I'm amazed you convinced the Alliance to let us go after such a 'valuable asset'," Luke had teased her on their way to Tatooine.

"Well, he is! He's a natural leader."

"Even when you want to strangle him?" Luke asked, raising an eyebrow.

Leia flushed in spite of herself. "He certainly has a way with people," she hedged, daring him to press the issue.

"He does indeed," Luke said with a laugh, hugging her and ceding her the point. They'd both be dead several times over without Han Solo, bound to him by ties of love and friendship. There was no way they'd abandon him to Jabba.

*And besides, how could we possibly take down the Empire without Han? He'd be incensed if we didn't take him along for the ride.*
Thank goodness for Leia. Thank goodness he didn't need to explain his trip to Dagobah to her. Somehow she knew what he was thinking and feeling without having to say anything. Just like she'd known where to find him on Bespin. He didn't know how it had happened, but her presence was one of the few genuinely bright, uncorrupted things in his life, and he was grateful for it.

"I will," Luke said into the comm, trying to reassure her as well as himself. *Yoda can't keep me there forever, after all. He wants me to face Vader again, save the galaxy, defeat the Empire--*

"Hey, Luke," Han's voice cut in suddenly over the comm. He and Leia must be standing right next to each other, probably wrapped arm in arm. Hopefully all of the sexual tension between them would be resolved by the time Luke got back from Dagobah. "Thanks. Thanks for coming after me. Now I owe you one."

Luke smiled, and bit his lip hard so as not to laugh where his friend could hear. He didn't want Han to think he was making fun of him. Expressions of affection like this from Han were few and far between--even if they were phrased in somewhat mercenary terms--and Luke took them seriously.

It was good to have Han back again. Luke had missed him so much during the past year as he wrestled with his own demons. Leia had done what she could, but it had been strange without Han's sardonic wit and laser-keen insights, his easy acceptance of Luke as he was, without demanding that he change.

So much had happened in the past year for Luke, and yet Han had been suspended in time, and knew none of it. In Han's mind, Luke was still the eager pilot who had gotten himself slagged by a wampa and trapped in a snowstorm back on Hoth. Han didn't know anything about Luke's Jedi training, or his growing mastery of the Force, or his new lightsaber or his missing hand--and Luke wasn't looking forward to bringing his friend up to speed.

(What would Han say if he knew that Vader had crippled Luke at Bespin? If he knew that Vader was Luke's father? Luke shivered at the thought of Han's face twisted in disgust at the revelation--)

Hopefully, the effects of the carbonite sickness would wear off in time, and Han would be no worse the wear for his terrible ordeal--

Tucked away in the astromech slot outside the X-wing's cockpit, Artoo finally managed to get Luke's attention with a series of trepidatious trills, at the same time the ship's computer finally spat out the navigation calculations Luke had requested.

"That's right, Artoo, we're going to the Dagobah system," Luke acknowledged, trying to sound cheerful. Considering all that had befallen them on their last trip to Dagobah, the droid had a right to be nervous.

He grabbed a long, black glove off the console and pulled it over his prosthesis to cover the charred synflesh and ragged wires from the blaster wound. The wound was ugly, but it barely hurt now; he'd cried out more from surprise than anything else when it happened. He was lucky the hand still worked as well as it did given how many wires had been severed; he'd made the rest of the battle on more on instinct and adrenaline than anything else.

He didn't have the energy to fix the prosthesis now, but it would be easy enough to repair before he arrived on Dagobah. Luke had always been a good mechanic, but he'd never though he'd use the same techniques he used to patch up droids and vaporators on his own body. It made him a little queasy when he thought about it.
I suppose it's lucky it was my right hand that got shot, though. It would have hurt a hell of a lot more on real flesh--

Artoo, dismayed by Luke's confirmation, wanted to know why they had to go back to that terrible planet again, and didn't they have important business with the Alliance at Sullust, anyway?

Come on, you sound like Threepio, he wanted to say, but Artoo was unlikely to be mollified by the observation. And if history were any indication, Luke wasn't going to have a good time, either. Still, despite their mutual trepidation, there was no help for it.

"I have a promise to keep--to an old friend," he said instead. He kept his voice light, grateful Artoo couldn't see the tension on his face. He wasn't sure how good the little droid was at reading human expressions, but he didn't want to puncture his confidence any further.

If the droid found Luke's wording odd, he didn't comment. Yoda was certainly old -- he'd been alive for at almost nine hundred years at this point - though Luke had only met him a little over a year ago (plus or minus any chronological weirdness). Yet though Luke hadn't known him for very long, the Jedi Master had shaped him more thoroughly than anyone else in his life. He owed so much to Yoda, tried so hard to live up to this teacher's expectations--and over and over again, he'd failed.

And his worst failure at the very end had been to choose his friends over his training. To walk away from Yoda and abandon him on Dagobah. To turn his back on all his teacher had to offer him for a single, reckless vision--

And--he felt a catch in his throat at the though--Yoda was a friend, too. Truly a friend--not in the same way than Han and Leia were, but important all the same. Pivotable. Essential.

He wouldn't be who he was without Yoda's teachings. But he also wouldn't be himself without Han and Leia, either.

I promised Han and Leia that I'd protect them. I also promised to Yoda I would complete the training. Yoda made it sound like I couldn't do both. Yet here I am, and perhaps it's possible to move forward. To become the Jedi he wants me to be. The Jedi I want to become--

He wasn't sure how Yoda would react to Luke's return. They certainly hadn't parted on the best of terms. Luke remembered vividly how old and frail Yoda had looked at Luke's departure, hobbling forward with his staff with hunched shoulders, adrift and broken in a way that he'd never seen before.

I hope he's all right-- I never tried to send messages, but I assumed he knew--with the Force--without me having to say anything--and I was so angry I wasn't sure I could be civil, anyway--and if I'm honest, I kinda wanted to let him suffer--just a little bit--

Well, that had been petty and childish of him and he regretted it now. He hoped he'd feel the same way once he'd returned to Dagobah, but Yoda had a way of bringing out the worst in him. Sometimes, it was intentional.

Could Luke do it, start up the training again as if nothing had happened? What if Yoda kept him there for so long he missed the Alliance's battle? What if Han and Leia needed him again--

It couldn't be helped. He needed to return to Dagobah, keep his promise, make peace with Yoda, find out the truth, and then he would see what happened. And it probably wouldn't be too bad. He'd even found himself missing his training at times: the quiet meditation before dawn, long runs through the swamp with Yoda on his back, successfully blocking random objects that Yoda threw
Please don't tell me I'm feeling nostalgic for that miserable place. The irony is too much.

At the time, he'd thought his training with Yoda to be one of the most excruciating events of his life. That was before he'd dueled single-handedly with Darth Vader, and lost his hand, which made his trials and tribulations with Yoda seem almost quaint in comparison.

I'm not the same as I was. I didn't die. And I didn't give into hatred. I didn't fall to the Dark Side. I didn't join Vader. Surely that counts for something.

When the schism had come, Yoda had presented it to him as a choice: stay and be safe, or go and fall to the dark side. Yet there had been another way, a third way, just as Luke had insisted. Somehow, he'd found a different path and made it through.

But he wouldn't have been able to do it without the training Yoda had given him. True, he'd been so, so, so out of his depth against Vader. But the training went deeper than technical skills, straight to the core of his being, yielding insights that had grounded him, calmed him, saved him. It was his training that had showed him his connection to the rest of the universe, allowing him to reach out to Leia for aid when all other hope was lost.

You will be ready when you know who you are.

Being a Jedi meant facing up to the truth, however unpleasant. And no matter how much he thought he knew about himself, there was still more to learn. No doubt Yoda would be able to enlighten him still further when Luke returned to Dagobah.

Hopefully, they could make it through the atmosphere without disaster this time. He'd never had all of the sensors on an X-wing wink out all at once--particularly not in a dense fog--and it had spooked him and Artoo badly. The little droid seemed to take it as a personal failure, and had grimly resolved that a similar fate would not befall them again.

Luke didn't think it would be possible to screw up a landing more than they had the first time around, but he kept his mouth shut. Dagobah had a way of unpleasantly surprising him, and he didn't want to jinx them with a show of overconfidence.

Ready or not, here we come.

He pulled back the lever on the hyperdrive and the stars dissolved into blurs.
Miraculously, nothing went wrong with the landing. The fog was thick, but not unbearably so, and with no unexplained sensor failure, zero visibility wasn't even a problem. During the initial descent, they slipped past a few brewing storms in the atmosphere, but nothing particularly serious. Artoo was able to use the geonavigation points he'd taken on their previous visit to take the X-wing down just a few hundred meters from Yoda's hut, an hour before local dawn.

Ironically, it was much easier to tell time from orbit - as soon as the X-wing had slipped into the atmosphere, it was back to dull, grey drab uniformity. Luke knew from past experience that he would never see the sunrise here. It would be dark until it was gradually lighter, and that was that. Still, he made a point of noting the time with his ship's chronometer and instructing Artoo to do the same. If there was any temporal weirdness afoot, he at least wanted some measurements of the phenomenon.

As Luke opened the hatch, the humidity hit him like an unwelcome embrace, warm and clingy compared to the perfectly balanced air in the cockpit. He grimaced. He hadn't missed that particular aspect of life on Dagobah, and it was especially jarring coming directly from Tatooine. Of all the miseries of his training with Yoda, it was one of the few things he'd never gotten used to.

He lowered the landing ladder and gingerly made his way to the surface, senses poised and ready for attack from any and all quarters, from experience as much as paranoia. Primed by previous disasters, he checked to make sure that the X-wing was on truly solid ground, but all seemed well enough. He was pretty sure he could get the ship out if it was swallowed by the swamp again - and Yoda definitely could - but it was not an experience he cared to repeat.

Everything was quiet. Too quiet. He didn't like it, even if it was normal enough for Dagobah at this hour. He was simultaneously pleased and unnerved that everything had gone so smoothly.

Were there seasons here on Dagobah? Everything looked more or less the same as he had left it. All around him for miles in every direction was the familiar landscape: an endless, flat swamp, stinking pools of dark water and rotting organic matter, in which unsettling reptiles lurked. Leafless brown sticks, sad imitations of that trees he'd seen on other worlds, propped themselves above the muck on flotillas of exposed roots, their branches draped with fuzzy mosses and clambering vines. He knew from personal experience that the water was full of leeches and ticks; that snakes lurked under every fallen log and twisted branch; and that the vines looked fragile but would hold his weight (excepting the ones that weren't truly vines at all but aerial rootlets from epiphytes supported in the higher branches. He had a scar on his left leg from when he'd fallen as a result of mistaking the two.)

First things first. He stripped off his flight suit--it was far too hot to be comfortable here, and he didn't really need it now. He helped Artoo out of the astromech slot - it was tough for the little droid to get in and out by himself without a vaccuum tube setup. Luke wanted Artoo on the ground and mobile if something happened to the ship.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

A cascade of rude noises encapsulated Artoo's position with remarkable brevity and vulgarity. Namely, the droid had plenty of work to do on the X-wing, and any business with Yoda was Luke's affair alone and did not concern him. It was the most passive-aggressive response Luke had ever seen from him.
"You sure you're okay here by yourself?" he said, already knowing the answer, but compelled to ask anyway.

Artoo assured him that everything was one hundred percent fine and in good working order and no assistance was necessary.

"Well, that's good, then," Luke said, patting the droid's rounded sensor dome. It was just as well - Artoo couldn't fit in Yoda's house anyway, which no doubt contributed to the droid's grudge - but he was oddly disappointed all the same. "I'll feel better knowing that you're out here taking care of the ship, keeping the snakes off."

Artoo, who had worked up a massive grudge against all native life-forms during their previous visit, made no small secret of his disdain. Luke opened one of the lower panels underneath the ship to speed the droid's routine checks and left him to his work.

They were close enough to the hut that it was visible from the ship, but the direct route would send him tumbling into fetid water deeper than his waist, so he didn't bother trying. Instead, he took a winding, circuitous route that twisted and turned along a narrow strip of solid ground to avoid the deep pits. He was pleased that he had not lost the knack of stepping just so to keep from falling into the muck or losing the trail.

The soggy smell of swamp gas assailed him as he picked his way towards the hut, as unpleasant as humidity even if his nostrils eventually desensitized over time. All around him was evidence of the sheer fecundity of life--inextricably intermingled with death and decay. It was something he'd noticed, but hadn't appreciated during his past visit.

Back then, before the sensors failed, he'd seen from orbit how Dagobah glowed with life. Now he didn't need to rely on gadgets; the Force revealed the constant interplay of life and death to all his senses, particularly sight, so that the darkened swamp appeared to shine with a ghostly pallor that his brain insisted on interpreting as coming from his eyes.

He felt a tense, familiar prickle in the air, as the air pressure fell. One of the storms they'd passed on their way in was approaching. If the severity of Luke's headache was any judge, it would be at least an hour before the storm came, maybe more.

There was no sign of Yoda anywhere.

Luke kept his senses alert, as if his teacher would tumble out of the undergrowth at any moment, lodging missiles at him. It had happened all too often before. But everything in the swamp was quiet and still, without any sign of movement. His tension didn't help, and he had to pause several times to force himself to relax.

Given his abrupt departure, he hadn't expected a welcoming committee. But not seeing Yoda at all was equally unnerving. Still, it is pretty early. He's usually up by now, but maybe he slept in this morning.... who knows what he's been up to since I've been gone?

As he rounded a loop to avoid a camouflaged pit, the hut came back into view - smoke was visible as it left the chimney, though it rapidly intermingled with tendrils of fog. Yoda was inside, then, or not too far away. Perhaps he was making another batch of unpalatable stew or that mysterious dark hot drink he always foisted on a sleepy Luke before morning meditation. Luke was glad he'd eaten a ration bar before the landing; Yoda's diet had never appealed to his stomach, and it was a lot harder to refuse when he was hungry.

From the outside, the hut looked just as he remembered it--formed out of the very muck of this planet, a hardened mass with a sinuous, organic shape. It was likely, Luke realized, that Yoda had
sculpted it himself. The hut was sized for a being of Yoda's height rather than Luke's, and correspondingly cramped -- while at the same time managing to house whatever snakes, rats, ticks, centipedes, ants or beetles that cared to venture inside. Luke appreciated the hut most on rainy nights, when a roaring fire in the corner could make the place downright cozy.

He knelt and rapped on the little door of the hut, uncertain of the proper etiquette for a prodigal student's return. "Master Yoda?" he called at last. "It's me, Luke. I've come back to finish my training. Are you there?" He felt like an idiot, announcing himself like this when Yoda had known he was here as soon he'd popped out of hyperspace, but he didn't know what else to say.

The door opened outward, startling Luke - but slowly enough that he had time to jerk his face away before impact. In the doorframe, leaning on his stick, stood Yoda. He didn't look good at all. That was an understatement, Luke realized as he stared. Yoda didn't look bad, he looked terrible. His pale green skin had faded to a dull grey, and he was bent and twisted, in a way that Luke had only seen once, on that last terrible day, when Luke had rushed off to Bespin.

When he looked at Yoda, he could see a tiny spark of light at his master's core, twisting and fluttering -- and fading.

Luke felt all the blood drain from his face in horror. Oh, no. This is my fault. I did this to him. I broke him. I broke his heart that day, and he--never recovered from the blow I gave him--

"Come in, come in," Yoda said. Whatever ills had befallen him, his voice was still the same. Hearing that familiar, halting accent was like coming home. "Waiting for you, I have."

It was so kind. So friendly. So open. It was as if the past year has never happened. I don't deserve this, Luke thought in a daze. Why aren't you angry at me? Why aren't you yelling, raging, screaming, rubbing my failures in my face?

His endlessly rehearsed speeches evaporated like water under the Tatooine suns. All his accomplishments from their time apart fell away, and he was left with deep regret and shame. He hadn't expected gentleness of all things from Yoda.

He hadn't expected anything like this.

It had never occurred to Luke that Yoda might not be able to resume the training where they'd left off. Given his appearance now, it was a miracle that he was out of bed.

I'm so sorry. I know you've been waiting for me, Luke wanted to say, but his mouth didn't seem to work and nothing he could think of to say seemed adequate. No, Yoda hadn't lost the knack of rendering Luke speechless, all right. Just like old times.

Luke had to crawl on his hands and knees to follow Yoda into the hut. Once inside, he leaned against the clay support pillar at the center, with his back to the door out of old habit. It was where he'd sat to take his meals when they ate together - it was fine as long as he remembered to move slowly to avoid knocking his head against the low ceiling. It was also important to check for snakes. He looked for them before he sat down, but he was in luck; they all seemed to be elsewhere at the moment. They weren't poisonous, but their bites hurt, as he'd discovered on multiple occasions - another hazard he preferred to avoid if he could.

He folded himself up with his knees against his chest, wrapping his arms around his body, like a dark, brooding bird. He was wearing the dark, tailored suit that Lando had given him in the aftermath of Bespin as a way of cheering Luke's spirits. He'd accepted with a smile, but not for the reasons Lando had assumed. There was so much darkness and pain within him now - it felt good
to display it on the outside somehow.

Not that Yoda was one to care about fashion choices, having worn the same ragged robes for the entire time Luke had known him. On an isolated backwater planet, with only a frustrating and undeserving apprentice for company, it didn't come up much.

As Luke made himself as comfortable as he could in a space that wasn't intended for human use, Yoda hobbled over to check on the fire, sniffing thoughtfully to himself.

"That face you make," Yoda said at last. "Look I so old to young eyes?"

Luke thought he'd been doing a good job of keeping his turmoil hidden - at least until Yoda was facing the other way. "No! Of course not," he lied--badly and he knew it.

Of course, Yoda wasn't buying it. "I do." He coughed, tilting his head to favor Luke with a dreamy smile with far too many teeth. "Yes, I do." He coughed again, looked down at the ground, suddenly serious again. "Sick have I become. Old and weak."

It's my fault. All my fault. I'm so sorry. I knew I was hurting you, but I hadn't realized it would have this much of an impact - you were always so STRONG - I never thought I could hurt you like this--

"Hmmph." Yoda looked up again, and for a moment, he was his old vibrant self again, poised to skewer Luke's self-pitying monologue. "When nine hundred years old you reach, look this good you will not, hmmph?" he said, jabbing a spike-nailed finger at Luke. He chuckled feverishly to himself, gleeful at his little joke, but Luke could barely crack a smile at his master's antics.

It was a joke, but there was a core of truth to it - two hundred was about the limit for humanity, and that was only if you were very, very rich or very, very lucky. But in Luke's case, he wasn't sure any of that mattered. Between his ominous dreams and the massive campaign the Alliance was unrolling soon, there was no guarantee he'd survive long enough to die of old age.

He followed Yoda with his eyes as his teacher moved from the fire towards his bed, built into the wall of the hut at Luke's right elbow. When Luke had lived here, he'd had slept on a mat on the floor because it was the only place big enough for him to stretch out. Even then, he'd to curl up on his side to keep his feet from brushing the wall.

"Soon will I rest, yes. Forever sleep." Yoda settled on the edge of his bed with a grunt and a sigh. "Earned it, I have."

Luke had seen death before, but it was usually quick, bright oblivion, total disintegration into stardust or a vigorous youth cut down in their prime. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this. "Master Yoda, you can't die," he said. "I need you. I need your help, your support, your guidance, even if I disagree with it. There's so much I must do, and I don't want to be alone--"

Yoda looked at him skeptically. "Strong am I in the Force," he said. "But not that strong." He let the stick fall to the ground as he wiggled into bed. "Twilight is upon me, and soon--night must fall--"

Oh, of course--they'd discussed this before. The fear of death was the reason so many fell to the dark side, and had given rise to the ancient enemy of the Jedi, the Sith. They were strong enough, and arrogant enough to believe they could defy death--and twisted themselves and others in great evil in the process, Yoda had told him once.

As Yoda fumbled with the blanket, Luke reached out and helped cover his teacher's tiny frail body. "That is the way of things," Yoda said, accepting Luke's help without comment, even as he
continued with his lecture. "The way of the Force."

Not even approaching death could interfere with one of Yoda's monologues. Luke's face twisted and blanched as the implications of Yoda dying hit him.

"But I need your help," Luke said, trying to keep the tears out of his voice. "I've come back to complete the training--"

Any bravado he'd carried during their year apart evaporated in his panic. *I thought you would tell me what I needed to do! I can't--I don't know how to do this without you--!*

Yoda opened his eyes a sliver. "No more training do you require. Already know you that which you need." He closed his eyes again and relaxed with a sigh.

He was still breathing. He wasn't dead yet, but he looked more like a limp doll than the powerful Jedi that Luke had known.

"So I am a Jedi," Luke said slowly, trying to wrap his mind around the thought. All that he'd done since leaving Yoda a year ago--constructing his own lightsaber, training on his own--it had been the right thing to do, it was enough--

But apparently Yoda wasn't going to let his errant student get away with one last presumption. "Oh-ho?" he said, opening his eyes and turning to Luke with a laugh that quickly descended into a choking cough. "Not yet. One thing remains."

Luke froze. The hair on the back of his neck and hands prickled. He knew what Yoda was going to say, and he wasn't wrong.

"Vader. You must confront Vader. Then, only then, a Jedi will you be."

Luke bit his lip as he closed his eyes. He remembered the battle on Cloud City - his scream as Vader's lightsaber cut through his wrist, and the emotional agony that followed as Vader said those four awful words: "I am your father."

His right hand - the missing one - ached at his side.

"And confront him you will," Yoda added with grim certainty, as he nestled deeper into the folds of his blanket.

Luke had been so distraught and so distracted by Yoda's frailness that he had almost forgotten the questions he'd been so eager to ask a few minutes ago. But now was the perfect opportunity. His only opportunity, if Yoda was truly dying.

Calm. He needed to be calm. He took a few deep breaths, trying not to shake.

"Master Yoda," he said gently - and paused. The breath got caught in his throat and it took him another moment to get the words out. "Is Darth Vader my father?"

There was no anger his voice and no blame. It was just a simple, ordinary question. Yet words fell like proton torpedoes from his mouth, and he readied himself for an explosion. There was no going back now.

It felt so strange to say those words out loud. He hadn't ever done that before. It didn't seem right. the nightmare that had haunted him.

Maybe I was wrong, and it was a lie. Yoda will know. Yoda must know. Yoda had hinted before
that Anakin Skywalker had been headstrong and impetuous, had defied the Jedi Order on some fundamental issues. Given the Jedi vow to let go of attachments and the general custom of celibacy, Luke assumed that Anakin's crime had been to fall in love, with Luke's existence damning proof of the affair. Oh, let it be that. Let Anakin be dead after all. Let Anakin be the joyful hotshot pilot and beloved comrade whom Vader had betrayed at murdered. Let the nightmarish turmoil that Luke had lived in for the past year be nothing more than a lie.

He knew Yoda well enough to know that Yoda would speak truthfully. He wouldn't lie to Luke the way Uncle Owen had, the way Ben had--

Silence. Luke counted his breaths, waiting. One, two, three--

"Rest I need," Yoda mumbled at last, turning on his side to face the wall, away from Luke.

Oh, no. Please, no. The fact that his teacher chose to evade the question rather than answer was not a good sign.

"Yes--" Luke's heart jumped for a moment at the apparent confirmation, before his teacher's next words remedied the confusion. "--Rest--"

"Yoda, I must know," he said, still gentle now, but firm. You can't keep this from me any longer. Yoda sighed, still turned away from Luke. "Your father he is."


It's true. It's really true. It's true--

The words hurt. Not in the same way his hand hurt, or the way they had hurt that first time on Bespin. But they ripped through his heart, tearing away any comforting stories he might spin for himself, leaving him raw and naked and bloody on the inside. There were no more illusions now. No more lies. No more--

"Told you, did he?" asked Yoda, still not looking Luke in the eye. Perhaps he was ashamed. This couldn't be any easier for him than it was for Luke - particularly not in his current state of health.

Luke nodded. He couldn't look directly at Yoda, either. It took every ounce of control he had to remain outwardly calmed, to keep sitting still. "Yes," he whispered.

"Unexpected this is," Yoda said. "And unfortunate."

"Unfortunate that I know the truth?" Luke spat. You mean, you weren't going to tell me? How could you--

This was too much for Yoda to take, and he rolled back over to face Luke, jabbing a finger at him. "Unfortunate that you rushed to face him! That incomplete was your training! Not ready for the burden were you!"

The echo of the old question reverberated through his head: "You will be ready when you know who you are."

Luke sagged back, the fire of his righteous anger abruptly extinguished by his teacher's rebuke. But inextricably tangled in those words ran deep, abiding love and compassion - and deep sorrow that Luke had suffered so much, borne so much--

Not ready for the burden were you.
Yoda was exactly right. It was a burden, and he hadn't been ready. It wasn't anything he'd wanted, but it was true, and he was stuck with it now. The knowledge set him apart from his friends, from the Rebellion, from everyone he loved and admired, from the whole rest of the galaxy. He was tainted, and had been from birth. He was the spawn of the galaxy's greatest villain, a man who killed and tortured and destroyed without mercy.

This was the secret that Yoda had been keeping from him - watching, waiting to determine the right moment to tell the truth. Only Luke had left before that could happen - convinced that he knew better -

Luke shook his head, still reeling from the blow. In all of his imaginations of how this conversation might go, he'd never expected anything like this. He'd never imagined that Yoda would place the responsibility squarely on Luke's shoulders without a hint of anger or blame -- let alone love and compassion.

Yoda was right - and had been from the very beginning. Luke didn't regret his decision to try to help his friends - but he'd been ignorant of the true costs of his decision on so many levels.

"I'm-I'm s-sorry," he stammered.

But Yoda wasn't going to let him dwell in self-pity. "Remember, a Jedi's strength flows from the Force," he said.

It was another one of Yoda's favorite catchphrases, the start of a lecture he gave frequently during their time together. Luke had heard it often enough to recite the whole thing by heart. "But beware anger, fear, aggression, the dark side are they--" Once these would have been just aimless words, but now they had deep meaning for Luke, he'd experienced them all in his battle against Vader. He knew what Yoda said was true.

Yoda rallied himself for the conclusion. "Once you start down the dark path, forever--will it dominate your destiny--" He groaned and lapsed back onto the bed.

The end was coming soon. Luke didn't need the Force to feel it. The tiny spark inside Yoda was fluttering fiercely, but it was almost extinguished.


He bent closer to hear.

"Do not--" It was harder for Yoda to speak now. Every word, every breath was a tremendous effort. "Do not underestimate the powers of the Emperor, or suffer your father's fate you will."

_We should have talked about this before, it's too late now -- I've come back and it's almost too late-- I wasted too much time -- I should have come back sooner --_

"Luuuke. When gone am I, the last of the Jedi will you be."

I can't do this alone--


_Oh, no, does he mean what I think he means--?

"There--is--ano-ther--Sk--" Yoda's voice broke into a pitch Luke had never heard before. "--Sky--"
walk--kerrrrrr---" He slumped down, his eyes closed, the firelight flickering on his still features.

Luke felt the tiny spark of life go out.

He stared, eyes wide, unable to process the latest, most horrific development of a conversation full of them.

No. No. No.

Not somebody else I have to bury.

Yoda was dead, and all he could think of was the day he'd dragged his aunt and uncle's charred corpses across the sands of the moisture farm where they'd spent the whole of their lives. I swore never again. Never again. And here I am--

I don't want to throw him in the swamp, that doesn't seem right--but how do I dig a grave on this world, there's not much in the way of solid ground here. I don't want the snakes to eat him--the thought was unbearable -- so a pyre, perhaps? Should I burn the whole hut down? Would anything catch in all this wet--?

But as his mind frantically calculated the grim logistics, there was a booming echo of distant thunder. Luke watched with awe and horror as Yoda's tiny body dissipated into the air, leaving only ragged robes behind. Just like Ben's body had disappeared on the Death Star--

Thoughts flickered through his mind like the stars in hyperspace, zipping from grief to inanity and back again.

Gone--just gone--not again--

Will THAT happen to me when I die?

I am the last of the Jedi now--I'm alone--

There was another rattle of thunder outside. The storm was drawing closer. He curled into a ball on the floor in the old familiar spot by his teacher's bedside and sobbed even as the rain came down in thick sheets outside.

***

It rained for a long time. That was okay, because he didn't feel like going anywhere in particular for a long time. Besides, where else was there to go? This hut had been the only shelter he'd ever known on this planet - it was the ONLY bastion of civilization in this godforsaken swamp, anyway. There was nowhere else to go. Nowhere else to be.

He'd learned that much from Yoda, anyway.

Try as he might to acclimate himself, he was still reeling from all the revelations that had come in quick succession the moment Yoda opened the door for him. Yoda, sick and dying. Yoda, forgiving Luke for his failures. Yoda, expressing compassion for Luke's suffering. Yoda, dead.

"Your father he is."

Darth Vader is truly my father, and I am the last of the Jedi. But there is another Skywalker out there somewhere? Who are they? I hope they're not evil. I always wanted a family, but not--not like this--
If I found them, maybe I wouldn't be so *alone*--

Perhaps this was all a nightmare, a dream. Everything would make more sense once he woke up. He knew it wouldn't, but he clung to the illusion anyway.

Eventually, he slept.

***

He walked alone into the darkness. Ahead of him, illuminated by a dim blue glow, Vader called to him, a dark-gloved hand reaching imploringly.

"Father..."

"Luke, join me..."

I can't... not that way. But I want to--

"Luke," Leia said into his ear. He turned to see her there behind him, her own hand outstretched in a gesture that mirrors Vader's. Where did she come from? How did she find him in the darkness? He doesn't understand, it doesn't make any sense, but he's grateful. "You don't have to be alone, Luke. I'm here with you."

He reached for her hand. Their fingers brushed and the air was filled with ghostly fire, that didn't burn them, as if it somehow belonged to them both, protecting them--

"I'm here with you--"

***

It was twilight when he woke, and the rain had stopped. The fire was out in the hearth and his sweat pooled cold and clammy on his skin. His hand ached, and his chest wrenched when he remembered where he was and what had befallen him. The peace of his dream evaporated and he was numb and empty again.

There was a snake curled up on the table. He tossed it out the round little window with practiced ease, before his mind caught up to the reality of what he was doing. He jerked back to look at the nook in the wall where he'd last seen Yoda. It was still empty.

Yoda is dead. He's not coming back.

He forced himself to think practically, calmly, slowly. Fine. So he didn't have to bury a body. That was good. He'd buried Owen and Beru back on Tatooine, and he hadn't enjoyed it. Not to mention all his fellow pilots in the Rebellion who hadn't had a body to bury, or his gunner, Dak, who he'd left a steaming corpse in the wreckage of their snowspeeder during the Imperial assault on Hoth.

So much death. So much death. It never ends, and I--I've done my part in it, too-- I'm no innocent--

At least this time, there had been no violence tearing Yoda away from him. Their falling out might have precipitated Yoda's health crisis, but his teacher had had a long and eventful life, over four times the length of a human's. At nine hundred years old, it was time.

And there had been-- closure of sorts. Luke hadn't managed to say all that he'd meant to say -- all that he'd wanted to say - yet somehow, without any direct discussion, Yoda had forgiven Luke for
his failings, and offered what consolation he could. And before he died, he'd told Luke the most
important thing: the truth, at last.

Still, just because Yoda had known what was in Luke's heart didn't mean there was no need to say
it aloud. He knew from his return to Tatooine that it was the only way for him to let go of past
regrets, instead of carrying them with him.

After all, he had plenty of burdens that would not be so easily resolved.

"Thank you, Master Yoda," he said quietly into empty air. "Thank you for all your teachings,
even the ones I didn't and still don't understand. Thank you for caring for me, even when I was
surly and you could easily have let me fall. Were it not for your teachings, I would be dead or
turned. I may not agree with you, but I respect you, and love you, and--" His voice cracked a little.
"I will miss you very much."

He paused, and took a deep breath. "I wish you weren't gone. I don't want to be alone." Self-
pitying, perhaps, but it was true.

"When I am gone, the last of the Jedi will you be."

He didn't expect a reply. Perhaps Yoda was watching him the way Ben's ghost had watched him,
perhaps not. Luke had no idea how such matters worked - it was one of the many conversations
he'd never had with Yoda during their time together. And who knew what had happened with
Ben-- Luke hadn't seen Ben in over a year, since his departure from Dagobah.

In any event, it didn't matter if Yoda could hear him or not. What mattered was for Luke to
acknowledge his grief, his fear, his pain -- and let it go, all of it, or at least as much as he could --
and then keep letting go. It was the practice of a lifetime, and he knew he would never be able to
let go of it all - but with so many burdens, shedding any additional weight was a blessing.

He couldn't stay here forever. No doubt Artoo was worrying about him even now, bless his
electronic little heart. And Han and Leia and his friends in the Alliance were waiting for him back
at Sullust--

As he'd done with Ben Kenobi's place on Tatooine, a quick search of the hut revealed nothing of
interest. He felt like a grave robber, but he had no choice - Yoda was dead, and surely Luke was
the natural heir of his teacher's possessions. "Pass on what you have learned," he'd said. Surely,
this counted as a part of that?

But there wasn't much, and none of it appeared outside the ordinary. There was no hidden
lightsaber, no trapdoors, no archives of Jedi wisdom. No technology, even - no hidden holos or
remotes. Yoda had lived as he'd died, in apparent simplicity, and left nothing tangible as a gift for
his last apprentice.

Luke swallowed, remembering the feel of his old lightsaber in his hands, the one that had
belonged to Anakin. Perhaps it was just as well - some gifts were burdens, as well.

No, he would have to rely on himself, and what he remembered. There were no talismans here, no
magic devices to save him. For better or worse, there was nothing to connect himself to the past
now but his memories.

As he eased himself out of the hut, he was tempted to burn it down, but decided against it. There
was no need. Let it disintegrate back into the swamp now that its occupant had no further use for
it.

He could see the X-wing across the swamp, but it felt light-years away from the world he lived in.
It took him a long time to make his way back there.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Yoda and Luke's exchange about "someone who requires it" is based on a koan from Chinese Zen master Pai Chung (Baizhung Huaihuai).

Obi-wan's line about the living and the dead is from *Yuibutsu yobutsu* - "Only a Buddha and Buddha" - a fascicle by Japanese Zen master Eihei Dogen.

Everything hurt. Luke moved stiffly, dodging the obstacles along the twisting path back to the X-wing, but it was reflex and habit, rather than attention, that got him through. Every step through the swamp, every scrap of vegetation, brought back memories of his training, with Yoda perched on his back, or ambling along ahead or behind, cajoling him with encouragements or reprimands as circumstances required. One particular incident stood out vividly in his mind.

"Why do I have to work so hard?" Luke had asked, winded after a particularly grueling set of exercises.

"Someone who requires it, there is," said Yoda serenely, his eyes closed.

Fine. If Yoda was going to be a passive-aggressive ass, then Luke could give as good as he got. "Then why doesn't he just do it himself?"

Yoda opened his eyes to meet Luke's gaze and smiled. "No tools, he has."

At the time, he'd thought it a bizarre and nonsensical answer. Now, though, he saw another meaning - that Yoda had been grooming Luke to be an agent of liberation for the galaxy, a weapon aimed squarely at Vader's heart to bring him down at last.

"Vader. You must confront Vader."

The last time Luke had come face-to-face with Vader, he'd almost died. Luke's skills in the Force had grown so much since then - but would it be enough? And was there a way to do it without killing the man who had once been--who still was--his father?

"Only then a Jedi will you be."

A true Jedi, he'd realized on Tatooine, wasn't the master of the Force, so much as a master of *himself*, the good as well as the bad. The Force didn't make you all-powerful -- or else Vader and the Emperor would have already won -- it amplified the qualities you already possessed, for better or worse. Nor, as he'd already seen from Ben and Yoda's failures and his own bouts with precognition, did it make you all-knowing.

Just for a moment out in the desert, he'd slipped loose of his fixed ideas of who he was and who he ought to be. He saw himself free to walk his own path, no matter what others said. That certainty flickered and vanished like a mirage as he studied it, but the memory of that moment lingered with him.

Yet there was a truth to Yoda's words that he couldn't deny; like it or not, Luke would have to
face his father again unless he wanted to keep running from that shadowy fears for the rest of his life—which was not the Jedi way. A true Jedi faced things as they were, without falling prey to his own ideas about how the universe should work. And only by facing Vader—and bringing him back to the light if he could—would Luke be whole again.

If I do this, I'm not doing it because Yoda told me to. I'm doing it because I choose to. I *choose* to face my father, to meet him where he is, and-- do what I can to sway him to my cause, as he tried to sway me. I can't do anything else and remain *me*.

He remembered the hum and crackle as his lightsaber had gone through Vader's mask in the cave, and the horror as the head rolled to his feet. It had been a vision, not a real battle, and yet he'd never forgotten the shock of so personal a murder. The idea of killing anyone that way - let alone his own father - made his stomach churn. Once he would have swung his lightsaber at the real Vader with gusto, but knowing what he did now, he couldn't go through with it.

Out in the desert, he'd seen visions of his father's life as a Jedi, saw him battle with Obi-wan, heard him scream as he fell. That man was out there, trapped inside Vader's dark armor all these years. He had to be. It was the only way out of this nightmare he was trapped in.

But as Luke remembered the way Yoda had smiled when he said, "No tools, he has" he realized there was another, more charitable interpretation of that peculiar statement. That "someone who required" Luke's sweat and toils wasn't some arbitrary external taskmaster - it was Luke himself. Only Luke couldn't be his own teacher in this instance because he'd lacked the tools - all the necessary skills and discernment - to judge his own progress and set his course.

What had Yoda meant on that day? There was no way to know now. No way Luke would ever know, unless Yoda came back as a ghost the way Ben had. Even then, Luke doubted he'd be able to coax a straight answer out of his teacher. The comparatively straightforward task of a straight answer to the truth about Vader had been a struggle - and that was a simple "yes or no" question. Luke didn't want to think about what would happen with something more open-ended.

I still can't believe he's gone...

In the days after the first Death Star, he'd had long conversations with Leia about grief and mourning, as they stole a few golden afternoons of peace tucked away together in a corner of the ancient temple the Rebellion had co-opted as a based on Yavin IV. Luke had lost Owen, Beru, Ben and Biggs; Leia had lost her family along with her entire planet. They'd cried together as the jungle rain fell outside and the ache in Luke's heart eased, just a little, in her company.

Back then, it had felt good not to be alone. He wished Leia was here with him now. Leia would understand how he felt about Yoda - that he was family, of a very weird sort, even if they hadn't been related by blood. Leia would understand - the father and mother who raised her, and their vast extended family were no biological kin of hers. She'd been adopted at birth, she said, when her mother died, though she'd kept that a secret to all but her closest confidants. He'd been honored she trusted him with it now. In exchange, he'd told her all about the Force, and his training with Ben, and what little he knew of Anakin Skywalker. Leia had laughed and suggested that Luke could look it up, or perhaps ask one of the older leaders in the Rebellion to find out more, but things had gotten so chaotic in the evacuation and the subsequent missions that followed that Luke had never followed up on her suggestion--

He came around the X-wing to find that Artoo was hard at work with his welding torch in an attempt to fix the occasional wobble and spin of the flux capacitors there. He was also granted a clear view back to Yoda's hut - and this time, there was no welcoming lights or puffs of smoke from the chimney. He knew there was no longer any comfort for him there - it was cold, damp, dark and full of snakes in there now. He found himself gripping the underside of the ship to keep
himself from falling.

Artoo beeped curiously, asking that if Luke had finished his business with Yoda, maybe he could hold the capacitor down, because it kept slipping away from the welder?

Luke automatically came over and bent down to look at where the droid was pointing, but even as he reached out his hand towards the offending panel, his vision blurred and he couldn't focus. He sagged back, unable to explain all that he'd been through in the past few hours to his companion.

Now that Luke was in close range of Artoo's sensors, the droid's facial recognition software clearly recognized something was wrong and he made a soft moan of concern. Perhaps Artoo lacked a protocol droid's finesse, but he cared about Luke in his own stubbornly loyal and logical way.

"I can't do it, Artoo," Luke said dully.

Artoo said that this was a fairly simple problem, one that didn't necessarily require human assistance, he'd only thought to ask because Luke was available, and had everything gone all right with Yoda--

Luke rose, ignoring the flood of questions from the astromech, lost in the flood of his own grief. "I can't go on alone--"

"Yoda will always be with you," a very familiar voice said from behind him.

Luke looked up to see a luminous, glowing figure, striding out of the mists towards the X-wing, as if Luke hadn't witnessed his death at Vader's hands four years earlier. "Obi-wan..." he whispered.

Obi-wan Kenobi had been a general in the Clone Wars under Leia's adopted father, a Jedi Knight of the Old Republic, and an earlier student of Yoda's. Luke had known him back on Tatooine as Old Ben Kenobi, a crazy hermit who lived on the edge of the Jundland Wastes--only to learn Ben's true identity when Artoo had escaped and gone looking for the mysterious Obi-wan. Even so, Luke had never quite gotten out of the habit of calling him Ben.

But "Ben" had always been an alias, a cover, for the cunning warrior who lurked within. It was Obi-wan who had befriended and taught his father, Obi-wan who had given Luke Anakin's lightsaber, Obi-wan who had told him of Anakin's death at Vader's hands. It was Obi-wan who had lied to him all those years ago, and it was Obi-wan who was going to tell Luke the truth now. Luke was done with secrets, done with everyone holding out on him.

As with Yoda, he'd rehearsed endless variations of this conversation in his head for the past year, over and over again. Now he forced himself to stay calm and focused, to be kind but firm in his quest for the truth, rather than letting his anger escape from him.

He ducked under the X-wing's lower guns, ignoring Artoo's questioning squeals of protest, towards the ghostly figure. There was one question, the most important question of all, that he needed to ask first: "Why didn't you tell me?"

You knew I was going to face him, you knew who he was, you had plenty of opportunities to change your story, and you chose to keep silent--why? Why did you let me walk into Bespin so hopelessly unprepared to face the truth?

As Luke approached, Obi-wan stood quietly, his hands on his hips, the neutral expression on his face reflected in his eyes.

"You told me Vader betrayed and murdered my father," Luke said, in case he needed a reminder.
Obi-wan remained unruffled. "Your father was seduced by the dark side of the Force. He ceased to be Anakin Skywalker and became Darth Vader. When that happened, the good man who was your father was destroyed. So what I told you was true - from a certain point of view."

Luke was doing his best to control his temper and focus on his breathing, but it very, very difficult. "A certain point of view?" he repeated, unable to believe his ears. Was Obi-wan really going to deny lying outright, despite all the evidence to the contrary?

Without taking his gaze away from Luke, Obi-wan sat down on a fallen tree. Luke wasn't sure if the ghost would pass through the wood or not, but the log seemed to support him well enough. "Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view."

Luke decided that hearing Obi-wan out was probably more productive than screaming at him, especially if an explanation was forthcoming. Grudgingly he sat down beside his old mentor to hear the rest of the story.

"Anakin was a good friend. When I first knew him, your father was already a great pilot, but I was amazed at how strongly the Force was with him. I took it upon myself to train him as a Jedi. I thought that I could instruct him just as well as Yoda. I was wrong."

Well, that was as close to an apology from Obi-wan as he was ever going to get, Luke decided. It wasn't good enough (if he was honest, nothing would ever be good enough), but at least it was something. He felt his anger ease a little, even as his thoughts jumped ahead to more troubling implications.

So is it your fault that Anakin became Vader? Is that why you didn't teach me, Ben? Is that why you insisted that I come here to Dagobah and train with Yoda? Is that why you let Vader kill you - as punishment?

"There is still good in him," Luke insisted. "I've felt it." He didn't kill me when he had a chance. He reached out to me, recognized me, wanted me to join him. He can be saved. I know he can be saved.

He wanted to tell Obi-wan about his vision en route to Dagobah - of Vader begging Luke to remove his mask so he could be free, the dreams of Vader calling to him. Given Luke's track record with visions, however, he doubted Obi-wan would find them compelling evidence, so he left it at that.

No one is beyond redemption, not even him. Not if he chooses to come back.

"He's more machine now than man, twisted and evil," Ben said, his expression turning ugly as he stared off into the distance, as if he were recalling some particularly unpleasant memory.

Luke's hand throbbed. He thought of his prosthesis, of Artoo's concern for his well-being. The machine part, at least, didn't sound so bad.

Luke shook his head. "I can't do it, Ben," he said, slipping into the old familiar name of the man who'd been on the periphery for so much of his life.

"You cannot escape your destiny. You must face Darth Vader again."

"I can't kill my own father," he insisted.

He spoke those terrible words in hope that Obi-wan would reassure him that facing Darth Vader
didn't mean killing him, or being destroyed. He had hoped for comfort beyond those two equally frightening options: the one that would kill his body and the other that would kill his spirit. *There has to be another way, surely you've seen it, too--*

But no. The corners of Obi-wan's lips turned down in disappointment, and he turned away with a sigh, though his voice was mild and smooth when he spoke. "Then the Emperor has already won. You were are only hope."

If Obi-wan was trying to guilt-trip him, Luke refused to take the bait. Besides, that wasn't strictly true. "Yoda spoke of another." *He left it pretty vague, so I hope you can tell me something about this mysterious Skywalker--*

Obi-wan gave Luke a long, measured look. "The other he spoke of is your twin sister."

"But I have no sister," Luke protested. Surely Obi-wan knew that - he'd seen Owen and Beru with Luke back on Tatooine - so what was he getting at here? This sounded suspiciously like yet another life-shattering revelation--

*I'm starting to get very tired of those--*

"To protect you from the Emperor, you were hidden from your father when you were born. The Emperor knew, as I did, that if Anakin had any offspring, they would be a threat to him. That is the reason your sister remains safely... anonymous."

As Obi-wan spoke, Luke was aware of something buzzing deep inside him. He thought of his dream, of Leia's outstretched hand, reaching for him in the darkness--

"You don't have to be alone, Luke. I'm here with you."

--that sense of closeness, connection, that he'd never experienced with anyone else--

"Leia," he breathed, as the insight crystallized into words. "Leia is my sister."

Even as he spoke, he knew it was true, in the same way that he had known that Vader's claims of parentage were true. He hadn't seen it before because he hadn't been *looking* for it. But now that he knew, it was *so obvious*--it had been right in front of his eyes for the last four years--

*Oh, I am so glad we never did anything more than FLIRT with each other--*

"Your insight serves you well," said Obi-wan, clearly amused. Damn him. "Bury your feelings deep down, Luke. They do you credit, but they could be made to serve the Emperor."

Luke swallowed, still reeling from this latest development. *I--have a sister! I'm not alone! And it's--LEIA--*

*Oh, she's going to hate me when I tell her that Vader--that Vader is--*

"You told me to trust my feelings, back when we first met," Luke said to Obi-wan, bound and determined to get more information while he could. This was something he'd been wondering about for a while. "What changed?"

"Luke, you must keep this hidden in your mind if you wish to keep your sister safe. - Vader and the Emperor will try to turn her if they learn of her existence."

No. That thought was unbearable. "Can she do what I do?" He thought of Leia training with the remote and blast helmet on the *Millennium Falcon* as he had--of Leia balanced on her hands as
she lifted rocks with the Force--and the icy glare she aimed at him when she was displeased. Even
without the Force, Leia was a formidable opponent indeed.

"She has great potential, but thus far it has been channeled into... other arenas." Ben said. "Bail
Organa was a good friend and a good teacher, but he knew nothing of the way of the Force. We
thought it safer that way."

"I don't understand."

"Vader did not know of your existence. He only saw what he expected to see and nothing more. It
is a great failing of humanity, you must realize; this inability to see what is directly in front of us."

He's explaining how he missed Anakin's fall to the dark side, Luke realized suddenly. And HOW
Anakin fell...

"And I..." Ben continued, "I took you to Tatooine, to be raised by your family there."

"Was Owen really my father's brother?" Or was that a lie, too?

"Kin on his mother's side, abandoned a long time ago after a bitter quarrel. Once they took you in,
your uncle would not let me interfere any further. After my failure with Anakin, that seemed wise,
and I... respected that. Instead, I watched from a distance to ensure your safety."

"How did you get his lightsaber?" Luke asked, uncomfortable enough with the direction of the
conversation and its implications to change the subject.

"Your father had no further use for it."

"What do you mean?"

"At the end, when his perfidy was revealed, I tried to bring him back to the light, though I could
persuade him when no one else could. I failed. We fought, Vader and I. He fell into the fire and
burned. I... could not bear to watch. I thought he would die from his wounds." He sighed. "Had I
remained, perhaps things would have turned out differently. But the Emperor found him, and
healed him with his dark arts as best he could. Now Vader is attached to a machine that keeps him
alive, as scarred on the outside as he is on the inside, hidden inside his armor. His hate and his
rage is all that sustains him now."

On Tatooine, Luke had glimpsed a vision of his father's past: a younger Obi-wan screaming
Anakin's name as lightsabers clashed and fire blazed around him. How could Luke be angry at
Obi-wan for his failure to kill Vader then, when Luke refused to kill him now?

Anakin Skywalker was Luke's father.

He had also been Obi-wan's student and greatest friend.

"I'm sorry," Luke said quietly.

"As am I," Obi-wan agreed. "You understand why I wish you to learn from my failures? Anakin
was prophesied to bring balance to the Force, to destroy the Sith utterly. He chose to join them
instead, and slaughter the Jedi." A bitter laugh. "It was not the balance we had in mind."

"Ben, I have so many questions."

"I know. But my answers will not give you the peace you seek," Obi-wan said, as he stood up, as
if preparing to leave.
No. Not yet. We're not finished. Luke rose. He wasn't going to let Obi-wan get away just yet. "Who was she, Ben? My mother."

Obi-wan smiled and there was genuine sadness in his eyes. "Remarkable woman, your mother. Attachments were forbidden to the Jedi, but your father defied them and married her in secret."

I knew it! I KNEW it! "Did he kill her?"

"She died of a broken heart after your father turned to the Dark Side," Ben said at last. "She tried to reason with him before I did. He was too far gone to listen. As Yoda warned us, once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny. And from that darkness, there is no return."

Ben's message was clear: If we couldn't sway him - we who loved and knew him - how could you? How many more innocents must die until this monster is put down? How many more years of terror must the galaxy endure?

And who else with the strength to defeat him now, but me, Luke Skywalker, Jedi Knight, and his son--?

"You will do what you think best, Luke," Ben said, as if sensing his train of thought. "This is your destiny. It is beyond my power to interfere in the affairs of the living beyond this point."

"Aren't you alive?"

"From a certain point of view, I never died." Ben's lips quirked in a smile. "In death, there is living; in life there is death. There are the dead who are always dead; there are the living who are always living."

"I don't understand."

"In time, you will." Obi-wan stood up. "Good luck, Luke. May the Force be with you."

"Ben--Ben--"

But it was too late. The ghost of Obi-wan vanished and Luke was alone.

One moment passed, then another. He focused on his breathing to drown out the pain of this latest round of insights. Life was so much easier when he could be angry at Obi-wan. It was infinitely harder when he understood where Ben was coming from - even if Luke didn't agree with that "certain point of view".

At least he didn't have to track down the mysterious missing Skywalker. She'd been right there with him, from the very beginning....

I can't take Leia as my sister without accepting Vader as my father, though...

He gradually became aware of Artoo's insistent whistles at his side. The droid had abandoned his soldering and was nudging his leg. "It's okay, Artoo, it's okay," Luke said automatically as he put a hand out to pat the droid's dome, even though he wasn't sure that was true at all.

Artoo said that according to Threepio talking to oneself was a major sign of human grief, and had everything gone all right with Yoda?

"What? Oh--but I wasn't talking to myself, Ben was just here, and--"
Artoo replied that no such beings had been detectible with his sensors, General Kenobi had been terminated many years ago, and that hallucinations were a sign of an impending systems malfunction. Would Luke would need to be checked by a meddroid upon their return?

He waved the droid's concerns aside. "No, no, Artoo, I'm all right. It was just--a vision in the Force, that's all."

Artoo, who couldn't perceive this alleged energy field with any of his sensors, grudgingly accepted this statement, though it was clear that he didn't approve. Artoo had gotten used to more obvious manifestations of Luke's powers - particularly when they involved using the astromech as a subject for levitation - but the more subtle aspects were new to him and therefore suspect.

His next question, however, caught Luke off-guard, and it took several moments to muster a response.

"No," he said, "I'm not ready to leave just yet. There are still some things I need to do."

Even if Luke hadn't been fluent in Binary, there would have been no mistaking the little droid's moan for anything but dismay.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This chapter is heavily influenced by the writings of Zen master Eihei Dogen, whom Yoda directly paraphrases in the "don't try to control them" and "circle of the way" passages; and the Sandokai, or "Harmony of Difference and Equality", a poem by Zen master Sekito Kisen, paraphrased in Yoda's lecture on "obstacles that block the way" and a later conversation on the true nature of dark and light.

If someone had told me a year ago that I would be here of my own free will, I'd've called them crazy, Luke thought, as he crawled through the opening of the dark side cave. Yet here he was. And it's true. I *must* be crazy to do this.

Then again, if someone had told him a year ago that Darth Vader was his father, Leia was his long-lost twin, his right hand would be missing at the wrist, and he'd sob for hours when Yoda died, he would have thought them utterly insane. And all those unlikely scenarios had come to pass as well.

All I can say is that it's been one hell of a year.

Luke had left Artoo with the X-wing at dawn, after a cramped and restless night in the ship's cockpit, with a handful of ration bars in lieu of a proper meal. The astromech, unhappy with Luke's decision to go alone in the swamp, insisted that he take a tracking beacon with him in case of trouble. Not wanting to argue and mindful of the consequences if something unexpected did befall him, Luke had agreed.

Said tracking beacon was tucked in a tree outside the cave entrance, blinking steadily. The last time Luke had gone into the cave, he'd vanished from the droid's sensors; the usual laws of physics didn't apply there. Artoo was nervous and twitchy enough as it was without Luke pulling a similar vanishing act now. The last thing he needed was for the droid to panic and take the X-wing back to Sullust to muster a rescue party if the beacon dropped out of range.

He'd taken very little on this expedition - a few ration bars tucked away in his utility belt amidst the usual mess of wires and tools, a blaster, and, of course, his lightsaber. He didn't expect to use either weapon, but there was no way he would venture anywhere alone on Dagobah without them. Yoda might be able to walk unchallenged, but animal life on this planet was unfriendly at best, with far too many teeth for his comfort. Even for a Jedi, it was best to be prepared.

In the night, he'd wondered if he could find his way through the tangled maze of trees back to the cave without Yoda's guidance. A few moments of quiet meditation in the morning, however, roundly disproved that hypothesis. Gradually, he became aware of a chill in the distance, a tiny black hole in the luminous landscape of the Force, drawing his attention. Slowly and carefully, mindful of traps and pitfalls, he followed the faint tendrils of cold as they grew stronger and stronger until he stood at last before the entrance of the cave, shivering.

The journey was just like the games of near-and-far from his childhood on Tatooine - first with reprogrammed droids, and then with Biggs and Camie and his other agemates on the outskirts of Tosche Station when he was older. Then, words alone guided him to and from an arbitrary destination, instead of something real and powerful, subject to laws he barely understood. Now he
was drawn by physical sensations just on the edge of consciousness, only tangible when he dropped his focus from his chattering mind and to his body.

Who knew that a simple children's game would provide a framework for understanding the Force now? That would be something to keep in mind when he was training in the future--

His feet slipped in the muck, and he cursed at himself for becoming distracted by his thoughts again. How could he ever hope to teach someone else--Leia, at the very least--when his own skills were still so lacking?

*Practice*, he decided, and forced himself to relax and focus until he'd regained the thread. Despite Artoo's jitters, there was plenty of time for Luke to do - whatever exactly it was he was doing. He'd find out what that was when he got there; best not to worry too much now.

On Tatooine, nothing had ever been truly cold. It was cool underground in the deep clay dwellings, hidden from the glaring suns, but never cold. He'd never felt true cold - or knew water could freeze - until he'd set foot on Hoth. That had been an uncomfortable revelation for a desert child, unlike the rainforests and waterfalls of Yavin IV. This trail of coldness now wasn't physical, but it was no less unpleasant; it was the chill of deep space and the threat of frostbite on exposed face and fingers; it was dark and unpleasant and the sensations grew stronger and stronger as he drew closer. He was surprised that he'd only managed to catch a dim echo of this on his previous visit.

He'd grown strong in the Force indeed. But his explosive growth had not come without deep sacrifice and pain. His missing hand ached at the memories.

There was a period in Luke's training with Yoda where the old Jedi pelted him with missiles at random intervals - rocks, sticks, dishes, whatever was easily at hand - and Luke would have to dodge or block them with the Force. Luke had borne the unpredictable - and frequently painful - attacks for several days before exploding.

"When you throw all these things at me, it's overwhelming! I don't know what to block first!" Can you please stop, was what he wanted to say, but he didn't think that was a likely option.

"Controlling things, you are. Easier your life will be if you stop," Yoda said, as another fusillade of stones came straight at Luke's head.

With a flush of annoyance, Luke dodged, but he wasn't going to let the matter rest there. "I'm not controlling anything, I'm just getting out of the way. *You're* the one controlling things!"

Yoda let the rocks drop to the ground instead of swinging around for another pass, a sign that Luke had piqued his interest, at least for a moment. "When objects come, do not attempt to change them. Whatever comes is the Force, not objects at all. Even if you exert yourself and block them, controlled they cannot be."

"I don't understand," Luke said, an all too common refrain.

This complaint bored Yoda enough that the rocks swirled back up in the air, aimed straight for his head. He moved fast enough so that he dodged all but one, which clipped his shoulder instead.

"Hey! That hurt!" he complained, rubbing his shoulder to ease the sting.

"Understand you will in time," Yoda said placidly. "In time."

Yoda was right. He understood now, or thought he did. Yoda wasn't deliberately obtuse--he had stated a truth too simple and obvious for an angry Luke to grasp. Perhaps that insight would be the
key to the cave.

He would learn if he was right soon enough.

The cave's origins were a mystery and would likely remain so. Yoda had never told him what it was or how it had come to be. "Strong in the dark side of the Force - a domain of evil it is," was the most Luke had ever gotten from him. He didn't know how a place could become saturated with negative energy, but there was no denying the effect. Something terrible had happened here, and the feelings lingered and concentrated instead of dissipating into oblivion.

"What's in there?"

"Only what you take with you."

In that shadowy, underground realm, the inner workings of his soul were given tangible form. Somehow, the cave manifested those deep truths, forcing Luke to confront them in a waking vision, revealing his character in the process. Somehow the cave had the power to bring his darkest secrets to life.

He needed that power now.

It was critical that he face the darkness inside himself before he met with Darth Vader and the Emperor as Yoda and Ben had prophesied. The way forward was so narrow, so elusive enough already. If he was to come out the other side of this ordeal with his heart and soul intact, he could not afford any doubt, any hesitation at all.

"You will be ready when you know who you are."

When he'd entered the cave a year ago, at Yoda's insistence, he'd found Darth Vader waiting for him. Luke hadn't hesitated; he'd rushed to attack, drawing his lightsaber and slicing Vader's head off--only to find his own slack-jawed face and dead eyes staring back at him, like some hideous, twisted mirror. He'd failed the test that Yoda set for him, and he knew it.

He would not fail again.

There were fewer snakes than he remembered from his previous visit, and the giant nest of spiky gray lizards appeared to have cleared out. The tree roots were damp and clingy, but he was a lot less squeamish now, and their touch no longer bothered him. Luke navigated the increasingly tight quarters with the same slow, steady pace he'd used to find his way on the surface.

He looked for the stone passageway where the hollowed underground caverns shifted from organic to deliberate construction, but it appeared to have been blocked by a vast landslide of dull-grey, slimy muck from the surface above. From the rank smell and the lack of vegetation, Luke judged it to be a recent disturbance.

Luke paused, not sure what to do next. Stay here and wait? Go back up to the surface and find another route? Give up this foolish quest and go back to the X-wing?

And, then, with a rattling shudder of breath, Darth Vader stood before him.

It was an illusion. It had always been an illusion; he'd been too panicked and reactive to notice the first time. Of course, he'd had enough conversations with Ben Kenobi's ghost to know that illusions had a reality of their own--

"I can't kill my own father," Luke had protested.
Obi-wan's voice echoed in his head: "Then the Emperor has already won."

And Yoda: "You must confront Vader. Only then, a Jedi will you be."

Luke didn't think for a moment that facing this particular version of Vader was what Yoda had in mind. Nor was he sure that what he was doing would work, or if it was really Vader under the mask now. And yet--he had to try--

He spread his arms wide. "Father," he said. "Father, it's me, Luke. I'm here."

Vader didn't move. He stood there, looming over Luke, his rasping breaths coming more slowly than Luke's rapid gasps. He was so tall. Luke had forgotten exactly how much space the Sith Lord occupied, how he filled the room with more than his physical body, forcing his opponents to shrink down, retreat--

Luke forced himself to slow his breath. He was panicking; he couldn't afford to lose focus now.

"You will feel the Force when you are calm, at peace," the memory of Yoda's voice echoed in his mind. Yes. There it was, now...

As with his previous sojourn here, the dark figure before him did not initiate any action. All it seemed to do was respond to Luke--and, like a mirror, reflect back what it saw there.

All right, then. Here I go--

And before Luke's courage could fail him, he flung out his arms away from his body in a gesture of surrender, empty palms facing towards the dark shadowy ghost that was his father--and somehow, himself.

Vader did not move.

Luke took a step towards him, then another. "Father, it's me, Luke, I'm here--"

When objects come, don't try to control them--

Vader said nothing. With a flash of insight, Luke realized that he couldn't speak without the mask. He had to get the mask off. Just like in my dream.

"Father," Luke said gently, letting go of Vader's body and placing one hand on his shoulder. "Kneel down. I can't reach your mask. We have to take the mask off. Let me see your face." He let out one breath and then another. "I won't hurt you."

Vader knelt obediently, his breathing unchanged as Luke fumbled with the controls for the headpiece. The top part came off easily, like a hat; the face plate was more challenging, and for a second, Luke thought it was fused so tightly to skin no removal was possible. Just as he was about to let go, something clicked, and it peeled away easily in his hands.

His own face reflected back at him, an eerie, living mirror.

Luke's breath caught in his throat as he stared. He should have known better. Just as before, it wasn't Vader underneath the armor; it never had been. This was no vision of the future - it was a message, and a warning.

"Do not underestimate the power of the Emperor or suffer your father's fate, you will," Yoda had said on his death-bed.
I'm not infallible. There is darkness in me, too. We are not so different, my father and I could become like him, if I am not careful--

And yet the answer to Luke's dilemma was inseparable from his dreaded kinship with Vader. Inside that dark armor was a human being, just like himself. A human being, worthy of love and redemption if he chose to accept them. A man who had fallen, yet was not wholly lost to the light--as long as Luke was alive--

And if that was true within Luke, it was true for Vader as well.

There's only one thing I can do with this darkness--

With a cry, Luke lunged forward, and embraced his silent doppelganger. His face mashed into mechanical chestplate and he clung to the double in his father's armor like a child coming home. "I'm so glad you're with me now--"

But even as he gripped tighter, the illusion melted away, and he was wrapped around empty air, alone in the darkness.

"No," he whispered in shock. "Come back. Come back--"

He collapsed to the ground, sobbing and shaking, until there were no more tears left. For a long time, he lay on the damp earth, breathing in the smell of soil and decay, alone in the darkness.

He'd passed the test, but that didn't mean an end to the pain. And there was still a long, hard road left before him.

If he slept in that underground realm, there were no dreams.

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There was one other place he needed to go.

Like the cave, he worried he wouldn't be able to find it without Yoda; like the cave, it wasn't a problem. Instead of tracking darkness and cold, he found a winding ribbon of phosphorescent light to be his guide, overlaid on his sight despite its invisibility to his eyes. It took him on a long and winding route, clambering through tight spots and dodging fallen trees, yet he was so calm and still that no obstacle fazed him.

As he walked, the tracking beacon flashing at his belt, he remembered another trek through the swamp, more fraught with tension. Yoda, perched on Luke's back, had been frustrated by Luke's hesitation at their chosen route.

"Words you hear, understand their meaning, you must - don't set up standards of your own," Yoda said, poking his finger at Luke's face for emphasis. "If you don't understand the way before you, which path will you follow, hmm?"

"I certainly wouldn't have chosen this one," Luke said, eyeing the fragile vines that Yoda insisted would hold their combined weight if Luke moved quickly enough. "The hut is the other way, Master. We'll never make any progress if we keep backtracking like this."

As usual, Yoda was unfazed by Luke's objections. "Hmph. Progress is not a matter of far or near, of going somewhere or accomplishing something. If that is how your mind works, confused you are, and no end there will be to the mountains and sinkholes, oceans and rivers, trees and swamps, that block your way, yes."
"All right, all right," Luke sighed, "We'll go your way, then." He'd managed to make the jump without falling - just barely - rolling his eyes at Yoda's triumphant shouts.

Now, following this quiet thread, he realized that Yoda had been right again. It was an all too common realization these days; he ought to stop being surprised by now.

Well, slow is better than never, I guess, he thought. I just wish I could apologize to him. Even if he would be so insufferably smug about it--

He passed over groves of gnarltrees, balancing lightly along their aerial roots, and burrowed through dense thickets of tallreeds, which grew so close together that his entire world was reduced to the thick, smooth reed shafts and the clusters of puffy seedheads two meters above his head. He thought the path he followed was an animal trail, but mercifully, he was spared any meeting with its creators.

He wriggled out of that final slog through the tallreed grove to find a familiar vista before him: a vast marsh of low-lying plants spreading out towards the horizon in front of him. Looming out of the mist was a massive tree, with vast sloping branches of stubby green needles, so tall it vanished into the fog layer as if it reached out into space. From a distance, the tree was suffused by a soft, diffused, phosphorescence - Luke knew it to be the work of a vast colony glow-worms, one of the myriad species that made the tree their home.

"Special, this tree is," Yoda had said. "Planted at every Jedi temple was this tree, with branches taken from its parents long before my time. Destroyed them all, the Empire did, along with the Jedi. Perhaps there may be some on other worlds--forgotten. Perhaps this is the last. Difficult to say."

And as before the tree called to him, welcoming him. And as before, it felt like coming home.

He made his way over the series of stepping stones that lead towards the tree. Who made these? he wondered, a question he'd been too dazed and distracted to ask on his previous visit. A tree of this size must be ancient - as old as Yoda, at the very least. What Jedi had brought this tree, so different from the other plant life here on Dagobah? Who had made the path to this place, as infused with the light as the cave had been with the dark?

He thought he knew the answer to at least one of those mysteries - it was the tree itself that appeared to be making the light. Even without the aid of the glow-worms, it was impossibly bright when he opened all his senses to the Force. He knew intellectually that the Force was generated by living beings, but he'd never witnessed the phenomenon on such a scale before. The sheer size and--intelligence--of the tree made it impossible to ignore for one attuned to the Force.

No wonder the Jedi planted this tree near them, he thought. I wish I could bring this with me somehow.

If Yoda was right, this tree might well be the last of its kind, in the same way that Luke was. We are kin, this tree and I. If I am to restore the Jedi, then perhaps I must restore the trees as well--

On his previous visit, he'd come at dawn, when the marshes were quiet and still. Now, in what he thought was mid-afternoon--but whether it was the afternoon of the day he'd left the X-wing or not was another matter--he found himself in the midst of lively cacophony, as a chorus of invisible marsh creatures vied with each other for prizes and causes unknown. Their chatter reminded him of the colorful treefrogs that had delighted him in the Yavin rainforest, but while those had been high-pitched and bell-like, these were deeper and lower, a cross between a shout and a moan. Given how close and loud the calls were, he suspected these amphibians were so well camouflaged in shades of grey and brown - like everything else on Dagobah - that he could look
straight at one and never see one.

Halfway across the marsh, he paused to study the tree more closely. The tree looked different, but he couldn't quantify how. Yet as he continued to approach, patches of brown emerged on the branches, stark against the solid green needles. Was the tree sick, injured, or diseased? He didn't like that idea at all and quickened his pace.

Closer still, the amorphous splotches became dense, round clusters, spiked in an intricate spiral pattern. It took him a moment to process what he was seeing; having grown up on a desert world, he still wasn't used to plant life that wasn't dense, incredibly prickly, and low to the ground.

*Cones. They're cones.*

While he was away, the tree had flowered - if a tree like this could flower, he wasn't sure how that worked - and brought forth a vast crop of seed. Maybe it was like the posyykas trees on Kashyyk, which bore rarely, producing massive amounts of tasty nuts every few years. (He vaguely remembered Chewbacca mentioning during a particularly grim meal on Hoth; according to the Wookiee, they were quite the delicacy if you had the requisite strength and manual dexterity to crack them open.)

Even before Luke reached the tree, he felt it a fragment of its vast, slow attention shift out to him, much more strongly than on his previous visit. He stood under the shelter of its branches, craned his head to stare up into the dizzying heights, breathing in the sharp, fragrant scent of the fallen needles underfoot.

He put his hand on the trunk. It was crazy to have a conversation with a tree, but no less crazy than anything else that had happened recently. And it didn't *feel* crazy to do this; it felt like the deepest kind of sane.

"I've come back," he said aloud, his voice rough and unpolished after so long in silence.

There was a thrum of welcome in his mind, a diffuse but benevolent greeting that he felt as much as heard. The light from the tree reached out to him, and he could see the light within himself now, too. There wasn't any boundaries between them - none that mattered to the light. Luke was Luke, and the tree was the tree, but the light, permeated through them, unity and separation at once.

He knew the answer before he spoke, but it was still polite to ask. "May I climb?"

*Yessss*, said the tree, or perhaps it was the faintest hint of a breeze in the branches. *Yessssss.*

He had to take the glove off his prosthesis to climb; the leather was too slippery to grip the thick, layered bark well. It was strange watching his hands move as he climbed, to note the slight gap in response between his left and his right (the right hand was faster now) and sensitivity (where flesh trumped synthflesh every time). With the glove on, he frequently forget his hand was missing; the slight differences in skin texture and tone, unnoticeable to others, jarred him every time.

The tree noticed his discomfort. It sympathized with the pain of a lost limb, yet pointed out that new growth eventually emerged every time. The body called for symmetry and yet asymmetries naturally arose, through the vagaries of light, wind, water, and chance. It was nothing to be ashamed of.

"I'm not exactly a tree," Luke said, though he couldn't help but smile.

*Not so different*, the tree said, too calm and mellow to argue but determined to repeat its point all the same. Luke shrugged, and let it go.
He'd climbed two or three branches before he realized that the glow-worms were no longer there. They were replaced by clouds of small, iridescent beetles, their abdomens winking blue-green lights in the same patterns as the worms had done before. He was light, the tree was light, and over and around him zoomed the tiny flickers of light, shifting and moving in and out between the two.

They grew up, he thought in wonder. Now it's time to complete the life cycle. The rest of Dagobah might be stuck in a peculiar ecological stasis - or perhaps he hadn't the skills to detect the seasonal differences - but here, the dance of life continued its looping rounds.

Eventually, he reached a point where he could climb no further - not the top of the tree by at least fifteen feet, but as far he could safely go. The ground was lost in a sea of fog, and only the flickers of the glowing beetles and the great limbs were visible now.

He put the glove back on his artificial hand and leaned against the solid shaft of the trunk and sat quietly for a long time, watching the glow-beetles flash in and out, calling to each other in a language he did not understand. His thoughts drifted, and he gathered them back in again, over and over again, just as he did with his exhale and inhale. He breathed, and his breath was different in kind from the flow of oxygen and nutrients in and out of the tree, and yet they were kin, attuned to each other on a level deeper and older than words.

Here at the tree, he could see clearly what came to him in brief glimpses and flashes elsewhere - that his body was the entire universe and the entire universe was his body. It was a truth that sounded impossible when constructed in logical terms, so antithetical to his habitual way of viewing the universe. Yet Luke felt it to be true at his core, and it was hard to deny that realization when it was so clear and shining in front of him now.

That unity was equally true of time as well as space. He knew with certainty that the past, the present, the future all joined together in a unified arc, connected by the Force, no matter how it might appear to him at other times with his limited, merely human, mind. The part of him that touched the Force was deeper and older than he was - intrinsic to his being, and yet fundamentally independent of it - and it understood. No explanations were necessary.

A memory swept over him: sitting by the fire in Yoda's hut, forcing down an unpalatable dinner while Yoda lectured him.

"The Force forms the circle of the Jedi's way, always and forever. Never cut off is it, even for a moment. Between aspiration, practice, mastery, no gap there ever is. Unstained, unbroken, the Force is. Corrupt it, you cannot."

(Here Luke had choked on a particularly woody chunk in his stew, and tried to pretend it was a cough. Yoda ignored his student's inadvertent interruption.)

"You think your efforts are your own, independent, yes? Know that what you do here, connected to everything else it is. This world, this sky; the myriad worlds, the myriad skies; the entire galaxy and everything in the universe." He sighed. "Notice this, you may not. Doubt this, you might. Still, true it is, whether you believe it or not."

What I do matters, Luke thought now, smiling at the memory even as his hand ached in sympathy. If I fall to the Dark Side, then everything suffers. And yet - life goes on, regardless of what I do. The idea was dizzying, liberating, contradictory and scary all at once.

My existence matters. *I* matter. And yet I'm nothing special at all. Beyond all this talk of light and dark, good and evil, doing and not-doing, destiny and free will, life and death. Beyond dualities, there is--just this. And it is enough.
It was true. Here at the tree, all was calm and at peace. War and suffering still existed, but they were fragments of the whole, rather than the whole itself. Even the dark was no longer something to be feared; it was the natural counterpart of light. For the tree, day and night were two halves of the same fundamental principle—different, perhaps, but one was not inherently stronger or better than the other.

*How can this be if the Dark Side exists?* Luke asked, confused in spite of the tree's implacable certainty. Why would Yoda and Ben have warned him of something that had no fundamental reality?

The tree spoke of drawing towards the sunlight, growing and spreading up in the sky to maximize leaves and light and growth, and down into the dark, moist corners of the earth where nutrients and complex alliances with subsoil organisms. That was the natural desire of all life, to spread and grow, but there were natural limits and conditions, checks and balances, to keep one life from taking over everything.

*I am large, but I am not the whole universe,* Luke translated the tree's explanation in his mind. *I take what I need and no more. I grow until I am checked and do not push forward beyond that until the time is right. What you call the Dark Side... is the opposite of that.*

Luke nodded slowly. *Growth for the sake of growth, to become the whole universe, not realizing that you already are the whole universe, and nothing is missing.*

*Yesss,* the tree said. *Yessssss.*

Luke held up both his hands in front of him - the paler flesh of his left hand contrasting sharply to the black leather glove on his right. "Light and dark are like my left hand and my right," he said slowly. "And when Vader speaks of the power of the Dark Side, he's speaking from his limited understanding of the dark, and not the whole. The relative, not the absolute."

*Yesss.*

"How do I tell him? How do I show him all this?" Even if he could find the right words, it wouldn't be enough. Even if he could somehow show his father his experiences here, it wouldn't be enough. It wasn't something that could be taught—it had to come from within. Yet even so, some circumstances and situations were more helpful than others—

And that was precisely what Yoda had done, Luke realized with a start. Yoda hadn't tried to teach him anything. He had just been himself, repeated his stories and his sayings until Luke had grown to understand them through his own experiences.

His heart contracted in his chest. Another realization, another apology too late to share with his teacher.

It might not be too late for Vader, though. Ben and Yoda were dead, and Vader was alive. As long as he was alive—

The tree took Luke's mental images of Vader and re-imagined them in its own terms: a broken, twisted tree, heavily scarred by lightning, thick and knotted at the base. Yet as Luke looked closely, he saw the tiny, tender green shoots that poked out of the ground, reaching towards the light.


Words failed him. The problem was so vast and complex, he had no idea what to ask for. *How do
I help him realize his true nature?

Bright sunlight on leaves. Deep waters flowing underground. Cold stone and the wind passing through branches. Anything can be a gate, for those who can perceive it for what it is, was the tree’s advice.

And love, Luke realized, as his spirits rose, buoyed by the calm strength of the tree around him. The love that Yoda had spoken of, in the tales of the old Jedi, the love that he had shown for Luke, his last and perhaps most frustrating student. Not the love of self, or the cravings of the body, but deep compassion fed by this view of universal wholeness, without disregarding the differences of the individual beings that composed it.

Love is what will save Anakin Skywalker. Love is what will bring him back. Love and compassion and knowledge and calm.

Yesss, the tree agreed. Yesssss.

They sat quietly together for a long time. Finally, Luke felt his muscles growing stiff, and he eyed the tracking beacon on his utility belt thoughtfully. It was still flickering, like a giant overgrown glow-beetle. Somewhere out there, Artoo was waiting for him--and further still, Han and Leia. It was time to go.

But even as he got to his feet, the tree wasn’t finished.

You leave and yet a part of you is here always. I am here, I am rooted, yet I am with you, across the galaxy under the light of other suns. We are different, and yet the same.

Luke nodded slowly.

Take the seeds with you, the tree said, in images of the cones Luke had seen dangling from its branches on his climb upwards. I want to grow beyond this planet, spread out across the stars.

Luke paused, confused. I thought you said the desire to spread beyond one’s natural limits was the Dark Side?

He felt the rustle of the tree’s amusement in his mind. There are more ways to pass on who we are than expanding our individual self. Seeds are the way of my kind. What way will you choose, Jedi?

He saw himself Emperor of the Galaxy, ruler of all that there was, the lives of billions hanging on his every whim. He was alone on the rocky shore of a deep blue sea, cloaked and hooded, staring with grim melancholy towards the horizon. He shouted advice at a young human woman and a reptilian alien of a species he’d never seen before, as they sparred with glowing lightsabers as the jungle creatures hooted in the surrounding forest. He looked over the night sky on an intensely urban world, so lit by artificial lights, the stars were a faint smudge against the glare, even as speeders and transports zoomed by in all directions. He fought for his life, blocking blaster bolt after blaster bolt with his lightsaber, all his senses attuned to the task before him. He stood at the feet of a scion of the great tree in the ruins of an ancient civilization, the brilliant arm of the galaxy arcing above them both.

He saw the Jedi reborn, scattered in ones and twos across a hundred thousand worlds, different shapes and faces, but all of them recognizable by their coarse brown robes, the calm peace in their eyes, and the joy in their faces when they smiled.

"I will do as you do," he said at last. "I will sow the seeds in fertile soil. I will lead the way by my example, and guide others to the truths that cannot be taught. I will grow to my natural limits and
no further, do good when I can, and accept what lies outside of my choice and my control."

*Let it be so, said the tree. Let it be so.*

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Despite following the tracking beacon’s signal closely during his absence, Artoo couldn't help a startled squeak when Luke appeared behind him. The droid's annoyed beeps turned into a squeal when Luke tossed the beacon at him -- only to have it hover in midair in front of him instead of falling to the ground as gravity required.

With remarkable aplomb, the astromech extended his mechanical arm, yanked the beacon out of the air to place in his inner storage compartment, whistling his fierce refusal to be intimidated by his companion's shenanigans the entire time.

"All right, Artoo," Luke said with a smile, patting the little droid on the head. "Now, we can go."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Shout-out to tumblr user @tattoineknights for their headcanon that Lando bought Luke the iconic black outfit he wears during _Return of the Jedi_, which was too good not to include in this chapter.

Hyperspace was an essential part of interstellar travel, but it was boring as hell from a piloting perspective. Artoo could handle whatever irregularities the X-wing's computer couldn't, so all Luke had to do in theory was sit back and enjoy the ride. In a small one-man fighter, with a cockpit too tight and cramped to move around, his options were limited: sleep, meditate, and ponder.

There was a great deal to think about; so much had happened in the last few days. It still hadn't fully sunk in that Yoda was dead, or that Leia was his sister, or that Luke was the last of the Jedi, destined to confront Vader again. His adventures in the cave and at the tree had provided a welcome distraction from his fears and worries, but once he was off-planet, they swirled around him again like troublesome gnats. He tried to ignore them and focus on his breath, but it was hard to forget that if Yoda and Ben were right, the galaxy's fate was now in his hands.

He would have to face Vader again, and bring his father back to the light - something that Obi-Wan Kenobi, a seasoned general and Jedi Knight, believed impossible, and Yoda himself had doubted. Luke's vision of Vader begging for help and his own experience with his shadowy double in the cave gave him hope, as did his own inherent sense of _rightness_ when he ran the scenario through his head.

But every time he remembered Vader looming over him in the air shaft on Bespin, black gloved hand extended towards the long-lost son he'd just mutilated, Luke's spirit quailed and he shrank back inwardly, just as he had in Cloud City.

He knew he would do his damndest to save his father, or die in the attempt if Vader cut him down when he refused to fight. But regardless of whether he succeeded or failed, the simple act of reaching out to Vader, to stay open and accepting, instead of flinching back, would require every ounce of courage and calm he possessed.

He hoped this time he would be strong enough. He hadn't been strong enough on Bespin, and the encounter had very nearly broken him.

The one bright spot in all of this was that he couldn't fall to the Dark Side unless he chose that path for himself. Vader might torture or kill him, but no one, not even his father or the Emperor he served, could force Luke down that path unless he chose. So there was that comfort, anyway.

Luke fiddled with the cuff of his sleeve, grateful he had followed Lando's advice to purchase multiple pairs of the fitted black pants, tunics and boots when they'd gone on a supply run together in Nibararna a few months earlier. It was worth all the fuss and expense alone not having to wear what remained of his soaking, sweaty clothes under his flight suit all the way back to Sullust.

"We're on the run from every Imperial agent in the galaxy, with prices on our heads that would bankrupt a Hutt, and you want to go clothes shopping?" Luke had asked at the time, incredulous.
at Lando's priorities when the subject had first come up.

Lando spread his hands out in a conciliatory gesture, his cape swirling around him in an equally dramatic flourish. "Come on, Luke, you know what they say about how the clothes make the man. You've been down a lot lately, but you'll feel so much better once you've gotten something to wear that really suits you."

_I doubt it_, Luke thought, still haunted by long episodes of hopeless despair that had plagued him ever since Bespin. Yet he followed Lando without further complaint to one of the nicer sections of the planetary capital, right to an exclusive boutique of the sort that didn't even exist on an Outer Rim backwater like Tatooine.

He watched, fascinated, as Lando waltzed up to the droid attendant, and began making selections, of vests, tunics and pants, all of which were a bright, glossy black.

"I don't think that's appropriate," Luke ventured after a few moments. "I don't think the Jedi ever wore black."

Lando, however, was not so easily dissuaded. "Who decides what's appropriate for a Jedi? You're the only one now, right?"

He was too tired to explain the truth to Lando - that the only other Jedi he knew of were a tiny alien who dressed in rags, and a ghost beyond the need of material comforts, both of whom had lied to him, both deliberately and by omission - so he settled for a nod instead.

"So, who says you can't wear black if you want to?" Lando said, grinning broadly.

Luke had to admit his friend had a point. It might be worth it just to piss Yoda off. "It's just - I don't know - so dark--"

Lando patted his shoulder. "Don't worry, black goes with everything. Try it on and see how you feel."

_That's what I'm afraid of_: But he accepted the clothing without complaint and bundled off to the changing room.

To Luke's surprise, he liked the ensemble that Lando had selected. It suited his newfound maturity, and he liked how it looked on him. _It matches the darkness inside me_, he thought absently, staring at his reflection, before he laughed at his own absurdity.

Just because he was Vader's son - just because his father had fallen to evil - did not mean that he would fall, too. He'd been afraid that taking on his father's colors would mean becoming like his father, but that was absurd.

He'd rejected his father's offers and had stayed with the light. It had been a near thing, and he'd almost died in the process, but he would do it again in a heartbeat if he had to.

_What I wear doesn't change who I am inside_, he thought, then came out of the dressing room to share his change of heart with Lando.

"I knew you would,"Lando said, not even bothering to hide his smugness. "Just be sure to get several pairs of everything, so you always have something in reserve. Fashions come and go, but lookin' good is never out of style, Luke. First impressions are everything, even when you're running a rebellion. When you meet somebody for the first time, you want them to think, 'Wow, this man has got it.'"
And Lando had been right. People looked at him differently now than they did when he wore his flight suit, or the plain grey coveralls of a comman soldier. Even as a commanding flight officer, he'd never stood out from the crowd, but now -- people noticed when he walked into the room. They saluted him, respected him, looked up to him. They might not have been as friendly or welcoming as they had been when he was a wide-eyed new recruit, fresh from his heroics at the Battle of Yavin, but - he hadn't been that person for a long time now. And it was good that he recognized that.

When he changed his clothes on Dagobah, Luke had shaken his head when he found the all-too-familiar Tatooine grit lodged in the corners and folds of his trouser pockets from the sandstorm they'd encountered while making their escape from the Great Pit of Carkoon. After so many years of battling the sand on all fronts - in his clothes, in his shoes, in his room, in his 'vaporators - here he was, millions of miles away from that miserable rock, and there was still no escaping it.

His boots were a lost cause, and he'd tossed them into a swamp and pulled on a new pair with a sigh of relief. The boots were tough, but they hadn't been designed for a watery world like Dagobah.

His shirt was equally ruined, but for an entirely different reason. He'd used it along with several of the ropes and webbings from his utility belt to rig up a passable backpack for taking the seeds of the Jedi tree with him. So he could fulfill the charge he'd accepted to help it to grow beyond Dagobah and spread out across the stars.

Following the tree's quiet suggestions, he walked out as close to the ends of the tree's larger branches as he dared, holding his makeshift sack under each of the cone clusters. The individual cones themselves were too large to fit more than a handful in his bag, but he found that the seeds fell easily into the sack when he shook the cone clusters. On a hunch, he strapped a few cones to the outside; he wasn't sure why, but he had a feeling they might be useful later on.

Once the sack was full, it was easy enough to it load it on his back, and climb down to the ground again with both his hands free. He set out across the marsh at a broad clip, pausing only once to look back over his shoulder and bid a silent mental good-bye to the tree before pressing on.

*You leave and yet a part of you is here always,* the tree had told him. I am here, I am rooted, yet I am with you, across the galaxy under the light of other suns.

It was important to remember he wasn't alone in the universe, that the experience of unity and connection were fundamental truths of reality, not a bizarre dream. Now that he was off-planet, he felt himself slipping back into the hustle and bustle of his planning, active mind, drifting further and further from the peace he'd felt in contact with the tree. It wasn't that those feelings were lost to him; he was just more distracted out here. He had to concentrate harder, and focus if he wanted to stay with that sense of calm.

The sack of seeds rested on his lap, the spiky cones sticking out from where he'd tied them on the top. Even as he wrestled with his troubled mind, he played with them, running his fingers across the imbricate brown spirals of overlapping scales, nested to form a long, blunt, vaguely pyramidal structure. Fortunately, the spikes at the tip of each scale were more blunted than they appeared from a distance, were less spikey up close than it appeared from a distance, or he would have cut himself on multiple occasions during the collecting process.

The seeds themselves were jet-black, round and heavy like currency, clinking together in his palm with a satisfying smack when he rolled them around. Each one was a promise, a tiny package capable of unfolding into a vast, complex creature like the Jedi tree, an entire world in and of itself. Looking at them humbled him, and he was reminded again that for all his training, he knew remarkably little about the universe.
How do these trees even *work*? he wondered, not for the first time. It had all been noble of him to vow to plant the seeds as part of his quest to bring the Jedi back, but he didn't know what sort of environment they needed, let alone how to germinate them. He knew vaguely that soil and water and light were required, but he had no idea what combinations would be appropriate.

He'd spent the first two decades of his life fixing machines that pulled water from the sky in a desert wasteland; plants were not his forte. He was going to have to research them, find somebody who knew more to help him--

Assuming, of course, he made it through the next few days. He could feel his tension ratchet upward as his attention shifted towards the future, and dread sloshed through his stomach, twisting his organs in its wake. He couldn't see anything more specific, but that ominous sense of impending doom hovered over him, like the Dagobah air at an approaching storm.

Whatever the Rebellion was planning at Sullust was going to change everything, and Luke would be right in the middle of it. And a major strike at the heart of the Empire would bring him face to face with Vader, and the mysterious Emperor at last--

Luke didn't know much about the Emperor, aside from the scraps of holos in every piece of Imperial propaganda. He was reclusive, kept to his court at Imperial Center. He reminded Luke an arachnoid in the center of a vast web, cruel, complex and scheming.

Emperor Palpatine was the one who had lured Anakin Skywalker over to the dark side. It was the Emperor—not Vader—whom Yoda had warned him about, which was concerning in and of itself. It wasn't Vader who was his true enemy, it was Palpatine--

*I have a feeling I am going to find out a lot more about him very, very soon*--

The computer pinged an alert that the X-wing would be dropping out of hyperspace shortly, and Luke wrenched his attention back to the controls in front of him.

Artoo was pleased at the prospect of catching up with Threepio and sharing all the horrors of Dagobah with him. As miserable as Artoo's experiences on Dagobah had been, Luke was amused at the little droid's creativity in using them to get a reaction out of Threepio.

Luke frowned as he considered his chronometer. As best as he could determine, he'd spent approximately three Standard days on Dagobah, a measurement that coincided with Artoo's own internal measurements. Yet according to the ship's computer, he was arriving only a day or so after the *Millennium Falcon* - which had made no unplanned stops and boasted a much faster hyperdrive than his X-wing. It didn't make any sense at all. Something odd had happened with time on Dagobah again, and he had a feeling it was a mystery he was never going to be able to sort out.

At least his little detour hadn't kept him from missing all the action, as he'd feared--

With another warning beep from the computer, the ship dropped out of hyperspace, and the starlines reverted back to individual specks against an infinite sea of black. The rebel fleet - dominated by the vast white organic blob of the Mon Calamari cruiser *Home One* - swirled out all around him.

It was a vast armada, and an impressive one - until you considered that it was the barest fraction of the Imperial Navy's strength. Then it all seemed hopeless. But the Alliance had made great gains using their small numbers to their best advantage, and he saw no reason why this latest campaign would be any different--
Immediately, Luke was picked up by the Rebellions's scanners, with a crisp, unfamiliar voice over the comm demanding that he give his name and destination lest he be destroyed.

"Luke Skywalker, destination *Home One* for meeting with Alliance High Command," he said, sending a confirmation code along for good measure. Imperial forces never used X-wings, but it was good for the fleet to be alert and cautious. It was a big galaxy and you never knew who might be lurking out there.

"Welcome, Commander Skywalker," the scanner tech said, as the code cleared and the voice recognition scanner confirmed his identity. "The High Command Meeting will take place in ten minutes. Please proceed directly to the rendezvous point on *Home One."

Luke bit his lip, eyeing the distance between his ship and the Alliance flagship as he ran some mental calculations. Even with pushing the sublight engines to their max, they would barely make it in time. He should have jumped in closer, but it was too late now. "All right, then. Skywalker out."

"Thank you, sir. Take care."

He leaned back in his chair, craning his neck to peer back at the astromech until behind him. "Think we have can make it to this top secret meeting if we punch it, Artoo?"

Artoo opined that meetings were boring and usually not worth the trouble. Besides, it was just another Death Star.

It took Luke a second to process Artoo's words; then he sagged back in his chair in shock. *Another* Death Star? Hadn't the Empire learn the first time what a terrible idea that was? Or did they enjoy blowing up planets so much they didn't want to stop?

*Apparently not,* he decided.

"How'd you find out about that? It's supposed to be top secret," Luke said aloud to the droid.

Artoo, who was enjoying Luke’s surprise, said if Alliance High Command had wanted to keep their messages secret, they should use better encryption.

"You're a little schemer, you know that, Artoo?" Luke said, amusement warring with awe in his voice. Well, it was that very trait had saved his life and that of his friends several times over by now. "Tell you what - don't ever change."

Artoo was all too happy to comply.

He landed the X-wing without incident in the *Home One's* docking bay, stripping off his flight suit as the vacuum tube pulled Artoo out of his perch in the astromech docking port. Making sure the bag of seeds was securely tied to his belt, he set off for the conference room just off the bridge, Artoo trailing along at his heels.

The meeting had already started by the time he reached the bridge, and the door was shut. He nodded to the Mon Calamari officer at the door, who recognized him on sight and let him into the room just as Han, in the front row of the bowl-shaped conference room, was telling Crix Madine that he didn't have a command crew yet for his shuttle.

Luke had no idea what that meant, but in a sudden flash of insight, he knew he had to be involved. He heard Chewbacca's roar as he volunteered, saw Leia dip her head in assent as Han smiled, and--
"I'm with you, too!" Luke called, coming down the steps. His black was a sharp contrast to the orange flight suits, and drab white and beige military uniforms and he knew it.

Madine, apparently satisfied, nodded once, and the meeting broke up as Luke reached the main floor of the conference room.

Leia met him at the bottom of the stairs with a welcoming embrace. Luke tried to keep his expression neutral, but she saw the tension in his eyes as he pulled away and her smile faded. It was so hard to keep anything hidden from her.

"What is it?" she asked quietly.

"Ask me again sometime," he said, as gently as he could. He wanted--no, he needed to tell her the truth, but it wasn't the right time or place, not with so many people about. "Hi, Han--Chewie," he greeted as the two came over, grateful for the distraction.

Artoo, unable to handle stairs, was babbling eagerly about their new mission to his counterpart. "Exciting is hardly the word I would choose," he heard Threepio sniff behind him.

"I didn't see you come in," Leia said, forcing Luke's attention back to her.

"That's because I just arrived," he said.

"Like your style there, kid," Han agreed. "I'm not a big fan of meetings myself."

"Doesn't matter if you're there for the beginning, but it's better to show up right at the end, huh, Han?" Luke teased.

"Damn straight," Han agreed, refusing to be baited by historical precedents. "How much of the briefing did you hear?"

"Let me guess. The Empire didn't learn from history the first time, so they're building another Death Star, and it's our job to sabotage the protective shielding so the Alliance can blow it up. Again."

"That's about right," said Han, impressed in spite of himself. "'Cept you missed the part where I'm in charge. General Solo and all that."

"Better you than me," Luke said, and meant it. It was good that Han was so involved in this mission after so long on the fence. The Alliance had wasted no time in giving him a commission, it seemed.

Han wasn't finished. "Now tell me how you found out. Was it some sort of Jedi trick, or a lucky guess?"

From his tone, it was clear he suspected the latter. Luke had to fight to keep his amusement from showing on his face. Despite Luke and Leia's explanations, Han still hadn't admitted to believing in the Force - and so far he'd missed all of Luke's more obvious displays of power.

It was tempting to string Han along and claim his Jedi powers were responsible, but that wasn't appropriate, and he knew it. "Neither. It was all Artoo's doing, actually."

"That droid is a security nightmare. I'm glad he's on our side," Leia said.

"Did you know all this when you gave him the original Death Star plans?" Luke asked.
Leia favored him with a slight smile. "I didn't think it would hurt. I was banking his tenacity more than anything else."

"We're bringing him with us, right?" Luke asked Han.

"Oh, I suppose it'll be good to have a codebreaker in case we need to hack into their systems before we blow 'em up," Han said with a sigh. "But I draw the line at letting Goldenrod tag along with us. What's he going to do, talk at people?"

Luke frowned. That was--wrong somehow, but he couldn't articulate why. How to convince a skeptic, who still didn't take Luke's powers seriously, of a hunch?

"Threepio saved ours lives on the first Death Star, Han," Luke reminded him. "We never would have made it out of the trash compactor alive without him. For better or worse, Artoo won't go without him."

Han grudgingly agrees. "All right. We'll take the fussy bastard along and hope nobody shoots at him. But he'd better shut up when I tell him to, okay?"

"Han, he's right there, you can tell him yourself--"

"Good, maybe then I won't have to repeat myself--"

"How much time do we have before we leave?" Leia interjected.

"Not too long. Two hours. The strike team is getting outfitted now. He pointed to Luke and Leia. "You two need to go down and get camo ponchos."

"What about you and Chewie?"

"I do what I want," Han said with a grin. "That's one of the benefits to being in charge, you can wear whatever you damn well please. Besides, you think they'd have anything that would fit a Wookiee?"

Chewbacca laughed at the idea. Wookies weren't fragile like humans-- who needed fragile cloth wraps that had to be swapped out so frequently when you had a luxurious coat of fur, anyway?

"That's right," Lando said, coming up behind Han. "We poor humans can't keep up with the Wookies, but we try." He nodded in greeting to Luke. "Speaking of which--looking good, my friend, looking good."

"Likewise," Luke said, taking in the whole ensemble. "The cape is a nice touch."

"Who's going to believe you're a general if you don't look the part? After all, we're going be in the history books if we win this thing," Lando leaned forward in a conspiratorial whisper. "And if I have to go out in a blaze of glory, you bet I'm goin' out in style."

Han rolled his eyes. "You can wear whatever you want on your space mission, General Calrissian, but us ground-troops gotta be a little more practical here."

"Well, I'm bringing a dress for the victory party," Leia said. "Is that practical enough for you, General Solo?"

Han flushed, and they all laughed at that, even Han. "You blow up that shield generator, you can wear whatever you damn well please, all right, princess?" he managed after a second.
Leia smiled and squeezed his hand. "I'll hold you to it, General."

This was getting too mushy and sentimental for Han, so he made an obvious effort to change the subject. "Okay, everybody, we need to get rolling. Do what you got to do, and we'll meet at the hangar in two hours."

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Luke's visit to the outfitters was brief and perfunctory. The outfit was simple - a green and brown camouflage poncho to go over his usual clothes and a helmet. Small waist pack with ration bars, a small portable survival and first aid kits. It included a small blaster, which he didn't think he needed, but left it attached to the belt next to his lightsaber.

It didn't seem right to leave the seeds here on the *Home One*, so he took them, too, sliding his makeshift backpack underneath his poncho.

And that was it. Aside from a few changes of clothing and a handful of datapads, Luke didn't have much in the way of personal possessions. He'd lost everything but the clothes on his back and his father's lightsaber when Imperial stormtroopers had razed his childhood home on Tatooine; and he'd lost his lightsaber along with his right hand on Bespin. There was nothing left to link him to the past anymore, nothing to hold him back to keep him from the challenges ahead, except his memories. He hoped it would be enough to get him through the hard road ahead.

He ate a meal he barely tasted in the canteen, reading about their destination - the forest moon of Endor - on a borrowed datapad. As the name suggested, it was a world dominated by vast forests, with few other biomes to speak of, except a few icy patches around the poles. The area around the site of the Imperial shield generator was dominated by particularly long-leaved evergreens, rising hundreds of meters into the air, no doubt rivalling the forests of Kashyyyk when they were finally officially measured.

Luke's heart lifted at the thought of seeing such giant trees, even though he doubted they would be good conversationalists as the Jedi tree on Dagobah.

And that was it. With no settlers or industry, Endor was one of the millions of habitable yet unclaimed worlds in the galaxy, exactly the sort of place that Rebellion looked for when setting up an operating post. It was far enough from the galactic core and any prominent shipping lanes to be isolated. No doubt those were the same reasons the Empire had chosen it for a vast, clandestine construction site.

He sighed. Something about the whole mission felt wrong, but he couldn't figure out what it was. It wasn't clear whether his own personal dread of his impending confrontation with Vader was bleeding into the rest of his life, or if there was something else lurking on the edges of his senses that he couldn't identify.

He needed to talk to Leia, privately. She'd picked up on his dark mood and swirling thoughts, and it would be good to hear her reassurances. And perhaps he would be able to tell her what he'd learned from Yoda and Ben, too--

But when he went down to the docking bay to where their stolen Imperial shuttle was waiting, Chewie, Lando, Artoo and Threepio were all there with her, watching the rest of the strike team file into the passenger section. The only one missing was Han.

"Can you believe the Emperor himself is overseeing the construction of this thing?" Lando said with a shudder as Luke approached.
Luke shuddered, though fortunately none of his friends had noticed his reaction. Was that why everything felt so wrong? Because the Emperor was there? Was that enough to trigger his senses of danger?

On the other hand, if the Emperor was already at Endor, then that would explain how Luke might meet both him and Vader by going there--

He had a bad feeling about this.

"Luke, are you all right?" Leia asked, as if noticing him for the first time.

He nodded. She gave him a concerned look, but let the matter drop, and he was grateful.

"Right fluffy little backstabbers, those Bothans who brought us the news," Lando said. "I hope they can be trusted."

"Say whatever else you will about the Bothans, they have excellent intelligent network, and they hate the Empire as much as we do. More, actually," Leia said. "It comes with all the subterfuge in their system politics. They love backstabbing each other, but nobody wants to be the first victim."

"Can we stop this discussion of stabbing, please? I find it very disturbing," said Threepio earnestly.

The three humans and Chewie looked at each other and shrugged.

"Luke, you sure you don't want to fly with the fighters this time? You're one of the best pilots in the fleet, and I could really use you," Lando said at last.

"Hey, stop tryin' to steal my people, you scoundrel," Han said, as he came from behind, but there was no real heat to his voice.

Luke shook his head. "Sorry, Lando. My glory days as a pilot are over. I'll stick with the ground troops on this one."

"No offense taken," Lando said. "I thought you want might in on the action with us. But I got Wedge and the other boys from Rogue Squadron, and we'll be just fine without you."

"You got a co-pilot lined up yet?" Han asked.

"Nien Nunb. Sullustan. Good man, good friend," Lando said. "Like I said, we'll be just fine. Now get out of here and have that shield down by the time we get there. We're all counting on you."

Chewbacca gave Lando a hug, urging him to be careful.


Leia gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She and Lando had gotten off on the wrong foot at their first meeting, and betraying them all to Vader hadn't helped. But the former Baron Administrator had grown on her since that awful day, and he'd redeemed himself in her eyes with his willingness to rescue Han from Jabba.

"You all get settled in," Han said, gesturing to the shuttle. "I have something I want to discuss with Lando."

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Han came into the cockpit a few minutes, as Luke and Chewie made last minute adjustments. "Leia all right?"

"Yeah, she's coming up," Luke said, fiddling with the lights in the ceiling. Leia had stopped by the passenger compartment to rally the rest of the strike team before departure.

Chewie growled and punched the ceiling, complaining bitterly about the anti-alien biases of the Empire.

"Yeah, I don't think the Empire had Wookiees in mind when they designed her, Chewie," Han agreed, settling himself down into the pilot's chair, and staring out the viewport to where the *Millenium Falcon* was docked nearby. He was so engrossed he didn't notice Leia entering the cockpit a few moments later.

"Hey, you awake?" Leia said gently with a touch on Han's shoulder.

"Yeah, I just got a funny feeling, like I'm not going to see her again," Han said, tilting his head towards the *Falcon*.

Luke got no such hints from the Force, but he wasn't sure if that was because Han and the *Falcon* would be fine, or because he was falling into an event shadow where his fledgling prescience didn't work properly. Fortunately, he was not called upon to give an opinion.

Leia smiled, and tapped Han's shoulder. "Come on, General. Let's move."

Han snapped back to his business-as-usual mode. "All right, Chewie, let's see what this piece of junk can do. Ready, everybody?"


"Here we go again," said Threepio ominously, but kept quiet when Luke and Leia both glared at him.

As Han and Chewie piloted the shuttle out of the docking bay, there was a whining sound as the wings unfolded into the Lambda-class's characteristic tripod. Compared to the shuttle itself were smoothly curved Mon Calamari cruisers around them, the shuttle was sleek, stark, and angular, and Luke shivered as they steered towards a clear space to make the jump to hyperspace.

Something was wrong, and he didn't know how to fix it because he didn't even know what it was.

"All right, hang on," Han said, as he pulled back the lever on the hyperdrive and the stars twisted into blurs.

Well, no matter what dangers lay ahead, Luke was committed now.

Regardless of where his own fate lay, he hoped his friends wouldn't get hurt in the process.

***

Han let it slip in the first few minutes after the jump that he'd let Lando borrow the *Falcon* for the impending space battle over Endor. Chewbacca roundly disapproved, and the two of them spent the next hour sniping at each other off and on, until the Wookiee's insults because too abstract and creative for Luke's rudimentary Shryiiwook. Once he'd gotten his annoyance out of his system, and accepted Han's argument that they really didn't want Lando to die out there, and the *Falcon* was indisputably the fastest ship in the fleet, Chewbacca settled down. As long as Lando
remembered it wasn't his ship anymore and returned her in pristine condition after the battle, there wouldn't be any problems later on.

While this was going on, Luke had a few questions of his own for Leia.

"Is it true there were no weapons on Alderaan?" he asked quietly.

Leia's face froze in that haunted expression she wore whenever someone surprised her with discussion of her destroyed homeland. For that reason alone, Luke wouldn't have asked her about it if he hadn't felt it was important.

"It's true," she said after a moment. "We had no standing army, no navy, and no blasters were allowed on the planet's surface. There was a strong judicial system, based on negotiation and mutual respect. It was--"

_Paradise_, she didn't say, although for her it had been. For Luke, who had grown up on the rough and tumble, kill-or-be-killed desert wastes on the fringes of the Outer Rim, her stories of peace and prosperity sounded like an impossible, utopian fever dream - one that could have been his had fate left them together, as they had been at birth.

But it was a dream Leia had _lived_ for the first two decades of her life, until the Empire had destroyed the entire planet in an attempt to break her. Her memories and her dreams of paradise were what sustained her. There wasn't much call for philosophical pacifism, and he'd seen Leia kill without hesitation when her life or the lives of others were on the line; war was a terrible thing. And yet--

Anger, fear, and aggression wouldn't help him when it was time to confront Vader and the Emperor. He would need courage, hope, love--and whatever snippets of ancient Alderaanian wisdom that Leia could impart to him.

"Why do you ask?" Leia said, eyeing him thoughtfully.

"Oh, well - I was just wondering. About the Jedi, I mean. My teacher said to use the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack. But I don't know how that works when someone's attacking you, and killing them isn't an option."

Leia sighed. "You have no idea how many debates about this I sat through during my educational seminars. What you're asking is one of the thorniest problems of Alderaanian society, and human nature, too. I don't know if we ever came up with a satisfactory answer, though we certainly tried."

"What do you mean?" He leaned forward, not wanting to miss anything.

"There's not one uniform right or wrong answer to fit all situations. So, justice has to be flexible to accommodate them all. But it can't be _too_ flexible, or else it stops being fair. That's why it's good to have a neutral arbiter in disputes, to see the situation more objectively, and stay within the letter of the law as much as possible, without violating the spirit. But that's not always possible when someone is attacking you. So you have to--be your own arbiter, which is hard when you're in the middle of battle. And it's very easy to fail."

She was silent for a long time, as they both considered her words. Finally, she said, "The first rules of diplomatic negotiation are to know who you are and who you represent, where you come from and why it matters, what compromises you can live with, and which ones you can't."

Not so different from a Jedi, then. Luke took a deep breath. "How do you know when to stop reaching out to your attacker?"
"You never stop," Leia said. "You do what you must to defend yourself and others, no more and no less. But you never give up on them unless there's no other choice."

"So you'd accept an Imperial offer for peace if they sent one right now?"

"If it was sincere... yes. Yes, I would."

Even with all that they did to you? he wanted to ask, but he didn't need to. She saw the question written in his face, and she didn't shy away from answering it.

"Yes. It would be the right thing to do. The day I stoop to their level is the day that Alderaan truly dies."

Luke reached out and squeezed her hand. "I'm sorry," he said. "Thank you."

She nodded slowly, and squeezed his hand in return.

Han paused in his argument with Chewie long enough to look back and interrupt them. "What are you two muttering about back there, anyway?"

At the look on Han's face, Luke let go of Leia's hand, but it was too late - Han had seen the innocent gesture and drawn his own conclusions.

It's not like that!

Luke wanted to shout to his friend, but his head hurt too much, and it wasn't the right time to explain it all. Not like this, anyway.

The rest of the trip passed in silence.

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When the shuttle popped out of hyperspace again, the familiar silhouette of the Death Star was there to greet them. Even partially constructed, it was forbidding and ominous, a grim specter of destruction hovering over Endor. And if the Bothan spy reports were true, the Emperor himself was there, too--

Leia drew in a sharp breath, and Chewie barked a particularly evocate curse. Luke's muscles clenched involuntarily, and for a moment he was nineteen years old again, cheerfully zipping towards the battle station, giddy with excitement and adrenaline. Then his right hand ached, hard, jolting him back to the present. Artoo and Threepio remained quiet.

If Han was perturbed by the resurrection of their old enemy, he gave no sign. "Where I come from, we'd call that a planet," he said, pointing to the forested moon below them. The gas giant around which Endor orbited was a grey splotch in the distance, too far away to be of consequence to them.

Then Luke saw something he'd missed on his first glance, though how he wasn't sure how he could miss a vast, black Super Star Destroyer than dwarfed the two regular Star Destroyers flanking it on either side. It was the Executor, the command ship of the entire Imperial fleet, under Vader's personal command. With that and the shield generator on planet, no wonder the Emperor felt confident enough to leave his sanctum on Imperial Center.

And if the Executor was here, then Vader was likely here as well--

Chewie's grim moan needed no translation: the Executor's presence here was not part of the plan.

"If they don't go for this, we're going to have to get out of here pretty quick, Chewie," Han
agreed.

Chewie said what they were all thinking - if the Empire didn't fall for their trick, they were dead. The shuttle had no weapons and none of the maneuverability of the *Falcon* and everyone knew it. But he stopped speaking as the comm blared on the dashboard in front of them; any Wookiee noises now would give the game away.

Han pressed the button to acknowledge the comm. "We have you on our screen now. Please identify," a crisp, mature voice said, the inherent threat couched in what passed for military politeness. Luke pictured a nice young man--human, of course--in a grey uniform, hunched over his comm board, eager for his shift to be over, but trying not to show it.

And, if life had turned out differently and he'd made it to the Imperial Academy after all, it could easily have been Luke sitting there on the *Executor's* bridge. Of course, he wouldn't have chosen to be a communications officer, he'd have gone for TIE fighter pilot, but sometimes you didn't get a choice--

"Shuttle *Tydirium*, requesting deactivation of the deflector shield." Han sounded bored, routine, as if he'd done this a billion times before.

"Shuttle *Tydirium*, transmit the clearance code for shield passage," said the officer, keeping to the script.

Han held the comm off long enough to hide Chewie's nervous groan before he resumed the connection. "Transmission commencing," he announced, as if he were making a bluff for the entire sabacc pot in a third-rate bar in the Outer Rim.

"Now we find out if that code is worth the price we paid," Leia said grimly once she was sure the comm was off again. The last time they'd gotten away with something like this with the last death star, it had been an Imperial trap, orchestrated to reveal the location of the Rebel base on Yavin IV -- and they'd all fallen for it.

"It'll work. It'll work," Han repeated, though he sounded as if he might be trying to convince himself as well as her.

Luke reached out tentatively with the Force, wondering if he would have to influence the officer's mind to let them pass--only to snap back into his body with a start as something cold and black and ominous stirred on the *Executor's* bridge and directed its attention towards him.

*Oh, FUCK.*

"Vader's on that ship," Luke said, his eyes wide with barely repressed panic at his mistake. *I should have known, I should have known he'd see me if I tried to look, now he knows I'm here, I've blown our cover, FUCK--"

"Now, Luke, don't get jittery, kid, there are a lot of command ships," Han said, but he was clearly spooked, and covering it badly. "Chewie, keep your distance, but try not to *look* like you're keeping your distance."

Chewbacca snarled that those were contradictory instructions, and therefore unhelpful.

"I don't know! Fly casual," Han snapped, his patience wearing thin under the tension.

"Shuttle *Tydirium*, what is your cargo and destination?"

There was a new voice on the comm, older and more polished - no doubt, the communications
officer's direct superior. They'd noticed something off about the shuttle was off, and Luke had the sick feeling he knew exactly what had triggered their concern.

There was no sign of panic in Han's voice. "Parts and technical crew for the forest moon," he said, keeping that hint of casual boredom still in his voice.

Luke felt Vader reaching out to him, searching for him--they were so close, so helpless now, and there was nothing Luke could say or do now that wouldn't blow their cover faster. All Vader had to do was catch them in a tractor beam, and Luke would be be his prisoner--along with the beings he cared most about in the world--

If you do this, Father, I will fight you. I have to. Do whatever you want with me, but I won't let you have my friends again--

Luke thought it was only fair the others should know he'd doomed them all: "I'm endangering the mission, I shouldn't have come."

"It's your imagination, kid," Han dismissed. "Come on, let's keep a little optimism here."

The seconds ticked past, agonizingly slow. The Imperials were clearly discussing them now, no doubt figuring out how best to take them out. All was not going according to plan, they had failed before they'd even begun, and it was all Luke's fault--

They were drifting closer to one of the Executor's communications towers, well within range of the guns. Then again, given the firepower of a Super Star Destroyer, close might be the safest place to be; Han had pulled that stunt several times over the course of his career. Was he plotting another evasive maneuver?

Just as Han declared, "They're not going for it, Chewie," and Luke braced himself for evasive maneuvering, the comm crackled again.

"Shuttle Tydirium, deactivation of the shield will commence immediately," said the young communications officer, as if there had been no delay. "Follow your present course."

The tension levels in the cockpit plummeted as everyone processed the news. They'd made it. Somehow, impossibly, they'd made it.

"See, I told you it was going to work. No problem," Han said, as the shuttle's sensors flickered, showing that the Imperials had indeed lowered the shield as they had promised. "Bureaucracy. Everything just takes forever, you know?"

Han was wrong. Bureaucracy had nothing to do with it. Vader had let them go, and Luke had no idea why.

What the hell just happened?

Vader could have easily taken them all then and there. They'd been completely at his mercy, and he had... let them walk away to continue their mission.

He knows I'm here. Does he know that Leia and the others are with me? What is his plan? Is this another trap? Why did he let me go so easily?

Is it possible that there's still good within him? That he doesn't want to hurt me? I don't understand what's going on.
Disturbed and unsettled, Luke wrestled with his churning thoughts as the shuttle plunged down, down, down to the waiting sea of green below.
Chapter 6

Under other circumstances, Luke might have enjoyed his time on Endor, strolling through ancient evergreen forests that towered hundreds of feet above him, marveling at the life around him. But he was on here on a mission, and though his fledgling sense of prescience was blinded as if by shadow, he knew that the next forty-eight hours would be the pivot around which his entire life was arrayed.

Assuming he survived, of course.

He didn't know what he was in for, exactly, as he stepped off the shuttle into the lush, green, ferny undergrowth that flourished in the dappled sunlight that penetrated the dense canopy, but he could feel the storm bearing down. It was the same thick tension that marked the coming of rain on Dagobah, except none of his companions could sense it. Whatever darkness he faced, he would do it alone.

He could call it the weight of destiny, except that fated glory no longer seemed as romantic as it had when he was nineteen and yearning for the stars. But he couldn't deny a tug, stronger than gravity, pulling him towards his father--one that Yoda and Ben had seen as well--on a collision course. If destiny was what he couldn't avoid doing lest he betray himself and everyone around him, then perhaps it was the right word after all.

Destiny, then, like the dark side, was cold and heavy, leaving his skin crawling and his head aching. But there was no help for it except to push on, keep moving forward, and hope there would be a way through.

Soon Luke would face his Darth Vader--the twisted monster who was also his father--and there was no other way out but to see it through to the end, whatever that might entail. To stand before him, offering no resistance, and show him the path to the light.

It was almost time.

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When they landed on Endor, Luke didn't dare reach out to the Force again, feeling he'd done enough damage already. It was bad enough that Vader knew Luke was on the shuttle without leading him right to the others, too.

He was glad, very glad, that Han had vetoed the decision to land the shuttle at the shield generator and infiltrate from there. He and Han had managed such a feat on the first Death Star--but all Vader would have had to do was comm the base command and order them to capture Luke, and that would be the end of the mission.

It was much better to land the shuttle in the woods a few klicks out from the shield generator and venture in on foot. Even if the Empire knew they were coming, that way at least a few of them might get through.

"Won't the Empire notice when we don't report in, though?" Luke asked Han quietly, as the strike team filed out of the shuttle. He had learned to frame these sorts of observations as questions in order to take away the sting of questioning his superior officer; even an old friend like Han could get prickly when the chain of command was on the line. "They'll wonder why we didn't go directly to the base."
"This ain't a suicide run, kid," Han said gruffly, though not unkindly. "Some of us want to make it out alive. Our best bet is to clear out of here before any scouts come to investigate; I'd rather leave a mystery for them to wonder about than anything concrete. They won't look for what they're not expecting -- in this case, us." He grinned.

"But--" Luke wanted to explain to Han what had happened in the shuttle, but he wasn't sure Han would believe him. Han still thought of Luke as the well-intentioned and enthusiastic "kid" he had known on Hoth; he didn't believe in the Force and had missed or dismissed every demonstration of Luke's Jedi abilities thus far. It was hard to convince someone who didn't want to be convinced, even when the truth was right in front of them. Now was definitely not the time to start.

"Besides, the Fleet won't be here until tomorrow afternoon, local time," Han continued, oblivious to Luke's roiling thoughts. "We don't want to chance the Empire getting the shield back up before then."

There was no point in arguing now. It was clear Luke would have to strike out on his own as soon as possible in order to draw Vader's attention away from the others. With any luck, Vader would be too distracted by his prize to spend much energy chasing after them--assuming he knew there were others here with him in the first place.

Perhaps Luke's presence hadn't screwed everything up just yet. Perhaps it could even be helpful.

He craned his neck to stare up at the trees that surrounded them. They were massive, several meters in diameter, with a thick, spongy bark that reminded him a little of the Jedi Tree on Dagobah; perhaps they were distant cousins. Their sharp green needles blocked the blue sky with lacy filigree patterns, and cast dappled shadows on the ground several hundred meters below. The outline of the Death Star was a hazy sphere high above them, barely visible against the daylit sky.

_Vader will be down here on Endor soon, very soon, after me. I don't know how much time I have._ If Vader were alone, he would have left the _Executor_ as soon as he'd sensed Luke on the bridge, but there was the Emperor's presence to consider. The Emperor, lurking on the Death Star, was the hidden puppetmaster who pulled all the strings--and Vader would do whatever the Emperor commanded. In theory, anyway.

Except that on Cloud City, Vader had stretched out his hand, encouraging Luke to join him so they could rule the galaxy together as father and son. Luke had a feeling the Emperor hadn't been consulted about _that_ decision, but he'd been in too much pain to puzzle through the politics of the situation at the time.

_Still, that's good, if Vader considers betraying the Emperor. That means they won't present a unified front. Maybe I can reach out to him--get his help to defeat the Emperor--so I won't have to do that alone--_

He forced himself back to the present as the last members of the strike team came trailing out of the shuttle. There were fifteen of them, all human and veterans of sabotage campaigns on similar Imperial installations. Most of them had worked together before in various capacities; Luke, who had spent most of his time with the pilots, knew of them by sight and reputation rather than personal experience. He had the feeling that while they appreciated the celebrities in their command crew, they would work quietly and diligently to do their job without the need for more specific instructions. Under the circumstances, this was all to the good, because they couldn't afford for the mission to fail--not when the entire Alliance was counting on them, and the future of the war hung in the balance.

One way or another, regardless of what did or didn't happen with Vader and the Emperor, that shield was going to come down and the Death Star would be destroyed. Luke would do whatever
he needed to do to ensure his friends would succeed--up to and including self-sacrifice.

He had to be honest: the task he had before him might very well kill him. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary to die, but the knowledge was there, lurking in the back of his mind, no matter how hard he tried to avoid it.

The forest was quiet, punctuated by the soft, distant buzz of insects and the occasional ominous call that he hoped belonged to harmless avians, not carnivores with teeth. *The survey said no major predators,* he reminded himself, and took a deep breath to calm himself.

His near-encounter with Vader on the shuttle had shaken him more than he realized; he would have to do better when they met face to face. *Start getting used to it now,* he told himself sternly, and turned to follow the others.

While Luke was distracted, Leia had persuaded Han to don a camo poncho after all, but he'd drawn the line at the helmet. "They block your view," he said shortly, when she thrust one towards him. "I get more head injuries when I wear one than when I don't."

Leia had muttered something about it being too late to prevent irreparable brain damage under her breath, and Luke had to hide a smile. *Some* things hadn't changed, anyway.

It felt good to smile about something--anything--again. They were here together, just like old times, on a mission to take down the Empire, and they were going to win. Luke wouldn't let Vader ruin everything, not now when they were so close to the end.

But they had gone only a few hundred meters from the shuttle when they ran into trouble.

Han waved the others back, as he, Chewbacca, Leia and Luke took cover against a massive, mossy log to survey the situation. An open meadow, punctuated by the occasional cluster of ferns, stretched out in front of them, in which a pair of Imperial scout troopers had chosen to take a mid-afternoon break from speeder patrol.

"Should we go around?" Leia asked quietly.

"It'll take time," Luke said.

"This whole party will be for nothing if they see us," Han said.

The scout troopers were relaxed and slouching, which was promising - if Vader had sent word to be on the lookout for Luke, it hadn't filtered down to the rank and file yet.

It wouldn't be so bad if they were *only* expecting Luke. But if Vader suspected there were others with Luke, then the whole mission was in trouble. And if that happened--

Chewbacca, hidden in the shrubbery behind Luke, said he thought the old 'misdirection' gambit that he and Han were so fond of would work very nicely here indeed.

"Chewie and I will take care of this," Han agreed with a nod. "You stay here," he said to Luke and Leia.

"Quietly," Luke whispered, more shortly than he meant to. "There might be more of them out there." He didn't dare reach out with the Force to find out.

Han's mock-hurt expression rapidly shifted to a grin and a wink. "Hey, it's *me,*" he said with a casual shrug, and crawled away into the undergrowth towards the troopers.
Luke and Leia exchanged knowing looks. Luke sighed, and hoped he wouldn't have to intervene after all. Han meant well, he always did, but subtle was not his strong point - nor Chewie's, come to think of it.

'Misdirection' involved Han sneaking up on one trooper from behind, and distracting the other long enough for Chewbacca to fire from his hiding spot in the bushes. It was a great trick when it worked, but it depended almost entirely on maintaining the element of surprise.

It started off well enough. Unfortunately, a twig snapped underneath Han as he approached the first trooper, and gave the game away completely. It was hard to say who was more startled, but the trooper recovered first, slamming Han into the ground with a desperate punch as Han's blaster fired harmlessly into the air.

"Go for help! Go!" the trooper shouted to his companion, who ran for his speeder and was aloft and away in seconds.

"Great! Come on!" Luke said, grabbing Leia's arm, as they rushed to the rescue.

Chewie shot the fleeing trooper with his bowcaster, while Han grappled with his man, slamming him repeatedly into the tree. For a second, Luke thought that would be the end of the skirmish, and his help wouldn't be needed after all.

No such luck.

"Over there! Two more of them!" Leia shouted, as Luke looked up to see two more troopers - who hadn't been visible from their hiding place - fire up their speeders and zip away.

"I see them--" Luke yelled back. At least there was a speeder left so they could hunt them down--but Leia had the same thought, and was faster on the draw. "Wait, Leia--"

She ignored him, throwing herself onto the bike and kick-starting it into gear. Luke managed to pull himself onto the speeder behind her seconds before she took off, clinging to her waist to keep from falling as she accelerated.

They could hear Han's angry shout behind them, but it didn't matter. Regardless of what Vader did or didn't do, if the troopers managed to alert the base, the whole mission was doomed--and with it, the Alliance's main hope to destroy the Empire.

"Quick! Jam their comlinks, center switch!" he ordered, and Leia obeyed, slamming so hard on the interference channel that the knob almost broke off in her hand.

He wished he'd managed to get to the speeder first. Leia was a fine pilot, thank you very much, but he was the one who'd grown up flying rings around with Biggs in Beggar's Canyon--

Still, you learned all kinds of interesting things if you stayed in the Rebellion, and he was impressed with Leia's skills as she gained speed and caught up with the two fleeing scouts, dodging under fallen trees without killing them both.

But Luke had spent his childhood hotrodding in the desert, pulling all sorts of crazy stunts, and he knew how to handle this. If he could just get into position--

"Move closer! Get alongside that one!" he shouted to Leia over the roar of the bike's engine, and she complied.

The trooper saw them coming and ducked, but couldn't get away. The two bikes slammed and jostled together, as Luke readied himself for the jump. It took a few seconds longer than he
wanted to get into position -- seconds in which he thought Leia was going to lose control as the speeder bucked underneath her--but then he was in the air and onto the trooper's bike. He wrestled with the driver for a moment, before pushing him off. There was a scream mercifully cut short by a sickening crunch as his opponent's slammed into a passing tree, and Luke had to swerve the bike hard to avoid impact himself.

One down, one to go. And he was in the driver's seat of his own bike now. Things were looking up.

Well, at least until they sped past another pair of scouts, who came up behind them and started shooting.

Luke's bike buckled in the air as a blaster bolt hit from behind; he hadn't realized there were weapons on this thing. He looked back as the troopers behind them continued to fire. Time to make a decision.

"Keep on that one! I'll take these two!" he shouted to Leia. He saw her nod and zip ahead, as Luke wrenched his own speeder back into a hard reverse.

It was a stupid stunt that would kill you if you didn't do it right, which meant it was exactly the maneuver they weren't expecting. Now he was behind them, in an excellent position to test out the guns mounted below the steering panel. This is more like it! he thought as he fired, dividing their attention between the obstacles around them and the enemy at their backs.

It didn't take long to run the first trooper into a tree. Sorry, but I didn't survive the Battle of Yavin to get taken out by a low-level punk like you, he thought as he zipped away.

The other scout was more difficult to unseat. The two of them ended up slamming their bikes together, over and over again, until Luke's buckled and dove, sending him hurtling towards the ground. He jumped off, ducking and rolling into the ferny undergrowth, seconds before the bike hit a tree and exploded in a fiery cascade of sparks and shrapnel.

If the trooper had been smart, he would have fled, zipping back to base for reinforcements. Instead, his curiosity - or bloodlust - was his downfall. He zipped back around, speeder canons firing in steady rhythm, sweeping the little grove where Luke had fallen. It was a maneuver that would have taken out an ordinary opponent, but Luke was a Jedi and he was ready for him.

Without conscious effort, his lightsaber ignited in his hands, and he blocked the oncoming bolts with ease--one, two, three--sending them sputtering harmlessly into the great trunks around him. As the scout pulled in closer for the kill, Luke chopped the front steering bars of the bike off as he passed. Unable to steer and with no time to cope, the scout slammed into a massive tree and he and the bike exploded. And then it was over.

Luke realized he was shaking. He took a deep breath, and peeled off his helmet, which had cracked under the impact of his landing. Only then did he realize his lightsaber was still humming in his hands, and switched it off, sheathing it carefully at his belt.

He thought of the endless hours he'd spent blindfolded with Obi-wan's remote, until he could block the bolts without seeing them, until he'd sliced through the remote itself one day after a particularly harried practice session. He'd spent the last year perfecting the technique in preparation for the raid on Jabba's palace, and once again, it had saved his life.

It was just - different - in combat than in practice, that was all. He'd mastered a skill he'd considered impossible when he was nineteen, but he didn't enjoy his victories as much as his younger self had assumed he would.
Now would be the perfect opportunity to defy his orders and strike out on his own, to lure Vader away from the others. Han would be furious, but Luke doubted he'd even consider a court martial, especially once he understood the situation. But there was Leia to consider.

Leia. His sister, Leia.

He had to share with her the secrets of the past, what he'd learned from Ben and Yoda. And it was only fair that she hear the news from his own lips. He couldn't walk away - in all likelihoods, to his death -- without letting her know the truth.

After all, if he failed, she was the Rebellion's last hope. And she would be the only one who could stop Vader, if Luke was wrong and there was no trace of goodness left within his father's broken body.

His decision made, Luke reached for his comlink. "Artoo, can you read me?"

Artoo could. Following the droid's whistled instructions, Luke was able to make his way back to where he'd left the others, going as quietly and quickly as he could to avoid being discovered by more scouts. He passed at least two different patrols, but avoided them easily, his natural caution augmented by convenient Force nudges.

At this rate, the troopers were going to find the abandoned shuttle a lot sooner than Han had expected - and then what would happen? Would they assume that Luke had been a lone stowaway, or would they start looking for accomplices as well--

Well, there was no help for it but to find the others and go from there. But it took a lot longer to retrace his steps on foot than it did on the bike. Fortunately, he'd spent much of his training with Yoda on foot in the wilderness, running and climbing through the swamp, so he shrugged and kept on going, grateful again for his master's teachings.

Compared to Dagobah, this place was a paradise. He didn't stumble hip-deep into a pool of muddy water even once.

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Chewbacca broke into an excited roar when Luke emerged from the undergrowth, as the members of the strike team surrounded him, weapons cocked and ready. "Luke!" Han shouted, and then his expression darkened as he saw Luke was alone. "Where's Leia?"

Luke blinked, completely caught off-guard by the question. "What, she didn't come back?"

"I thought she was with you," Han said.

"We got separated--" Luke started, but broke off as he jumped to the inevitable conclusion: "We better go look for her!"

He kept his body relaxed, but his mind raced grimly through the possible scenarios. Few of them were good. If she'd lost her comlink and hadn't reported in, they were unlikely to find her in this vast forest without Artoo's scanners, and even then it would be tricky. She could have been injured in her battle with the last remaining trooper and knocked unconscious - or captured - or even (he didn't want to think about it) dead.

He hoped she wasn't dead. He'd feel it if she were dead... right? He'd felt Yoda's death, but he had been sitting at his master's bedside, not several klicks away preoccupied with his own struggles.

And with Vader already in the system, he didn't dare reach out to look for her now unless there
was no other way to find her.

Han turned to the rest of the team. "Take the squad ahead," he said to the unit commander. "We'll meet at the shield generator at 0300."

Luke gestured for the droids to follow, grateful not to have the entire strike team involved in this. "Come on, Artoo, we'll need your scanners."

Artoo whistled an affirmative as the rest of the scouts moved out, leaving Luke, Han, and Chewbacca alone with the droids.

"Don't worry, Master Luke, we know what to do," Threepio said, delighted to be of assistance, before he went back to arguing with Artoo over the aesthetic value of the local landscape.

Artoo, for whom all wilderness was a vast improvement after the droid hellscape that was Dagobah, had nothing but rude suggestions for his counterpart.

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Luke re-traced the route he'd taken with Leia through the forest as best he could, but it was a challenge given the lack of discernable landmarks and the constant chatter of his companions. Equally distracting was the rising sense of panic as he tried and failed to focus on the present rather than all the horrible things that might have happened to her. Finally, Artoo whistled that he had successfully located the princess's comlink frequency, though she did not respond to any of his queries.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Take us there!" Han snapped.

It took them another hour to get there, since neither of the droids moved well on such uneven terrain. Luke could see the fuse on Han's temper getting shorter and shorter as the afternoon progressed, a sign of how worried he was about Leia. True to form, however, he wouldn't admit that anything was bothering him.

When Artoo pinged that they were in the general area of the signal, they split up to cover as much ground as they could. Right away, Luke found the wreckage of two Imperial speeders -- perhaps the scout Leia had been tailing, plus one of his buddies? - but there was no sign of Leia herself.

Only after a few minutes combing the ground nearby did Luke find her comlink buried in the moss. Then he spied a familiar green helmet lying upside down a few feet away, and bent to pick it up.

His hands shook, and he forced himself to stay calm, to not rush rapidly to conclusions. But this didn't bode well. This didn't bode well at all--


Luke ran over to find Han, his hands on his hips, staring at the wreckage of yet another Imperial speeder bike amidst the ferns.

No, this did not bode well at all.

"Oh, Master Luke," Threepio said sadly as he approached.

"There's two more wrecked speeders back there," Luke said, gesturing with his head back in the direction he'd come. "And I found this."
He tossed the helmet to Han, who caught it neatly out of the air, though his face fell once he realized what he was looking at.

"I'm afraid that Artoo's sensors can find no trace of Princess Leia," Threepio said, perhaps unnecessarily.

"I hope she's all right," was all Han said, although Luke could tell he didn't believe it.

Well, that was fair. Luke didn't want to believe Leia was dead or captured—even though the evidence was mounting that they would never see her again. *No. Not Leia, too. Not after all this time, all we've been through together, so close to the end. Not after all I've learned—*

But he didn't say anything, just nodded, and focused on his breathing to stay calm. He couldn't afford to fall apart now.

Should he reach out with the Force for her? He hesitated, remembered the skittery cold feeling of Vader's presence in his mind. But they'd exhausted the other possibilities and there was no help for it if he wanted to find Leia—

Chewbacca roared, moving across the clearing at a fast clip, as if he'd sensed something unusual.

"What, Chewie?" Han said, looking up, hope in his eyes.

The Wookiee shouted something back, and gestured for them to follow, but whatever he said was incomprehensible to Han as well as Luke.

"What, Chewie?" Han repeated, following after his co-pilot, Luke and the droids trailing at his heels.

*Leia—maybe he caught some trace of her—maybe she survived the crash and is trying to find us,* Luke thought. *Maybe she was still alive, maybe—*

But instead Chewbacca lead them to a clearing where the remains of some sort of herbivorous quadruped dangled from a sharpened stake. Once again, Luke was reminded that Wookiee noses were vastly more sensitive than humans'—he couldn't smell anything at all. Between that, and the distinct lack of flies, it was clear that the kill was very, very, recent.

"Hey, I don't get it," Han said, grumpy that what he thought was Leia had turned out to be a false alarm.

Chewbacca made agitated gestures, his Shryiiwook coming too fast for Luke to grasp much meaning—he thought it might be something about how fresh the meat was, and how they hadn't heard any sounds of struggle or death while they were searching the area—

Han was unimpressed, and his fear and worry for Leia made him testier than usual. "Yeah, it's just a dead animal, Chewie—"

A fragment from the old Endor survey report popped into Luke's mind—something about "possible signs of higher life forms detected, perhaps sentient"—

And he remembered how some of the moisture farmers back on Tatooine would hang a gutted bantha over a pit trap to ensnare a krayt dragon—

"Chewie, wait, wait, don't—" Luke yelled, vaulting as fast as he could to stay Chewbacca's arm, but it was too late. Something coarse and hard jammed into Luke's back, and he was swept up along with Chewbacca and the others, all jumbled and shouting, into a vast woven net.
Luke's ultimate position--his legs in the air, almost over his head, caught in the coarse folds--was undignified, but it could have been much worse. At least he wasn't jammed against the carcass the way Han was.

"Nice work," Han said under his breath, as the absurdity of their situation sunk in. "Great, Chewie, great! Always thinking with your stomach!"

"You take it easy, let's just figure out a way to get out of this thing!" Luke said, more shortly than he meant to, as he fumbled a hand around the netting towards his waist. "Han, can you reach my lightsaber?"

"Yeah! Sure!" Han said, sending the them all spinning as he clawed his torso forward as far as he could to get closer to Luke.

Artoo announced with a cheery whistle that he was taking matters into his own hands.

"Artoo, I'm not sure that's a good idea," Threepio cautioned. "It's a very long DROOOOOP--"

And whatever Artoo had done must have worked, because a hole opened up at the bottom of the net and Luke was yanked by the force of gravity out of the net and onto the ground. All five of them cried out at the abrupt shift, although Threepio's was by far the most dramatic.

_Oh, I hope no Imperial scouts heard that_, Luke thought groggily, as he forced himself onto one elbow. And then, more urgently, _Who the hell made that trap? --because it definitely wasn't the Empire--_

And then he saw the undergrowth shift and move around him, and he realized they were about to find out.

They were small and furry, less than a meter high, but they walked upright as humans did. Their faces and bodies were more or less humanoid, but covered in the same short hair that decorated the rest of their bodies, in a way that came off cute rather than grotesque to human eyes. Most were brown, with simple leather hooded over their heads, although one individual, sporting black and silver stripes and bearing a headdress and several necklaces of pointed teeth, appeared to be their leader.

As Luke looked around in wonder, he realized they were surrounded by several dozen of these aliens, all of whom were armed. Most carried wooden spears tipped with jagged stone points, although a few farther in the back held wooden bows, with arrows on the string. A hunting party, then--from a very low-tech culture.

What sort of beast would it take to require so many creatures--clearly intelligent--to hunt in such a fashion? And what would these aliens do with their unexpected quarry?

From the excited mutterings, it seems that the aliens were wondering the same thing themselves.

Artoo gave a nervous whistle as he was surrounded; though he would never admit it, he'd been timid around any beings less than a meter tall since his capture by a caravan of Jawas on Tatooine.

"Ww-wha--" Han said, clearly unable to take the aliens seriously on account of their stature and appearance. As he struggled to get to his feet, the leader thrust a spear directly into his face.

Han never took kindly to threats. "Hey, point that thing someplace else!" he said, pushing the spear away.

As the leader fell back, he spoke in agitated whispers to a companion, who nodded and replied in
that same unintelligible language. It was clear that Luke and his friends were the source of some contention in the group, and for a moment, it seemed like Han's boldness might succeed. But within seconds, the leader made his decision, and the spear was right back in Han's face.

"Hey!" Han said, grabbing the middle of the spear to hold it steady, while he reached for his blaster with his other hand.

Luke felt a prickle in the Force. No, that wasn't right, they didn't need to fight these creatures--

"Han, don't," he said quietly. "It'll be all right."

Han hesitated, but he let go of the spear. A second later, tiny hands snatched his blaster away from him and he let it go. A roar behind Luke told him that Chewie was receiving similar treatment.

"Chewie, give them your crossbow," Luke said quietly.

Chewbacca complied, though he made it clear that he didn't think much of surrendering under the circumstances.

"Oh, my head!" Threepio moaned as he sat up, completely unaware of everything around him.

There was a gasp as all of the creatures turned to look at the golden protocol droid. Then they began to talk amongst themselves, very loudly and all at once.

"Oh, my goodness," said Threepio, sounding dazed at all the attention.

The chatter continued, but after a few moments, it was clear that some sort of decision had been reached. More and more of the creatures took up a rhythmic chant, bobbing their heads in unison in Threepio's direction, as they swayed backwards and forwards with open palms.

Luke and Han exchanged looks. This was an unexpected development.

*But they don't seem so hostile anymore - and even then, they didn't want to hurt us, they just wanted to make sure that WE didn't hurt THEM. This is more like--*

Threepio said something that sounded like a question in that same unintelligible language--and then, more confidently, an affirmative statement.

"Do you understand anything they're saying?" Luke asked slowly, remembering that nagging insistence he'd experienced on *Home One*, that Threepio was vital to the success of their mission on Endor. If the protocol droid could communicate with them, it would make diplomacy much easier--

"Oh, yes, Master Luke," said Threepio, delighted to be of service. "Remember that I am fluent in over six million forms of--"

"What are you telling them?" Han interrupted, eager to get to the point.

"'Hello,’ I think. I could be mistaken. They're using a very primitive dialect, but I do believe they think I am some sort of god."

Artoo made a very rude comment, while Chewbacca muttered that Threepio was useful at last. Luke had to fight hard not to smile.

Han, at least, was appreciating the absurdity of the situation. "Well, why don't you use your 'divine influence' and get us out of this," he suggested pointedly.
"I beg your pardon, General Solo, but that just wouldn't be proper," said Threepio primly.

"Proper?" Han scoffed. Now Luke was fighting even harder not to laugh.

"It's against my programming to impersonate a deity."

Luke gave up any pretense of holding back his amusement, and covered his mouth with his hand instead. But it was the last straw for Han.

"Why, you--" he said, lunging for the protocol droid.

There was a gasp from the assembled creatures, Threepio shouted something, and Han found himself surrounded by a dozen of them, angrily brandishing spears. Han, alone and unarmed, was forced to stand down.

"My mistake," he said, holding up both his hands in the universal gesture of surrender. "He's an old friend of mine."

From the tone of the creatures' chatter, it was clear that they were not amused.

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Luke Skywalker had experienced many forms of transportation in his life: walking under his own power, carried by banthas, tauntauns, and other strange beasts of burden; ferried by landspeeders and speeder bikes while on-planet, (not to mention his old T-16 Skyhopper back on Tatooine); and various fighters and cruisers in the Rebel fleet in between jaunts on the Millennium Falcon with Han. But dangling by the restraints on his hands and feet from a long stick as a small army of the furry aliens carried through the forest and into the treetops was definitely the oddest one yet.

Han and Chewie had reluctantly allowed themselves to be carried in this fashion, fighting their restraints, but Luke let himself relax as he swayed to and fro, trusting in the skill of their captors to keep him from harm. Despite the very real threats all around them, he felt no particular sense of alarm, only quiet watchfulness mixed with curiosity. What was going to happen next?

He'd let his captors take his lightsaber, though he'd told Threepio to warn them to treat it carefully, lest they hurt themselves with it. The chieftan interpreted this to mean it was an especially great war-prize, and had taken it for himself, waving it around like a trophy. Thankfully, so far he hadn't figured out how to turn it on.

Well, that was all right. Luke didn't need his lightsaber; he had no intention of fighting his way out of their predicament. This wasn't like the heist at Jabba's palace at all. With Threepio's help--divine or otherwise--they would sort things out when they got to wherever it was they were going. But his intuition told him to let events unfold on their own as much as possible, so he let himself be borne along in their flow rather than intervene.

Threepio lead the parade, carried in a makeshift wooden chair constructed on the spot out of ropes and logs. The droid kept up a steady conversation with the chieftan and some of the other higher-ranked members of the hunting party, while Luke listened with interest to translated summaries of the proceedings. After them came Luke, Han and Chewbacca, each tied on their own stake and ferried by half a dozen aliens, and then Artoo, strapped to a makeshift trellis carried by two burly aliens and whistling grumpily to himself. Apparently, their captors consider the astromech to be a deity, too, which annoyed the little droid to no end.

According to Threepio, the aliens called themselves Ewoks, and they lived in loose tribal groupings in a place they called Bright Tree village. They'd hoped to return home with game, but instead they had discovered a new god, whose favor they hoped would make them stronger and
more powerful in war. Han rolled his eyes at this, but Luke thought it wasn't so farfetched an assumption, given the weapons the Ewoks had taken from the "god"'s companions.

"Who are they fighting, Threepio?" he asked.

After a lengthy back-and-forth between the chieftain and the protocol droid, it seemed that the Ewoks had no lost love for the Empire - or, as they called them, the abominations.

Well, that's something we can work with, at least, Luke thought, filing away that information for future reference. He wished Leia were here. This was exactly the sort of thing she was good at--

Leia-- He hoped she was all right, wherever she was. Hopefully, she was alive and free and unhurt, though he knew it wasn't likely. If she were dead or a prisoner of the Empire again, he thought with a sudden flush of anger, he would kill every one of them himself--

Luke's train of thought was disrupted as he was jerked upwards as the parade of Ewoks stepped up onto a rope bridge spanning a swift and deep river. The structure swayed and wobbled under the weight of the party - it hadn't been scaled with humans in mind - but it held firm and they made it across without incident.

On the other side, the Ewoks tied Threepio's chair to a series of ropes and pulleys and Luke watched with astonishment as the protocol droid was hoisted high into the trees. His turn came next, and he was grateful that year of pilot training had taught him to keep calm when dangling and spinning at high altitudes.

He sprawled to a halt on a wooden platform, where more Ewoks were waiting to receive him. They carried him after Threepio across a complex and intricate series of bridges and platforms, none of which were visible from the ground. Occasionally, there were gaps in the bridges, which meant that the Ewoks would swing over to the next platform on a loose rope, then hook up more ropes and pulleys to ferry their prisoners across.

It was dusk when they reached Bright Tree village at last. Several dozen Ewoks were waiting for them in a central plaza built between five giant trees, each of which had a hut wrapped all or partially around it. Torches and fires had been lit, and horns announced the arrival of the deity and his peculiar companions.

Threepio, still in his wooden chair, was carried to a position of honor on a raised platform, while the others were tied up like banthas brought to slaughter below. As if to seal the point home, their captors hung Han directly over what looked like a well-used firepit, while Luke and Chewbacca were positioned nearby, still bound to their sticks, but mercifully upright.

Well, this will end well, Luke thought with a sigh, as he saw what they'd done with Han.

"I have a really bad feeling about this," Han said, shaking his head as he studied the charred stones below him.

A hooting chant broke out among the Ewoks as their chieftain--a staff in one hand and Luke's lightsaber in the other--made what sounded like a declaration to Threepio.

Threepio's response was regal, but harassed.

The chieftan, waving Luke's lightsaber in the direction of the captives, appeared nonplussed by Threepio's reaction.

"What. Did. He. Say?" Han demanded to Threepio
"I'm rather embarrassed, General Solo, but it appears you are to be the main course at a banquet in my honor."

Chewbacca roared and struggled at his bonds, shouting in Shyriiwook how they should have fought these pesky creatures rather than suffer such an ignominious end.

Undisturbed by the Wookie's agitation, two Ewoks began hauling firewood from a nearby stack, placing it carefully in the fire pit below Han and singing cheerfully as they worked. Han's eyes were flickering from them to Threepio and back again, an increasingly desperate look on his face.

Drums pounded in the distance, summoning more Ewoks to the area. And with them, towering over the tiny aliens by more than a meter, came a familiar, comforting presence in the Force--Luke, lost in contemplation about how they might extricate themselves from this mess without violence, opened his eyes. "Leia!" he exclaimed.

"Leia!" Han echoed, looking happier than Luke had seen him - well, since Hoth, actually.

Her hair was braided in a few coils around the top of her head, but the bulk of it dangled down her back in a loose cascade that Luke had very rarely seen her wear on informal occasions. Surprisingly, she was no longer wearing her camo fatigues, but what must be the dress she'd said she would pack for the victory celebration.

On seeing the captives, she rushed towards them--only to be intercepted by a horde of Ewoks, all brandishing their spears at her. She had to take several quick steps back to keep from impaling herself. Whatever the regard they might have for her was subsumed by their duties to their perceived deity.

"Your Royal Highness!" Threepio exclaimed.

Leia sighed. "But these are my friends," she said to the Ewoks, her tone conveying a level of regal disdain and privilege that needed no translation. Clearly, she hadn't let her ignorance of the local language keep her from conveying her opinions. "Threepio, tell them they must be set free!"

Chewbacca, shaking his bonds, yowled his agreement.

Threepio spoke with the chief again, but the Ewok shook his head, and gestured to the others to keep working. The firewood stacking under Han continued unabated.

"Somehow, I got the feeling that didn't help us very much!" Han snapped.

That was Luke's cue to implement his plan. He'd been a good little prisoner, very calm and passive and agreeable, but now it was time to act before any blood--human or Ewok--was shed. "Threepio, tell them if you don't do as you wish, you'll become angry and use your magic."

"But Master Luke, what magic? I couldn't possibly--"

The most important rule for handling Threepio was to be firm and consistent and never ever lose your temper. "Just. Tell. Them," Luke ordered.

Threepio spoke. A hush fell, as all the Ewoks turned to look at him. Threepio's voice rose to a distinctly maternal-sounding warning before the droid concluded with the sounds of a fiery explosion.

All the Ewoks turned to each other and began to talk again, but the chief ignored them, shouting orders to the fire builders, who were vigorously shoving logs into position. Another Ewok, this
one bearing a lit torch, came over to Han, followed a moment later by two more.

"You see, Master Luke, they didn't believe me, just as I said they wouldn't," Threepio said, clearly resigned to the inevitable barbecued Solo.

"Ah, wait, wait," Han said, as the flames drew close to him, huffing and puffing in a vain attempt to blow them out. Leia, barred from him by a wall of spears, looked frantic.

Luke rolled his eyes. *Okay, Yoda, I tried all the other options first. You would be so proud of me, if you're watching over me the way Ben did. Here I go.* He closed his eyes, and concentrated, relaxing into his bonds. Time to do something impressive, and end this farce once and for all.

He'd used the Force many times to lift rocks or catch things out of the air, but he'd had no idea during hour upon hour of his training with Yoda that his life would one day depend on being able to use those skills to save himself and his friends from ritual murder - in Threepio's honor, no less! - by an entire village of tiny, furry aliens.

He didn't need to look to see what he was doing; in some ways, it was much easier with his eyes closed. All he had to do was reach out to the blue energy that swirled all around Threepio and his wooden chair, and, slowly, carefully, begin to coax the materials upward--

He knew he'd succeeded even before he heard the Ewoks' startled shouts, and opened his eyes to better observe the effects.

There was a stampede as the aliens fled from the levitating chair, catching an astonished Leia and pushing her back towards the huts. Threepio, unprepared despite Luke's warning, was sobbing for help from Luke or Artoo or any other beings willing to save him from such an unnatural affliction, which only added to the chaos.

It only took a few moments of this for the chief to surrender at this demonstration of their new deity's power, waving frantically for his people to cut Han and the others free.

A newly released Artoo, beeping in vexed annoyance, took his revenge by chasing after the chieftan, and shocking him with his arc welder, triggering another mini-stampede.

Leia ran to Han and kissed him on the mouth as he spun her around, a display that drew appreciative oohs from the Ewoks.

Having successfully made his point, Luke lowered a blubering Threepio to the ground, before striding forward to embrace Leia.

"I'm so glad we found you," he said, as she smiled and kissed him on the cheek.

"I'm gone for a few hours, and where do I find you? Up to your ears in trouble, about to be sacrificed--"

"She's never going to let us live this down, is she?" Han muttered to Luke, but it was clear he was too happy to see Leia alive and unhurt to truly complain.

"Thanks, Threepio," Luke said, one arm wrapped around Han and the other around Leia, grinning broadly.

For once in his life, he'd done everything exactly right. He'd used his skills as a Jedi to save his own life, and that of his friends, and nobody else had had to die in the process.

*This is what it means to be a Jedi,* he thought. *This is what it should be like, every time.*
He hoped Yoda had been watching, if he was still around to witness the deeds of the living.

Threepio, still bewildered, shook his head. "I never knew I had it in me," he said shakily.

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Over dinner - berries, nut mash, and some meat that wasn't any species he recognized, thank goodness - served al fresco on the platforms, Leia told them what had happened after Luke had zoomed off on his own speeder. She'd managed to take out the last Imperial scout trooper, only to crash her own bike in the process and fall unconscious. "Good thing I was wearing a helmet!" she said, directing a pointed look at Han.

Han shrugged, too happy to see her again to argue. Luke smiled.

Leia had awakened to find a lone Ewok - Wicket, she said, pointing to the Ewok with a red-brown cowl on her other side - poking her with a spear.

Wicket, hearing his name, smiled amiably at Leia and cooed to her in his own tongue.

"How did you get on his good side when you don't speak the language?" Luke asked.

"Fortunately," Leia said, adopting her old haughtiness like a cloak, "I have been a diplomat my whole life. And," she added, with a wicked smile, "it turns out that our friends actually like those military-grade ration bars. I had him eating out of my hand in no time."

Han made a face. Those ration bars aged well and would keep you alive if that was all you had to eat for months, but they weren't particularly easy on the palate. "Well, there's no accounting for taste," he said, poking with a wooden chopstick at the mash on his plate.

"That was impressive what you did back there," Leia said to Luke. "I've never seen anything quite like it. I knew what was going on, and it was still eerie to watch."


Luke could tell that Han's worldview had been thoroughly ruffled by the display, though his friend was trying hard not to show it. It was the first time Han had seen Luke's skill with the Force, after all, having spent over a year frozen in carbonite. And it's a far cry from that first training session I did with Ben's remote back on the Falcon, Luke thought with some satisfaction, though he hoped this demonstration wouldn't change the easy, companionable rapport he had with Han.

It was something to worry about if and when the mission was over. If and when--Luke survived. For now, it was enough to be together, alive and well.

Still in his chair, Threepio chattered animatedly to a rapt crowd of Ewoks, while Artoo interrupted him at intervals to mock the reaction of the "deity" to his unnatural feat of levitation and his pleas for assistance. Luke - who had often used a very disgruntled and confused Artoo in his levitation practice on Dagobah before the astromech had surrendered to the inevitable - was highly amused.

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After dinner, the villagers lead their guests to a vast central hut, which Luke guessed was their meeting hall. This hut was noticeably larger than the others, tall enough for Luke and even Chewie to stand upright with a few meters to spare several meters into the air. For the Ewoks, it
must be positively palatial.

"Threepio, tell them who we are and why we're here," Leia murmured. "Maybe we can convince them to help us."

"Or at least stay out of our way," Han said, as Leia elbowed him in the ribs.

As Threepio announced his intentions to the the chief and tribal elders, more and more Ewoks came in, pressing excitedly against each other and whispering fiercely to each other. When the "god" began to speak at last, the crowd fell silent, watching him with bright, fierce intensity.

Leia and Han sat leaning against each other, but Luke was too agitated to sit, and stood with his arms folded on the other side by the door.

Luke had never appreciated how good a storyteller Threepio could be when the situation called for it. He'd concocted a detailed account of the Rebels and recent political events in the galaxy—all of which were news to the Ewoks—that was epic in scope. It even included sound effects.

After introducing each of them formally, Threepio unexpectedly began with the Imperial blockade over Tatooine, with Leia gifting the plans for the Death Star to Artoo, while Darth Vader and his minions followed in hot pursuit.

Threepio did an excellent impersonation of Vader's breathing that made Luke's skin prickle. He wasn't the only one - most of the Ewoks were shivering in fright. The TIE fighter noises also made them jump. The protocol droid had even gotten the hum of a lightsaber down perfectly.

In the midst of a breathless account of Obi-wan Kenobi's battle against Vader, Artoo interrupted, crudely reminding Threepio to get on with it.

"Yes, Artoo, I was just getting to that," Threepio said impatiently, and segued abruptly into the Battle of Hoth, complete with a perfect impression of an AT-AT walker. Luke heard his own name, followed by the sound of blaster shots, and guessed this must be an account of that long and disastrous retreat. The sound effects were a little too realistic for the audience, and a number of them ducked for cover.

*It's a pretty epic story,* Luke thought, *at least the way Threepio tells it. My mistakes don't sound nearly so bad in this version.*

Threepio told the Ewoks of the *Millennium Falcon*’s narrow escape from Hoth, and how its passengers sought refuge at Cloud City - only to fight Vader (more too vivid sound effects) there to ambush them. Threepio had clearly cast Vader as the main villain in this drama, and Luke wasn't sure how he felt about that.

By all rights, Vader *should* be the villain. He had been, right up to the point where he'd revealed himself to be Luke's long-lost father, Anakin Skywalker, reborn as a dark and powerful monster. Vader had captured and tortured his friends--murdered Ben Kenobi as Luke had watched in horror, unable to intervene--and yet Luke couldn't punish him for his crimes now that he knew the truth.

Who was the hero of Vader's story? And who was the villain?

"Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view," Ben's ghost had told him on Dagobah.

What did the world look like from Vader’s point of view, anyway?
Threepio was in his element, and the Ewoks weren't the only one affected by his words. Leia snuggled in closer to Han at the part where he was frozen in carbonite and puts her head on his shoulder. Even the normally stoic Chewie moaned in sympathy at the memory.

Wicket, the little hooded Ewok who appeared to have adopted Leia, snuggled at Han's other knee, was stroking it in sympathy at the tale of his new friend's plight. Han looked acutely uncomfortable and rolled his eyes, unwilling to push the alien away lest he react badly. It was hard not to crack a smile.

Without warning, Threepio jumped to Tatooine, and how they had all nearly been fed to the Sarlacc after freeing Han from his carbonite prison. There were more lightsaber sound effects, as story-Luke presumably defeated his foes. Then Threepio closed with a triumphant declaration that presumably explained that they had come to Endor to destroy Vader once and for all.

Luke couldn't blame Threepio for not getting into the particulars. The Ewoks didn't appear to have a concept of starflight, let alone a vast galactic Empire, and now wasn't the time to explain all that to them. Vader was easy to fear, and an excellent figurehead for its many, many evils.

Luke knew too much now for simple explanations, that was all.

The Ewok chieftan nodded and smiled as Threepio finished his tale, and began earnestly discussing something with the other tribal elders. There was a great deal of muttering and nodding from the crowd, none of which Threepio translated.

"What's going on?" Han asked.

"I don't know," Leia said, looking over curiously.

Luke didn't sense any danger, but he kept his senses peeled, alert and watchful. The Ewoks had proven themselves to be easily startled by things their foreign guests took for granted, and it would only take a moment for things to get out of hand.

And then a dark, cold and familiar presence reached out to him, and he heard Vader speak in his mind.

*_Luke, my son. I know you are out there. I am coming._*

He'd felt the touch of Vader's mind against his, as his father reached out to him across impossible distances in the aftermath of their duel on Bespin, as the Millennium Falcon fled. And Luke had spoken back, acknowledged him, had even called him "Father".

He'd felt Vader reaching out to him periodically over the last year, but he'd always clamped down hard and pushed it away, not ready to respond. And now here he was on Endor, and Vader was coming to find him at last.

Luke was almost out of time.

He had to get away before Vader came after him, before he brought the Sith Lord down on all his friends and the mission with it. He had to get out of here as soon as possible--

He was jolted back to himself by pounding drums and the shaking of bone rattles, as the Ewok chieftan announced something to Threepio.

"Wonderful!" Threepio declared proudly in Basic. "We are now a part of the tribe."

Han and Leia were immediately deluged by a swarm of Ewoks eager to embrace them. "It's what
I always wanted," Han deadpanned, shaking hands and pretending to be excited. Even Artoo and Chewie were mobbed by dancing Ewoks eager to celebrate with their new family. The Ewoks were the same height as Artoo, which made for an absurd picture, as they jumped around him, mimicking his whistles and beeps.

No one tried to approach Luke, which was just as well. Dizzy and sick from Vader's presence, he was leaking his tangled emotions everywhere, and even without a common language, his agitation needed no translation. He had to leave soon, very soon. Everything - the noise of the crowd, the press of furry bodies around him, the smoke of the guttering torchlight, was too much, all at once. He was going to faint, to fall, if he stayed here.

Or, worse, he was going to explode.

He ducked outside the hut into the darkness, away from the shouts and laughter of the Ewoks. Away from the love and companionship he could not share any longer, lest he destroy it all.
Chapter 7

Moonlight flooded the walkways, bathing the arboreal village in a sea of cool, misty light. Aside from the creak and swaying of the ropes and logs underneath him, everything was blessedly quiet after all the evening's hustle and bustle. All of the villagers were jammed into the meeting hall with Threepio and the others, and he was alone.

It was just as well. He didn't want to be around other people right now, not in so volatile a state. Not until he'd had a chance to process what had just happened.

The chill of the night air on his face revived him, but he didn't stop until he'd reached the walkway to the next platform, twenty meters from the meeting hall. Vader's presence had vanished as quickly as it had arrived, but it was easier to think away from the noise and clatter of the ongoing celebration.

What had happened back in the meeting hall changed nothing. He'd known ever since he'd sensed Vader's presence in orbit that he would have strike out on his own, but he'd let the mess with the scout troopers - and then the hunt for Leia - distract him. Now it was time for him to do what he'd planned from the beginning: leave the others and face Vader. Alone.

He had to leave as soon as possible. The last thing he wanted was for Vader to find him while he was still so close to his friends. But mindless panic would destroy him; he'd learned that the hard way on Bespin. He couldn't let Vader direct his actions, lest he be steered in a trap. It was important to take a moment to plan, to have a strategy of sorts, before plunging headlong into the abyss.

And he had to say something to the others first. He couldn't just vanish. Leia and Han might well break off from the mission to come and look for him, which would only lead to disaster. He had to warn them away, and that meant telling them the truth. He wasn't inclined to lie, and they wouldn't settle for anything less.

And he had to tell Leia what he'd learned on Dagobah now, before it was too late.

Somehow, it was easier to imagine himself walking alone into Vader's waiting arms than it was to tell Leia that the dark, spectral figure that haunted both of their nightmares was her biological father. The knowledge wouldn't crush her the way it had crushed Luke, but the impact would be painful enough, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

Luke had always longed for his absent father. Throughout his childhood, he'd pictured Anakin Skywalker on exotic adventures far, far away from the endless sameness of the desert, and longed to join him. Owen Lars had cared for his nephew in his own gruff way, but preferred practicalities to affection. He'd chided Luke to to keep his head out of the clouds and his feet firmly fixed on solid ground, rather than strive for the dangerous and uncertain embrace of the stars that had swallowed his brother-by-marriage twenty years earlier.

In contrast, Leia had always known she was adopted, but she'd been Bail Organa's trusted protege as well as his daughter. She'd never lacked for love or companionship in the vast and complicated Alderaanian kinship network, where everyone was related to everyone else. Though she'd formed a new family with Luke and Han and Chewie and the Alliance, she wouldn't thank Luke for the revelation that her biological father was an Imperial warlord who had destroyed her planet and her people and personally tortured her on two different occasions.

"You don't have to be alone, Luke, Leia had said in his dream on Dagobah after Yoda died. "I'm
here with you." He hoped she would feel the same way after he'd said his piece.

He knew what he had to to tell her wouldn't break her. But it wouldn't be a pleasant experience for either of them.

He wondered what their mother had been like, what traits each of them might have inherited from her. He didn't know what it was like to have a mother, hadn't thought much about her while he was growing up, or in the aftermath of Bespin. He'd been too busy digesting the tangled legacy of his father.

I don't even know her name... He'd forgotten to ask Ben when he had the chance. Too late now. He didn't even know if Ben was still speaking to him.

He could ask Vader, he supposed. Vader would know, though the very idea -- of such casual conversion and personal details freely shared -- seemed absurd under the circumstances. Next thing you know, he'll be buying me a starfighter for my birthday--

The logs underneath him shifted as someone approached. He knew without having to look that Leia was behind him-- even as he realized he'd been expecting her. Ever since they met, she'd always been able to sense his distress, knew when something was wrong, reached out to him when he needed it, without him ever having to say a word.

Now he knew why.

"Luke, what's wrong?" she said. He'd been putting her off ever since his return from Dagobah, and her tone suggested he couldn't put it off much further, no matter how much he wanted to.

He had to tell her. He was out of time. He didn't want to share what he knew, didn't want to hurt her, but he had to. He couldn't bear this alone.

Pass on what you have learned, Yoda had said, in his dying breath. There is another Skywalker--

He turned to face her. "Leia." He sat down on the wooden handrail, so that his face was level with hers. "Do you remember your mother--your real mother?"

He hadn't meant to start this way, but there it was. He might as well ease into it. And it was easier to ask Leia than to ask either Vader or Ben.

She paused for a moment, taken aback by a question she hadn't expected. "Just a little bit," she said at last, settling onto the railing beside him. "She died when I was very young."

"What do you remember?"

"Just images, really. Feelings."

"Tell me."

Leia sighed and closed her eyes. "She was... very beautiful. Kind... but sad." She looked up at Luke and studied his face closely. "Why are you asking me this?"

"I have no memory of my mother," Luke said slowly, lowering his eyes. "I never knew her."

He was dodging and they both knew it. "Luke, tell me what's troubling you."

Out of his peripheral vision, he saw her cock her head and lean towards him and he looked up. "Vader is here. Now. On this moon."
She didn't move, but he felt her tremble slightly, though her voice remained calm. "How do you know?"

"I felt his presence. He's come for me. He can feel when I'm near. That's why I have to go. As long as I stay, I'm endangering the group and our mission here. I have to face him."

"Why?"

She had every right to ask him that. He knew the answer he gave wouldn't satisfy her, but it was the only one he had.

It took all his courage to speak the words. He'd lived with the knowledge for a year and it still didn't seem right, like a dream. He couldn't look at her, couldn't bear to see her reaction when he spoke the words at last: "He's my father."

Silence. She didn't move, and he didn't, either—until, at last, he could stand the suspense no longer and met her gaze as calmly as he could as he awaited her judgment.

He'd surprised her. Her face twisted in confusion as she processed his words. "Your father," she repeated incredulously, as if Luke were pulling some sort of sick joke on her. It was a curse as much as a question.

"There's more," he said, rushing on, because he was afraid if he stopped, his courage would fail him. "It won't be easy for you to hear it, but you must. If I don't make it back, you're the only hope for the Alliance."

_Help me, Obi-wan Kenobi, you're my only hope_, Leia had said in the hidden holo-message that had launched them on a collision course four years earlier. How ironic that the positions were now solidly reversed, now that Leia was Ben's last hope, if Luke failed.

"Luke, don't talk that way," Leia said sternly. "You have a power I-I don't understand, could never understand, and could never have."

"You're wrong, Leia. You have that power, too. In time, you'll learn to use it as I have."

He could see the objections in her face. He had to explain himself, how this was possible, but he didn't know where to start.

It was easy to admit what _he_ was to Leia. It was so much harder to tie her into his darkness, too.

"The Force is strong in my family," he said at last. "My father has it. I have it. And..." He took a deep breath. It was now or never. "My sister has it."

She stared at him, stunned, as the wheels turned in her head and she processed his words, saw her reach the desired conclusion—and froze—

"Yes. It's you, Leia," he said.

She was so calm. She didn't run or scream or hit him. She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath. No doubt she was feeling that same buzzing acceptance he'd experienced on Dagobah when he realized the truth—that sense of closeness, connection, that he'd never experienced with anyone else—

"I know," she whispered. "Somehow... I've always known."

She hadn't seen it because she hadn't looked for it. But once she saw it, it was obvious.
Completely obvious. There was no denial, no recoiling, no possibility of rejection.

"Then you know why I have to face him."

"No!" At the mention of Vader, her calm shattered. She half-rose, grabbed his arm with a fierce grip, as if she meant to shake sense into him. "Luke, run away. Far away. If he can feel your presence, then leave this place. I wish I could go with you--"

"No, you don't," he said, unable to hide his smile as he rose to his feet. "You've always been strong.

"But why must you confront him?" There was a sob in her voice that betrayed her true fear: of losing him, just as she'd lost Alderaan and so many friends and allies to Vader.

"Because--there is good in him, I've felt it. He won't turn me over to the Emperor, I can save him, I can turn him back to the good side." None of that seemed like enough under her incredulous gaze, none of it was enough, but it was all he had. "I have to try."

Those might, he thought, be his last words to her. So be it. There was nothing else he could say that wouldn't hurt her more. Even I love you wouldn't help, would only hurt her more.

He'd won, and they both knew it. She wouldn't stop him, because no matter how she might deny it, she knew he was right. And Leia had always done what was right, no matter the personal cost. It was one of the things he loved her for: her integrity, as well as her courage.

He bent and kissed her cheek. She was still holding his arm with a death grip even as Luke began to pull away, and for a moment, he hesitated; neither of them wanted to let go. For a long moment, their hands stretched out suspended, then Luke forced himself to step away from her, let her hand slide down his arm to his own black-gloved hand--.

Only at the last possible moment did she let go. Fear and uncertainty radiated out from her like a burning star, yet she said nothing, made no other moves to stop him as he stumbled down the empty wooden walkways away from the torches and into the darkness.

He didn't look back. He couldn't bear to see her face. It would only make this parting harder than it already was.

Han would comfort her. Luke couldn't offer her any more than he could offer himself.

He knew he ought to say good-bye to Han and the others, but he couldn't bear the thought of going back, of explaining, not now. They wouldn't understand. Leia did, even if she didn't want to admit it.

It wasn't enough -- but it would have to do.

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He hadn't gotten very far across the maze of wooden platforms before a series of fierce invectives in Binary stopped him in his tracks. He looked up in shock to see Artoo barrelling towards him, squawking indignantly.

"What is it, Artoo?" Luke said, as if the astromech hadn't caught him sneaking away on anything more than a casal stroll.

Artoo wanted to know where Luke thought he was going. After all, this was a dangerous place and despite Threepio's alleged divinity, he didn't think their hosts could be trusted.
"It's all right, Artoo," Luke said, wondering who he was trying to reassure. "Something's come up and I have to go. You'll take care of Han and Leia and the others for me, won't you?"

Artoo, offended, said that historical evidence proved that he was responsible for preventing disasters approximately 92% of the time. Given this track record, how could he let Luke go off on this new mission alone? What kind of self-respecting astromech did Luke take him for?

Luke sighed, and knelt down, so that his face was level with Artoo's sensors and placed his right hand--the mechanical one--on top of the little droid's dome. "Artoo," he said slowly, "I'm going to face my father, Anakin Skywalker. Darth Vader."

He was pretty sure that Artoo already knew the truth, having eavesdropped on his conversation with Ben Kenobi's ghost in the Dagobah swamps (or at least Luke's part of it). But it still felt strangely vulnerable to say it aloud. He half-expected the droid to recoil from him the way Leia had done.

Artoo said that Luke's statement didn't compute. According to his databanks, Anakin Skywalker was dead -- and Darth Vader was most definitely alive.

Luke shook his head. "That's what I thought too. But he is Vader now. And I have to help him."

All the more reason to bring someone competent along, the droid said firmly.

"No, Artoo, I'm sorry. This is something I have to do by myself. I might not make it out alive. I can't risk them hurting you, too."

But, Artoo said, he'd accompanied Luke on every previous mission, no matter how dangerous. The first Death Star. Jabba's palace. He'd even gone to that Dagobah hellpit--twice. Why couldn't he help now?

"You can help me, Artoo." He had to give the droid a mission, or else he'd follow Luke and neither of them would be happy with the results. "Stay with Leia and others, and take care of them for me. Keep them safe. And--" He fumbled at his belt for the bag of seeds he'd taken from the Jedi tree on Dagobah, held them out to the droid. "Protect these for me. If I don't return-- Give them to Leia, tell her to plant them when the time is right. She'll know what to do."

There was a long pause as Artoo considered this. Then the droid sighed, a warbling, melancholy whistle, and opened the secret compartment in his hatch, where Luke had kept his lightsaber during their time in Jabba's palace. He placed the seeds inside and Artoo stowed them, away grumbling his dissatisfaction the whole time.

"I know, I know," Luke said, patting the droid affectionately. "I wish I could take you with me. But I have to do this alone. I'm the only one who can reach my father now, bring him back from the dark side--"

Artoo squawked suddenly, more agitated than Luke had ever seen him.

"Wait, what?" Luke said. The droid's binary was coming too thick and fast, and none of it made any sense. "Artoo, what are you talking about, there's no message, I don't understand--"

With a chittering whirr, the droid shifted into playback mode--

--and a tiny, perfect holo of Yoda hovered in the air between them, caught in the act of tapping with his stick against what must have been Artoo's body.

Luke's jaw dropped in surprise. It was impossible. Yoda was dead. Artoo had stayed with the X-
wing on his last trip to Dagobah, and had never seen Yoda at all. Which meant that Yoda must have recorded this before Luke left for Bespin--

--and the last time Yoda had been alone with Artoo was at least a day before Luke's vision of his friends in peril--

"Hmmph," holo-Yoda said, withdrawing his stick and settling back. "Only for young Skywalker this message is, and only when he knows the truth about his father, and leaves to seek him. Is. That. Clear?" He punctuated each word by poking the stick towards Artoo.

A faint but chagrined series of recorded beeps implied that Artoo understood all too well.

"Good," Yoda sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was calm and settled and he faced the recorder directly.

"Luke. Clouded the future is, and difficult to see, it is. Leaving this for you, I am, if gone I am before you return."

Yoda. Yoda had known. Somehow--his teacher had known all along that Luke would leave him to go to Bespin. He'd known it well before Luke had. Enough to record this message behind Luke's back, just in case.

"Luke," the holo said. "Know you now the truth, that Vader is your father. Know you, already, that what you must do. Mind what you have learned. Trust in the Force. Do not give into anger, hatred, aggression - the dark side of the Force are they. And once you start down the dark path--"

"'Forever will it dominate your destiny,'" Luke whispered, in perfect time to Yoda's. His eyes swelled with tears. He missed Yoda so much. It had been less than a week since he'd sat at Yoda's bedside in that little hut on Dagobah and watched him die.

But Yoda was wrong about the dark side taking over forever. It couldn't be true, or else there was no hope of redemption for his father and Anakin Skywalker was truly dead.

"Luke," the recording of Yoda whispered. "Luke. Much anger and frustration have I felt in you. Yet grown much you have in our time together. Proud of you, I am. Know that you are worthy of the Jedi if that is the path you choose to follow. Pass on what you have learned. Not to be feared, death is."

Tears rolled down Luke's face.

"Luke. Know who you are, at last. Ready, are you." Yoda took a deep breath, stared directly into the camera, reaching out to Luke across the vast distances of space and time. "Loved, are you," he said--and smiled, an eerie alien smile, with far too many teeth.

And then the holo figure reached up and tapped the air with his stick again and the image vanished as abruptly as it had arisen.

"Oh," Luke said. Tears dripped down his face as he stared where Yoda had been. "Oh, oh, oh--"

He thought he was beyond tears, but the dam burst, and he cried, as he had not let himself cry when leaving Leia, while Artoo apologized profusely for withholding this recording from Luke until now, but Yoda had made it very clear that terrible things would happen to the droid if he disobeyed--

"It's all right, Artoo," Luke said, when the emotional storm had passed, wiping his eyes with his gloved hand. "You did the right thing. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."
He hugged the droid. "I'm so glad it was you we picked up from the Jawas and not that red machine after all. Even if you are a troublemaker."

He was rewarded by a very soft coo of affection in return.

Getting to his feet a challenge. He didn't want to do this, but he knew if he hesitated, he would never leave. And that would bring disaster—not just for his friends, but for the Alliance and the entire galaxy.

"Good-bye, Artoo," he said as he rose. "May the Force be with you."

He turned and vanished into the darkness.

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Luke was grateful their hosts were with Threepio back in the meeting hall. There was no one to question him as he made his way through village and down to ground level. The moonlight helped; he'd left his headlamp back in the village meeting hall. Let one of the Ewoks delight in it—he wouldn't need it where he was going.

His only possession now was the lightsaber clipped to his belt. He didn't intend to fight, but there was no way he could abandon it, or even pass it along to Artoo for safe-keeping as he had done with the seeds.

Vader had sent his old lightsaber tumbling into the abyss at Cloud City. Luke fully intended to show him that he had not let that loss deter him from completing his training.

His arm and legs moved mechanically, as if he were embarked on a pre-programmed course of no return. Each breath was ragged, raw, precious. He had the distinct sensation of floating, rather than walking, though his feet remained solid and heavy underneath him. It was eerily like being outside of his body while simultaneously hyperaware of his physicality, wrapped in a fog, connected to the rest of the universe by a single solitary strand—the bond between him and Leia.

She was his anchor, she was why he was doing this. There were other reasons, he knew that, but he couldn't remember what they were right now, couldn't focus on anything beyond the task before him. He had to break it down into simple steps, lest the complexity overwhelm him.

Put one foot in front of the other. Move towards the dark and cold sensation, where Vader was. Keep breathing.

There was no need to worry about the mission to destroy the shield generator anymore. He had no doubt Han and Leia and the others would see it through. But they needed time—time in which Vader was too distracted to personally hunt them down. Luke's job was to give them that time, so they could succeed. And if the shield came down, then the Death Star was vulnerable, and so was the Emperor, so was the Empire. By doing this, Luke would save everyone.

now he knew why the Force had nudged him back on Sullust, why it was so important he'd come to Endor instead of going with Lando's fighters. He was a diversion—the only one Vader would follow. It was a hard thing to consider, throwing your life away for a cause, but--

*If that's all I accomplish with this... maybe that's enough.*

But as compelling as the argument was, he didn't buy it. Regardless of the stakes of their mission, as long as his friends were safe—or as safe as they could be in this war—Luke knew he would still walk away to face Vader alone, no matter the personal consequences. Luke's fall into the abyss at
in the understory of Cloud City had only postponed the inevitable. He had to see his father again. They weren't finished with each other.

A year ago, Luke had confronted Vader, only to emerge thoroughly, utterly beaten. He had no illusions on that score. He'd only saved himself by sheer chance -- and Leia's ability to hear his call across vast distances of interstellar space.

Failure had been a harsh teacher, but a fair one, and Luke had quickly rebounded. He'd grown so much since then. He was also far more cautious, more calm, more confident, more connected to the Force than he had ever been.

But that only made this next encounter more frightening, because he knew what was awaiting him in the darkness here on Endor. It had been easy to walk into Vader's trap on Bespin when he had never spoken with face-to-face with him, never felt the weight of Sith Lord's attention fixated on him, the heavy pressure of the dark energy that radiated from his massive frame.

It was easier when Vader was the Other, a darkness outside of himself, something Luke could strike down in the name of justice. It was easier when Vader was a murderer, a butcher, a destroyer, fully corrupted and unredeemable. It was easier when Luke hadn't known the truth.

Now he did. Now he was strong enough to bear the knowledge without breaking. He trusted in himself and in the Force to see it through to the end.

Of course, he'd thought the same thing on Bespin, too. But how many more surprises could the Sith Lord have up his sleeve? Surely nothing could top what Luke already knew. Obi-wan and Yoda would have warned him if there was anything else--

Strange animals yowled in the distance, faint and far away, but he knew they were no threat to him and was not disturbed. Even were their paths to cross, he would blend into the forest, and they would not harm him.

After spending the day in stealth and silence to avoid Imperial troops, it was strange actively seek them out. He didn't know where the base was, exactly, but it didn't matter; as long as he moved towards the dark, heavy coldness of Vader's presence, he would arrive at his destination, one way or another. Now that he'd stopped running, it was only a matter of time.

Luke was afraid to reach to Vader directly while he was so close to the alien village, lest he turn Vader's attention to his friends and those who sheltered them. He didn't like Vader's presence in his mind; it was too easy to for the man to read him that way. When they spoke again, Luke wanted it to be face to face, or not at all.

But Vader would speak to him, would try and cajole Luke into doing his bidding. He'd wanted Luke to join him before and now he wanted Luke more than ever. He'd come down to Endor after him. He'd called out to him, rather than sending a phalanx of stormtroopers or a squadron of TIE fighters to storm the landscape in search of him or threaten his friends.

Vader wanted Luke alive. He wouldn't hurt Luke, at least not fatally. He'd sliced off Luke's hand in their duel, but that had been to cripple him, not to kill him. To scare him into compliance and break his spirit, rather than to destroy him.

In the aftermath of Bespin, Leia had confessed that Vader hadn't cared about her or Han or anyone else; they had only been means to a larger end. He'd tortured them, yes, but it had all been as a gambit to lure Luke to him. His son was the only thing that mattered to Vader now--and Luke intended to use that to his advantage now.
The future was a dull, empty void, blind to all of his senses. There was nothing but numbness when he probed forward, crying for a vision, but it didn't matter. He knew that no matter what he saw, he would still do this, keep pressing forward, all the way to the end. And futures were tricky things, malleable and not to be trusted. He'd learned that lesson the hard way.

Luke walked into darkness, but the dark wasn't something he had to fear anymore. He'd seen that when he returned to the cave, when he'd embraced the shadow that was his father and his own heart. He'd stood in the crown of the Great Tree on Dagobah, and seen that the shadow was one part of the light, the part that isolated itself because didn't know it was complete and whole just as it was.

Vader was a monster: cruel, unpredictable, vengeful. But he was still human, in horrible pain, lashing out at the universe, with a spark of goodness buried deep within. Luke had seen it, had felt it--he had to trust it, as his last, best hope to reach the man who had once been his father. Had to love the shadow, love the man who had maimed him, love his father, who had been isolated and alone for the last twenty years, smothered by his own hatred and pain.

He would reach out to Anakin Skywalker--to the man beneath the mask, who was still there, buried, after all this time. His father needed him. He didn't know what Luke did, wouldn't let himself see it--and would never see it, unless Luke offered it to him.

Anakin Skywalker hadn't seen Yoda surrender to the inevitable with grace, hadn't seen Ben Kenobi waltz through the Dagobah swamps as if he'd never died. Anakin Skywalker didn't know that change was inevitable, didn't know to accept its transformations rather than fight them. Anakin Skywalker didn't know that death wasn't something to be afraid of, wasn't the end--

Luke knew all this, believed all this wholeheartedly, and yet-- when he thought about dying, a wave of terror washed over him, and he paused for a moment, let himself breathe through the fear, before resuming his slow, steady march onward.

Did dying hurt? It was something he'd never had the chance to ask his teachers, and now the opportunity was lost. He'd seen so much death, so much suffering... yet he'd never really believed it would happen to him.

It was a hard thing to consider, throwing your life away for a cause, but he'd done it so many times now, the danger barely registered. Even in his first space battle at Yavin, the explosions in his peripheral vision and the screams over the comm channel had felt more like a bizarre game than anything real. If his concentration had slipped for instant, he would have crashed. He had to relax, focus, disengage...

He'd been lucky so far, and made it out of every skirmish and dogfight intact, even with so many others dying around him. Death was always something that happened to other people, never anything personal.

Now it was. His death was solid and tangible now, a fate that he could touch, caress, embrace, as it drew ever closer to him. Every breath was precious now, and every breath brought him closer to the last one, the final one, the end of Luke Skywalker.

But that was foolish, wasn't it? Vader wanted him alive. Vader wanted to turn him to the dark side and use him for his own ends. Would he change his mind if Luke refused to be turned? Would he, in fact, kill his own son rather than yield to Luke's entreaties?

Maybe death wouldn't be so bad. Ben had looked so peaceful before Vader's lightsaber had sliced through his robes. Yoda hadn't resisted, either. Luke didn't know what happened after that, whether he would come back as a ghost the way Ben had or if he would disappear for good.
Or maybe something else would happen. There were an awful lot of people he missed who were dead: Owen, Beru, Biggs. Perhaps he'd get a chance to see them again soon.

"This ain't a suicide run, kid," Han had said to him a few hours ago. Already, it seemed like a lifetime away. Luke wasn't suicidal. But what else would you call walking alone and unaided into Vader's waiting arms?

It wasn't the first time he'd risked everything on a hunch. If the Force was truly with him, it wouldn't be the last.

Luke was no stranger to the impossible. At nineteen, he'd rescued Leia from her prison on the first Death Star, and destroyed that battle station with a single shot. Since then, he'd survived so many other adventures, including a frozen night unconscious on Hoth and the unpalatable mess that was Yoda's cooking. In the last week, he'd taken down a crime lord and his entourage, and killed a rancor barehanded. In theory--

If anyone could do this, he could.

No. Yoda had been firm on that point. Whatever Luke did, he must do it wholeheartedly or not at all. Doubt was not an option. Luke would succeed or he would die; there were no other options. whatever else happened was outside of his control.

Yoda's last message echoed in his mind. Proud of you, I am. Know that you are worthy of the Jedi if that is the path you choose to follow.

Yoda was proud of him. Yoda understood why he had to face Vader, had known it must be so. Yoda had finally said the words that Luke had longed to hear: that he knew who he was. That he was ready.

What a gift. One final message from his teacher beyond the grave.

He trusted that I would survive and return, even if he wasn't able to be there for me. He believed in me, even when I didn't deserve it.

He loved me.

Yoda had said that outright in Artoo's recording. Yoda had cared for him all this time despite their struggles, despite Luke's asinine behavior, despite his abandonment of his training.

Yoda had spoken of love in the tales of the old Jedi--the deep compassion arising from a vision of universal wholeness and respect for the myriad beings who composed it.

On his visit to the Great Tree on Dagobah, he'd seen that love, had seen that it would be what saved Anakin Skywalker, if it was possible to save him. And it was love that would save Luke, too, would keep him sane and stable and strong against the entreaties of anger and fear.

Leia loved him. And so did Han, Chewie, Threepio, Artoo, Lando, Wedge, and all his friends and comrades in the Alliance, each in their own way. So did Yoda, and the Great Tree. And so did the ghostly shade of Obi-wan Kenobi, even if their last exchange had been fraught with Ben's fatalistic assertion that Vader was irredeemable and that Luke's recklessness would plunge the galaxy into endless darkness.

A memory rose up: Yoda, lecturing him by the fire as pots and pans whirled around his head, ready to fling them at his hapless student if his attention wavered. "Whatever comes is the Force, not objects at all," he'd said when Luke complained. "Even if you exert yourself and block them,
At the time, Luke hadn't understood Yoda's point. Now, though, he caught a glimpse of what his teacher had meant. The only option was to live as if he were already dead, with nothing to lose and nothing to attain. He could only remain himself by surrendering completely to the Force, wherever it took him -- and, in yielding, triumph.

Luke would live, for as long as he could, staying true to what he knew in his bones to be right. And when it was time to die - he’d accept that, too.

He heard the AT-ST before he saw it--loud, graceless clanking as it strode through the forest, leaving crushed and bruised foliage in its wake, dwarfed by the trees around it. Its rolling, two-legged gait was awkward and ungainly, yet no less deadly because of it.

It didn’t belong here. Nothing of the Empire belonged here. But it was here, and so was he, and it was time for action at last.

Luke slowed his pace, and stopped in its path, fifteen meters out from the machine, which bore down rapidly towards him. He knew from experience that it was standard Imperial issue, riddled with heatseekers and life sensors, and its crew bore night-vision goggles and could see every move he made. He held his hands up in the air and spread his palms wide.

*I am already dead,* he thought as a spotlight blinded him, as guns swiveled in his direction, as a hoarse voice shouted for him to freeze. *I am already dead. I am already--*

It was a relief when the soldiers emerged from the undergrowth, and he surrendered.

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