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Genre: AU

Characters: Luke, Leia, Han, Mara Jade, Shira Brie, Deena Shan, others from OT and EU from that time-frame

Timeframe: From a few days before ROTJ to a few hours after it; in this fic that's stretching to several weeks.

Setting: After months of search, Han Solo is still missing. Together, Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Lando Calrissian and Chewbacca have scoured the galaxy to find their friend, but so far without luck. In between the searching Luke and Leia spend their time to solve shorter missions for the Alliance.

Note 1: This story is AU. However, when nothing else is mentioned, events will follow ROTJ.

Note 2: Quagmire is the first part of a planned, three-part story.

Disclaimer: All things Star Wars belongs to George Lucas. I'm just playing in his sandbox.

Summary: As the Battle of Endor approaches, a Jedi and a spy find themselves on common, boggy ground.

Quagmire - Chapter 1

Onerous secrets

It emerged out of the blackness of space, shining like a white jewel against the darkness and the faintly winking stars, its smooth organic shape lending the huge ship almost the air of a living, breathing creature. *Home One*; the pride of Mon Calamari's ship factories, the largest ship in the Rebel fleet; the heart of the Rebel Alliance.

“All right, Artoo” Luke said, taking a deep breath. “We’re home.”

The little astromech droid answered with a long series of happy beeps and twiddles, but Luke failed to follow the translation on his screen for the queer feeling that suddenly cramped his stomach with an intensity taking him quite aback. *Home!*

This was his base, his refuge. Here, where he'd finally been able to chase his dreams, where his friends were, here where he felt like home! Where he *had* felt like home.

The churning feeling in his stomach just wouldn't go away. Why had so many things changed lately?

Luke squeezed the yoke, knowing for sure that he had never wanted it to happen. In one fatal moment his world had turned upside down, and from there the speed of change had raced out of his control. He was still stumbling to catch up.

* * *

Finally set his feet on the docking floor. While he loved trying to truly, deeply it was inevitable that the narrow size of the small starfighter made longer trips an uncomfortable experience.

Stretching aching arms and legs to ease cramping muscles, Luke hesitated a moment, wondering with a sting of disquiet whether he should help Artoo out by using the Force. The maintenance droid effectively relieved him of the decision by lifting the little astromech down to the deck, and Luke sighed again. It was strange, he reflected, that he was less keen to practice his Force abilities nowadays, when he actually had something to show. The eager young Luke of old wouldn't have hesitated a second, would happily have grabbed any chance to feel like a Jedi, not caring a whit about the attention. Well. Things had changed.

The little droid turned his sensors towards him, happily unaware of his master's troubles. His satisfied beeping caused Luke to smile again.

"Yeah, it's good to be back," he agreed. "But first of all I need a sanisteam and then I have a report to write. You just go ahead and find Threepio."

Artoo whistled a question and Luke's smile widened to a grin. "Sure, I think he's missed you too. Don't worry, I'll let you know if I need you."

The droid rolled off in one direction and Luke set off towards his cabin.

"Hey! Luke!"

The young Jedi turned at the call and his face lit up. "Wedge!"

The two friends bumped into a hearty embrace, slapping each other on the back.

"When did you return?" Luke asked. "It feels like an eternity since you left for Bilbringi."

Wedge made a face. "Certainly feels that way. I've just returned and believe me, the assignment wasn't nearly as easy as old Madine made out."

Luke grinned, his own troubles forgotten for a moment. "They never are, are they? Hey, I have a few stories to tell myself, but I might need a shower first."

"Good idea," Wedge nodded. "Let's go."

He was interrupted by a shrill whistle. Turning towards the sound the two friends spotted an approaching party of four pilots in orange flight suits. Sprinting in the lead was Wes Jansen, Rogue Six, arms flailing and a gleeful, alarming smile on his jester's face. "Booooooss!!" he cried, setting course for Luke, his arms extended.

Luke grinned, raising his arms, but Wes passed him to give Wedge an energetic handshake instead. After eagerly pumping Wedge's arm for several seconds he stepped back to Luke, giving him the same treatment. "Big Boss!" he beamed.

Why do I always get to hear about those two centimeters

“To remind you that you’re a loser, Antilles,” Hobbie Klivian explained brightly, clapping his shoulder. Then he turned to his squad leader: “Hey, robot hand, what’s up?” He and Luke exchanged their traditional high-lows with their respectively prosthetic hands; Hobbie’s left, Luke’s right.

Wedge grinned and greeted Tycho Celchu while Luke’s attention was called to the fourth pilot, an auburn haired woman who’d stopped a few paces back, taking in the customary greeting rituals of the Rogues with a slight, knowing smile.

“Hi, Shira.”

“Hey there, Ace,” she replied, her light smile deepening to an infectious grin. “Now, please tell me I don’t have a reason to get suspicious here!”

“Suspicious?” Luke echoed, quite lost. “About what?”

“Weell,” Shira quipped. “We find the two of you” — she nodded at Luke and Wedge — “back at last from different missions, but at the very same time! Now *why* do I get the feeling that you’ve been having a secret rendezvous somewhere at a cozy bar, drinking Red Dwarfs while the rest of us slaved on with our duties?”

“Uhmí” — Luke tried to find an appropriate, presumably funny, answer but Shira just laughed and raised her arms.

“Welcome back, Ace!” Without waiting for an invitation she stepped straight to Luke and gave him a hug that was big enough to make him blush heavily and the men around them to snicker loudly.

“Just you wait until you’ve been sanisteamed, Luke,” Hobbie grinned. “Then the girls simply won’t let go anymore. You’ll have to use that Force of yours to peel them off.”

“Hey,” Wes exclaimed, mimicking a female voice. “I want a hug too!”

“To you that’s — I want a hug, *sir*,” Wedge corrected him sternly.

“I want a hug, *sir*,” Wes copied, still in falsetto. When Luke complied, he pulled back pinching his nose in disgust. “Phew! How can she hug you? You stink like a wet Bantha!”

“That’s because I’ve flown for four days without washing — *or* changing clothes,” Luke clarified dryly, silently wondering if Shira had thought he smelled too. “Besides, the common expression is to —stink like a wet Wookiee — Banthas don’t get wet, Wes. They live on Tatoine.”

“What would I know, *sir*?” Wes tossed him a lazy smirk. “Never been there, never going either.”

Tycho Celchu grinned. “Actually, Wedge, you were more right than you knew a moment ago. Things have been happening while you were away.” He glanced at Shira.

What do you mean? Wedge demanded, but Luke was already breaking into a smile, guessing the answer even before Shira replied.

Commander Brie at your services, gentlemen, she told them with an exaggerated salute. Admiral Gelsk signed my promotion two days ago. For old times' sake, you may still remain seated in my presence.

Congratulations! Luke cried and Wedge chimed in. That's wonderful and fully deserved! But doesn't that mean that you won't be flying Rogue anymore?

Shira made a face. Well, that's the tragic part of it. I'll be leaving you boys in a few days and probably even pull a few with me. Alliance High Command is mustering at full might at the moment.

Oh, no, Wedge moaned. That means we'll be training rookies again.

That means you're getting your own squad! Luke exclaimed, ignoring Wedge. Congratulations!

Well, I know I'll miss you guys, but getting a squad of my own makes up for it somewhat. Shira grinned. And there are other, more subtle benefits. For example I now outrank all of you losers. She let her thumb sweep at Wedge, Wes, Hobbie and Tycho.

Some people have ambitions, Wes sniffed, some of us others have common sense. The trick is how to get all the fun of flying but none of the responsibility. We'll see how you like those new bars of yours after your first post-action reports come due. Enjoy your flimsiwork, Commander. He shook his finger pointedly.

Shira laughed. Oh, but there's another benefit about leaving the Rogues too. Even better than outranking you guys is that I won't be anyone's subordinate anymore. She tilted her head slightly, her green-flecked eyes dancing to meet Luke's, and a slow smile spread over her face.

Aija jaija! Wes muttered, rolling his eyes. Everyone knew that Shira had been setting her cap for Luke for ages now.

Luke shifted, very uncomfortable now. Uhm, that sanisteamí

Taking pity on his friend, Wedge grabbed Luke firmly by the arm and dragged him away. Make way! Make way for the stinking banthas! he exclaimed theatrically.

*

Just as they were about to leave the docking bay, Luke started and glanced over his shoulder.

What's the matter? Wedge inquired, glancing worriedly at him.

Ií nothing, Luke murmured. Nothing.

But it was. Something. And it wasn't the first time he'd sensed it.



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* * *

After the bliss of the sanisteam, it was perfect to just sit down in peace and quiet in Wedge's cabin. The beer tasted divinely too. They lounged for a long while, sipping their bottles and trading stories from their respective missions, simply enjoying the peace and the company.

Luke leaned back in his chair, trying to stretch out muscles that still ached from too many hours in the cockpit. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“No sign of Han yet?” Wedge asked quietly.

Luke shook his head. He had commed Leia even before the sanisteam, and they'd agreed to meet the next morning. She'd been happy to hear from him but had no news.

“Last I heard was that Chewie and Lando would try Jabba's Palace on Tatooine again,” he told Wedge. “I have no idea why they didn't take Han there in the first place, though - Boba Fett has been crossing the galaxy for months!”

“Maybe they couldn't agree on the price?”

“Probably.” Luke eyed his beer thoughtfully.

He had been on Tatooine several times the past few months, trying to keep himself up to date with the events, but had gained barely any information. Instead, he had used the opportunity to visit Ben Kenobi's old home, where he'd found quite a lot of material concerning the Jedi. Included, had been directions to build a new lightsaber. Luke pursed his lips, remembering how he'd tinkered with the weapon for hours in the badly lit old cottage, his trouble to find spare parts and his devastating nervousness when he'd switched it on for the first time; Ben's instructions had also included stories of poorly constructed lightsabers that had exploded, taking their constructors with them!

“Your mind's flying.”

“Huh?” Luke glanced up and something in the way he looked, suddenly flustered and off-guard, reminded Wedge of that wide-eyed, open kid he'd first met, years ago. The Corellian felt a pang of sadness at the thought. That eager boy had held his own through hardships and battles, through disappointments and loss of comrades - yet suddenly, just like that, that boy had been gone, nobody knowing why.

He'd been replaced with a still stumbling but oh-so-serious young man; a man who kept his thoughts close to himself and who had secrets so dark that everyone, Force-sensitive or not, could feel them. A man who was as much introvert, insular and unnerving an enigma as the open-eyed young kid had been everybody's darling, hero and goldenboy of the Alliance. Sometimes - oftentimes actually - Wedge had the feeling that, aside from his very closest friends, Rogue Squadron was the

; the only company that accepted the changes in him without questions. But even that wasn't so easy anymore, was it?

"I just said," he repeated evenly, leaning back in his chair, "that your mind is flying again. Of course that's pretty appropriate for a pilot, but—" "

"Ha ha." Luke gave him a dry, suspicious glance. "What?"

"Naahí— nothing special, I guessí— Just something I've been thinking of for a whileí—"

For a brief instant, Luke looked wearily at him. Then his impatience took over and he waved the bottle of beer. "What, Wedge?"

Wedge pursed his lips, giving himself plenty of time to answer. "I was just wondering," he finally drawled, trying hard to keep his voice casual, "what you're thinking about our lovely, red-haired, soon-to-be ex-Squadron Mate, Shira Brie."

He watched Luke close up tighter than a Mon Calamari oyster, but then, that was about what he'd expected. Wedge plowed on, hoping silently he wasn't digging too much. "Miss Brie's been hitting on you for a long time, but you've kept giving her the brush off. Well, she's been your subordinate and all so I understand that. But now she's about to become allowed territory, right? Won't that change your attitude somewhat? I know you like herí— And it's plain obvious that she likes you."

"Why the hurry? Were you planning to make a move on her yourself?" Luke muttered evasively.

"Nope, we're an entire squadron, trying to keep her reserved just for you," Wedge deadpanned. "But we'd like some confirmation that we're not doing it all in vain—ó or that you at least appreciate our suffering and sacrifices."

Luke fidgeted with his beer, wishing Wedge wouldn't have asked. How was he to make sense out of what he could tell? Whatever feelings he might have were so utterly overshadowed by issues he couldn't share with anyone.

I am your fatherí— ø

There were too many things Luke couldn't reveal.

But now Wedge had asked. No one normally asked these kinds of questions. Only old friends—ó out of concern. Blast old friends!

"Look," he began wearily. "Shira'sí— great. She really is but—ó"

"Do you fancy her, or do you not fancy her?" Wedge remained on target as always.

"Of course I fancy her. Stars! Do you think I'm blind or something?"

"Fine! So what's the problem? I know you don't go for one-night stands but everyone needs a little fun now and then. Especially in our line of work! Look, Shira knows how it is; you wouldn't even

ing. And if some of that talk turns out to be horizontal, well, that's what happens. She'll enjoy it and you'll enjoy it, so no harm done, right?

“And then we go on to our shifts and one of us gets shot down because we hadn't closed an eye the entire night,” Luke grumbled.

Wedge rolled his eyes. “Common, Luke. It would probably do you a galaxy of good. You've been wound up tighter than a Twi'lek's thong since Hoth.”

“You know I'm not for one-nighters.”

“Hey, this is Shira we're talking about. She's got both boobs and brains and you wouldn't *have* to dump her afterwards! Hell, even *I* would think twice before I'd dump her!” Wedge paused a moment to consider on the truthfulness of the last statement, but decided it wasn't *that* far from reality.

“I dunno Wedge,” Luke hesitated, searching for some reason that might make sense. “Sometimes I can't pin her down. It's like she's so well, like she changes, somehow.”

“What do you mean? I thought she was the most straightforward person alive? Outgoing, approachable, sociable!”

Wedge stated the obvious, of course, and Luke wavered. Probably it *was* just his own imagination. “Well, I'm not exactly sociable myself.”

“She would do you good, Luke!”

Luke sighed, knowing any male with his intact senses would think he was being a idiot. He tried another tactic. “Look, I know this sounds stupid, and that many people don't really believe in these things, but I really have all that stuff about my Jedi education on my mind. There's a lot of that filling my head. And it should too. I simply *have* to use my energy on it. As soon as we've rescued Han, I'll have to take off again and finish what I've started. There's no way I can see myself in a relationship right now.”

Wedge nodded, his expression turning severe. This he could understand, at least part of the way. Luke and his Jedi thing had been inseparable as long as Wedge had known him. Of late, though, Luke had stopped talking loudly about it, even refusing to reveal where he'd received that extra training he obviously had. Wedge knew that most people didn't believe in the Force - and even worse, many people looked askance at the Jedi. Palpatine's twenty-year propaganda campaign had done its work. Even among the Rebels, many thought the Force fine and dandy as long as it was used to blow up imps and occasional Death Stars; in all other circumstances it triggered mistrust and fear. Wedge had heard the murmurs in the corridors, had seen the glances, and he didn't like it one bit. Especially not when it was his boss who was the target of them.

“I've actually been wondering why you haven't left yet. I mean, I know you want to save Han first, but as long as that's dragging out?” Wedge had meant the question as an encouragement but Luke looked away, clearly reluctant to talk about this too.

avoiding his gaze. "Leia!" He trailed off.

Wedge frowned at his last words, a suspicion suddenly occurring to him. The Princess? Was she the answer to more than one question here? After all, Luke had also been smitten with the Princess all the time Wedge had known him.

"It's not what you think." Luke shook his head, guessing his friend's thoughts. "Leia is with Han now. And we're still friends. Closer than before, even, but only friends." He smiled a bit sheepishly. "I'm over her. Almost at least. I feel a little like a loser from time to time, but that's about it. It's merely my pride that hurts."

Luke paused again, irresolute. Should he tell Wedge about the strange feeling he'd had – that of being watched, the feeling of danger that he'd felt, also in Leia's presence? Should he tell him that he'd easily be crazy about Shira – if he hadn't been convinced that a relationship with *anybody* would be about the worst thing to start right now? Should he tell Wedge of his suspicions that Leia didn't like Shira, though he couldn't figure out why, couldn't find out whether it was true even? Or should he go whole hog, start talking about his own messed up feelings, about his fears, should he reveal who he might be?

No. Luke shrank at the very thought. Wedge wanted to help, but he believed Luke's problems were much more straightforward than they were. A good friend wasn't enough here. This was Luke's own call.

I am your father!

Luke knew he had too many reasons not to get close to Shira, nor to leave for Dagobah, and deep down he didn't want to look too closely at any of them. He would have to anyway, sooner or later. . . but not just yet. Not just yet.

Wedge shrugged. "It's your decision, mate," he said glibly. "And your love life too. I just want to point out that Shira's practically drawling for you. And with her drive I don't think she'll yield until she's gotten her way."

Luke gave him an awkward look and Wedge couldn't resist adding: "She wants your body, Luke. You might as well enjoy hers while she takes it. Cheers!"

* * *

In his cabin that evening, the dark thoughts came to haunt him again. Those thoughts, that were present all the time now, whether he was sleeping or awake; only hard work could push them aside for a while.

I am your father.

No! Not Vader! Not Vader!

The claim of the Dark Lord had turned upside down Luke's whole mindset, his entire existence. If Vader had spoken the truth then everything Luke had believed in the past four years, everything he had burned for and breathed for, everything he'd built his existence on, was a lie.

Or was it?

I am your father.

Who would be able to accept it? Could even Leia?

So many times Luke had considered opening himself to her. Yet, if she would turn her back to him, not only would he lose her, but she would lose him too, lose yet one more person she cared for, as if she hadn't lost enough already. Luke couldn't put that on her. Maybe when Han was back

But what if Leia would still turn her back on him? What if she *should*? If Luke was tainted with the Dark Side wasn't he then a possible threat to his friends?

If Darth Vader really was his father, could Luke then be predestined to follow the same dark path? Yoda had warned him of the Dark Path - and Luke knew he had felt the touch of Darkness at Bespin. Was it now forever to direct his destiny?

Shadows, shadows everywhere and that feeling of eyes watching, guarding...

If Vader had told the truth, that was. Vader could have been lying

Had Ben lied?

Why had he lied?

Why was Luke believing the words of the most evil creature of the galaxy rather than those of Ben Kenobi, whom he'd known all his life?

Yet, the thing was, that Luke had actually never known Kenobi. He had only met the old man a few times in his life before Ben saved him from the Sand People that fateful day almost four years ago. Ben had just seemed so believable. He had helped Luke. He had faith in him. Had shown him the way, made him yearn to be a Jedi Knight.

What if the truth was quite different? What if Ben had simply been using Luke's ignorance and naivete for his own purposes, aware of Luke's abilities and his own weakness?

Still, Ben had led Luke to Leia, to the Alliance. His spirit had helped Luke at Yavin and in countless other situations, most lately at Hoth where he had told Luke to find Yoda.

Yoda was the great Jedi Master. Yoda, who finally had proved to Luke that his belief in the Force wasn't pure imagination. Who had taught Luke the ways of the Jedi.

...e he had been able to complete his training, because he in
his stupidity had thought that he could save the galaxy. Well his friends at any rate, and he hadn't
even managed that!

Yoda ó who had told Luke that once he entered the Dark Path there was no way back! Was it
already too late?

I am your father.

Did Yoda know?

Somehow, Luke was convinced that the old master had the answers. Even so, he hadn't managed to
pull himself together and return to Dagobah yet. The search for Han had become his excuse to
postpone the confrontation with a truth he knew he had to face.

Whatever truth that was.

Wearily he shoved the thoughts aside. It was time for him to sleep now. Soon they would rescue
Han, and then he would return to Yoda.

Still, he knew that as soon as he fell asleep he would find himself in the shrieking air shaft on
Bespin, exhausted, battered and nearly paralyzed by pain, Vader before him, claiming his soul.

Or in that dark, dank cave on Dagobah where Vader any minute would appear before him. He
would attack, Luke would parry and counter-attack, Vader's head would roll to his feet and the
mask and helmet open up with a ghastly screech, revealing Luke's own face. And that, he knew,
was the ultimate threat; what he could become himself. The fear of that possible future hobbled
him, haunted him and he didn't know where to find the strength to face it. He always woke up
soaked in sweat after those dreams.

Fortunately there was a remedy for dreams, at least.

He took a deep breath and reached out for the Force. Instantly, it surrounded him, cooling and
warming at the same time, protecting him and making him aware of the Universe itself. He wrapped
himself into the life-giving, strengthening energy and let himself slip into blissful peace and
oblivion.

* * *

Hours later, Luke was torn away from his sleep by the summoning of the door com. He threw a
glance at the chrono. He had only managed to sleep for a few short hours. Who could it be this
early?

Yay! Great Jedi, Skywalker! He mocked himself and hurried to reach out with his senses. Realizing
who was behind the door, he lurched up to open it.



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ally elaborate hair was scraped back in a disheveled ponytail, but her brown eyes radiated. "Luke!"

Luke took in her mood and in the same moment he knew.

"They've found him!!!"