

## Moving out

Early next morning, Luke was pulling on his boots, only half dressed in trousers, when his door com buzzed.

“Come in,” he yelled without thinking.

“Hi Ace.”

Luke jumped in surprise. It was the last person he’d expected. “Er, hi Shira.”

Hands clasped behind her back, Shira strode briskly into his cabin, tilting her head in approval as she took in Luke’s shirtless state. “Well, well,” she stated blithely. “I see that I didn’t wake you. You’re up early?”

Luke scrambled to find his composure. Shira had never been in his cabin before. Suddenly the space felt very cramped, her eyes and movements seeming to fill it all. “Yeah, uh, I – hey, wait a minute! Did you expect to find me sleeping here?”

“Maybe I was hoping to,” she suggested, letting her eyes run impishly over Luke’s exposed torso. “I think I was, yeah.”

Luke swallowed, searching for a reply, but it escaped him. Their eyes locked as Shira slowly started to move closer, causing Luke almost to backstep. He caught himself, provoked with his own lack of resolve. He wasn’t exactly threatened here, he reminded himself, and if Shira wanted to come closer he might as well see what her next move would be!

Images of her “next move” immediately started to flash through his mind and his mouth went completely dry. Shira’s expression was a strange mixture of playful amusement and commitment. Now she was at armslength from him, gods, how her lips looked alluring, why had he never noticed it before?! He could feel, actually *feel* the curves of her body against his own even though he wasn’t touching her - even though he was forcing himself to not so much as look at it!

Tugging her hand up from behind her back, Shira held a datacard up to his nose. “The trouble is; Admiral Gelsk said this couldn’t wait.”

“Huh? Oh!” Luke accepted the card automatically. Shira was already stepping back, turning to smile easily at him over her shoulder.

Luke’s returning smile came much more effortlessly now that she was a few paces away. He waved the datapad in the air, knowing it to be his official absence-from-duty permit; he’d sent the request in last night with Leia’s recommendation. “Thanks.”

Shira tilted her head, graciously. “You’re welcome. Care to join me for breakfast when you’re decent?”



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Luke shook his head. "Sorry, no."

"You're no fun," Shira sighed, clicking her tongue. "And Rebel Girls Rule Number Four states that men who aren't fun will have to pay."

Luke couldn't help grinning. "Pay? Uh oh. May I ask in what manner?"

"Hmm. Let's see." She pursed her lips. "The retribution must correspond to the offence, of course. Since you refuse to join me for breakfast, the evident consequence would be that you take me to dinner."

"Dinner?" Luke echoed, not believing his ears. "On *Home One*? Where? The mess?"

Shira shrugged. "Why not? Or in your cabin, I don't care. What I want is to be able to dress up in something other than these horrid coveralls." She picked at her utensils with obvious dissatisfaction.

Luke thought she looked terrific—she always did, no matter what she wore—and for a moment he considered telling her so. Then he thought better of it. Even though Shira's promotion had put them on a level playing field, he'd better not add fuel to the flames, especially not as he was about to deliver another disappointment.

"Okay," he told her. "But I'm afraid it will have to wait a while. I'll be leaving as soon as I've dressed. Chewie and Lando have found Han."

Shira caught her breath. "Hey, that's wonderful news! Where is he? How did they find him?"

Unexpectedly, Luke felt a strange hesitation in the back of his mind. He trusted Shira, of course he did—yet the Empire was on Luke's heels as well as Leia's, it had spies everywhere, even here on *Home One*, and the fewer who knew anything about their plans, the better.

"Yeah, it's great, isn't it?" he said instead. "But I'm afraid that I don't have any details yet. I only received the message last night. Within a few hours I'll be much wiser."

"Within a few hours you'll be gone," Shira retorted.

That was his point, of course, but Shira looked so disappointed that Luke couldn't stop himself from mellowing. "Hey," he muttered, touching her arm. "The sooner I leave, the sooner I'll be back. And then you'll get all the details."

She tilted her head, a twinkle in her eyes revealing that she was prepared to bargain. "That would be *all* of them? And from you?"

Luke laughed. "If you don't fall asleep first."

"Not a chance! I'll hold you to that, Ace. *And* the dinner!"

got a sudden, mad urge to make a move, regardless of all his determination to the contrary. He leaned towards her and caught her keen surprise as their lips closed in. Then panic lurched again and he craned his head just enough to hit her cheek instead. Shira, however, didn't pull back and Luke had to give her another quick kiss to retain the initiative. It hit somewhere between her mouth and chin before he hurried to withdraw.

Their eyes locked and she raised her chin slightly, clearly not sure if she should be pleased or disappointed. Luke tried frantically to find an appropriate comment to close the matter. "Watch the shop while I'm away, ok?" "Oh, gods, Skywalker! That was the lousiest, most clichéd line ever!"

But instead of upbraiding him she just smiled; a slow smile that he could feel all the way down to his stomach. "I will. If you promise to hurry back, ok?"

"I will," Luke managed. "Take care."

"You too, Ace." She left with a final, intense look over her shoulder and Luke hurried off to dress and pack. He could still feel her smile and gaze upon him all the way down to his ship. Not before he had started the engines of the X-wing he realized that he should have said "May the Force be with you," instead of that perpetual "take care."

Some Jedi he was.

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Sitting around the familiar and comfortable holochess table in the *Millennium Falcon's* main hold, Luke, Leia and Chewie went through the rescue plan for the umpteenth time. They had rendezvoused at Ben Kenobi's old home on Tatooine, but as the afternoon heat crept through the worn-down mudwalls of the cottage, they had chosen to withdraw to the *Falcon*, by far the coolest place available.

Ben's cottage was the perfect base for their rescue mission, located as it was on the plateau bordering the Western Dune Sea. It wasn't far from the Bømmarr monastery that Jabba had chosen as his residence, but it was desolate and still far enough away for them to dare setting down their spacecraft.

After several hours of hard work and heated discussions, the three friends had finally agreed on the details of the plan. Luke leaned back in his chair with a tired sigh. Leia could be a magnificent nitpicker when she wanted, he reflected fondly. Perhaps that was a part of her training as a politician? Anyway, it had resulted in a plan that was, if not exactly water-tight, then at least not impossible either. The only thing that nagged Luke was that Leia would be staying overnight in the palace, disguised as a bounty hunter. Lando was presumably already in position, infiltrated among Jabba's guards.

As he stretched his arms over his head, Luke faced Threepio's darkened eyes. Strangely, they seemed even emptier than ever before, staring out from his immobile, golden features. They had been forced to turn the protocol droid off when they'd realized how vital his role would be in the

Leo remained completely unaware of his real function - none of them nourished the illusion that there was an actor hidden somewhere deep below those golden plates.

Chewie rose and growled that he would start working on the camouflage of the ships. Leia nodded her agreement. "Go ahead. I think we've covered everything by now."

Luke smiled briefly. "You actually believe that?" he wondered casually when the Wookiee had left.

Leia chuckled. "Nah, it would be first time, wouldn't it?"

"Definitely the first time!" Luke grinned. "Well, when things start to go wrong I guess we'll just have to improvise."

He sensed a flicker of emotion from the Princess and turned his head towards her. She looked away, but Luke detected something more from her. Under normal circumstances he would never pry in his friend's thoughts, but this was too important. He stretched out towards Leia's mind. Before he reached it, he knew what she was thinking and sat straight up in his chair. "No! You're not!"

Leia's delicate features turned to those of a female gundark in a nanosecond. "Luke Skywalker! Don't you dare read my mind!"

"I don't have to," Luke snorted. "I know you well enough. You were going to try to free Han on your own!"

Leia straightened her royal spine. "Correction. I *am* going to try to free Han on my own. That is, if I judge circumstances to be favorable when I arrive at the palace."

"Oh no, you're not!"

"You can't stop me, Luke." Leia's chin was set at its most stubborn angle and her eyes shone with dogged determination.

"Oh, yes I can. I just have to tell Chewie about your little scheme, and he'll handcuff you to the *Falcon's* landing struts just like Han would want him to!"

Leia's eyes flashed in alarm. "You're *not* telling Chewie!" she barked.

Luke smiled and crossed his arms. "No, not if you give your word of honor that you won't try any funny tricks by yourself at the palace."

Leia bit her lip and looked away. Luke could feel her emotions swirl. As he carefully reached out for her in the Force he was a bit thrown off by how powerful they actually were. "It's far too dangerous, Leia," he murmured, trying another tack. "Think about it. If Jabba caught you -"

Leia turned to glare at him. "Then what?" she challenged. "He might kill me? Well, he sure will try that at *some* point of this mission. But if I could get Han out quietly in the middle of the night, then at least *you* wouldn't risk your life. And to tell the truth, it's *your* part that I'm most worried about!"



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“Jabba will not allow the Jedi to rise again. They always were a restriction to the Hutts and you, as a Tatooine native, would have far too much interest in this Region. Besides, he’s so ticked off with Han that your friendship with him made you Jabba’s enemy long ago. If he gets his hands on you, he’ll kill you without thinking twice. You know that, Luke, and that’s part of what we count on in our plan. But if Jabba catches me, he’ll only— only—” She turned her head away.

Luke’s stomach turned in despair. All the things Jabba might do to Leia, or have others do to her, were beyond his imagination, but unfortunately not beyond his knowledge. “Leia,” he tried again.

“I’m not afraid!” Leia turned to face him again, looking him straight in the eye. “And I don’t want you afraid for me either. We’re all at risk here. Well, we aren’t exactly new to that, are we? You don’t have to give your blessing, but I claim my right to improvise just as much as you will. May I remind you that you’ve never asked my advice when carrying out any of *your* reckless ideas? I know very well that if you’d find it necessary, you’d try to improvise yourself!”

Luke sighed. Leia was right, of course. It was just that— this was Leia. He felt a protectiveness for her like for no one else. Always had. He couldn’t simply dismiss it.

“I’ve really tried to grow beyond recklessness these past months, Leia,” he countered persuasively. “I’d be very sorry if you picked up that mantle. Chewie would be sorry too - and Lando. And you know who’d be the most sorry of all, don’t you? Imagine how Han would feel if we’d rescue him but you wouldn’t be there. Leia, try to imagine how...”

“Oh, shut up!”

For a moment they remained in troubled silence. Then Leia let out a muffled sound and burst out of her seat. Luke straightened in his chair and in the next moment Leia was in his arms. She slipped right onto his lap, laced her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder. Luke pushed his surprise aside and wrapped his arms gently around her, holding her to his chest. Leia’s body started to convulse violently and almost reluctantly she began to cry. He stroked her hair and mumbled small words of comfort. She was his very own Princess and he comforted her as he would comfort a child.

They had always been close but somehow, after Leia had heard his mental plea for help months ago outside Cloud City, their bond had grown even stronger. At least Luke felt that way, and he was convinced that Leia felt the same.

The strange thing was, they had never really talked about it, never dared to tread the difficult path of their feelings towards each other. Only months ago Luke and Han had, half jokingly, half seriously, been in competition for Leia’s love. Then Han had won her heart and Luke had sidestepped, without hesitation, without questions. Leia was aware of this, of course, but still she had to be as uncertain about where that left the two of them as he was. That she could come to him for comfort like this moved him deeply.

vering. By then Luke's tunic was soaked at the shoulder. Slowly, the princess straightened up and dried her eyes. "Sorry about that. If I "

"Don't apologize, Leia." Luke let his thumb brush the wet trails from her soft cheek. "If I can be of any help, any help at all, I'm only glad and honored."

"Oh, nonsense! 'Honored' " Leia mumbled and wiped the last tears away. "Luke, sometimes you're so respectful that I " She shook her head.

Luke peered furtively at her. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Leia made an impatient gesture.

"You should know what I mean, too," Luke replied softly.

All of a sudden, Leia looked uncertain. She stirred and Luke realized that she was still sitting on his lap. He let go of her and she slipped quickly back into her own chair.

For a moment the comfortable atmosphere between them seemed to slip away and Luke bit his lip. How could he love someone like a sister when she *wasn't* his sister? He yearned to tell Leia that she was the sweetest, most brave and admirable girl he'd ever met. That he loved her and never wanted to lose her. Part of him almost wished that he didn't love her quite so much. Luke had absolutely no idea how Han would take all of this. Would the proud, self-sufficient Corellian be able to contain his jealousy or would something finally come between the three friends who had gone through so much together?

Was it even possible that their friendship could go back to what it had been?

*I am your father!*

His friends were all he had. He didn't want to lose them - couldn't afford to lose them! Especially not Leia!

"You can turn so serious these days," Leia murmured.

Luke started and met her eyes, so full of concern. He smiled bashfully. "Sorry, I " "

"It's ok." She paused, her mild mahogany eyes piercing into his. "Something's been nagging at you, hasn't it?"

Luke sighed. "Something's seemed like the understatement of the millennia. "Well, yes. A number of things, really " he muttered.

Leia didn't shift her gaze, and Luke felt forced to continue. "It seems like so many things are coming after us. The Empire wants us dead or worse. There's my Jedi training - I have to take it up again at some point. And that has to be soon. I should leave after we've rescued Han, really. I don't know if anyone but you will be able to understand it - I mean, Gelsk was mad at me already for going away after Hoth - I don't want to lose all everything I've gained these last years; the Alliance,

longer want to lose *you*, Leia. You mean so much to me, you and our friendship—yet, sometimes it all seems so fragile! ”

It should have been easier to talk to Leia than to Wedge. Instead Luke found himself sidestepping the real problem once again.

Leia shuddered. “Stop it, Luke. Nothing will come between us! I know it won’t! And of course you have to follow your path, I’ll support that anytime, against Gelsk or anyone else. Also you should know— You should know that you mean an awful lot to me too, Luke.”

He smiled, a wave of reassurance flowing through him at her words, despite his knowledge that she only saw the surface of his worries. “I know. But I’m happy to hear you say it anyway.”

Did he know? Yes, he did. But before she’d said it, he hadn’t known he did.

Still, it haunted him. “Do you think people will understand? ” “How could they, when he didn’t understand a bit of it himself?”

Leia set her jaw. “They’ll have to. It’s that easy.”

Luke nodded. But he knew in his heart it wouldn’t be easy at all.

\* \* \*

“Of course, Master Luke. I understand. You can have complete confidence in us.”

Threepio almost beamed with self-importance as he turned to his counterpart. “Come on, Artoo. We’d better hurry. Master Luke has entrusted us with this assignment and I’m sure he wants it done as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

Luke shook his head, smiling softly as the two droids headed off. Beside him, Leia struggled to suppress her grin until they had disappeared behind the sandbanks. She reached up to pat his shoulder reassuringly. “They’ll manage just fine, Luke. Don’t you worry.”

“I’m not worried about *them*, Leia,” Luke countered quietly, eyes still on the two droids disappearing between the sandbanks. “You should know that by now.”

Leia flexed her neck uncomfortably, but the way her jaw was set, Luke knew that the matter was settled. Instead of pursuing, he let it go with a sigh, and craned his head to give her a wry smile. “However, I’m seriously worried about Threepio’s circuits when he hears the message. I still can’t help feeling pretty evil, setting him up like that.”

“He should be thankful,” Leia countered. “If it was Han, he actually *would* give him to Jabba.” She grinned wickedly and with a final squeeze of his shoulder, she turned and walked into the *Falcon*.

covered with a camo-net, both the *Falcon* and Luke's X-wing were not only invisible to sensors, they were also hardly detectable with the eye, even up close. Chewie was running a final but completely unnecessary check on the nets.

Luke stood watching the endless sand dunes where the droids had already disappeared. How strange it was to be back! He'd spent the first nineteen years of his life watching dunes just like these, a bit further east across the desert. Not that the dunes looked the same to a trained eye, not at all. Luke could still spot the differences as easily as any local. However, he'd also gained so much distance that he could understand why the desert looked all the same for a newcomer. It felt odd somehow, like a double perspective. Like he was standing with both feet in different worlds. He saw everything through a distance and it wasn't as he remembered it. Certainly not like home anymore.

His life had changed completely the past years, and he with it. Everything he'd clung to since he'd left Tatooine had been challenged, every hope, every belief. Sometimes Luke found himself wondering if even the Force that he'd put his trust in so fiercely the past four years wasn't in fact as much a danger as a help. What if the path Luke had chosen could transform him into a threat towards the friends he wanted to save? How could he know? Yoda had told him to trust the Force, but he had also warned him - and he'd been reluctant to train Luke. If Vader had been telling the truth, then his father had lost his path; couldn't Luke lose his too? Luke had never been convincing as a Jedi in the first place. Yoda wouldn't even have agreed to train him unless Ben had persuaded him.

Lost in his thoughts, Luke let his feet had taken him back to Ben's house, well preserved for the past four years by the dry desert air. Neither Tusken raiders nor Jawas had found their way to the house yet; there were no signs of plundering, and no sense of them in the Force. Perhaps pleasant old Ben had appeared so frightening to them that they still didn't dare approach his home? Good old Ben - who might have lied to Luke about the most important thing in his life. Yet without Ben he wouldn't be the man he was now. Probably wouldn't even be alive.

As Luke contemplated the paradoxes, it suddenly struck him that it wasn't only intruders he couldn't sense in the Force, but hardly the man who'd lived here for so long either. He hadn't noticed before. Ben had always struck Luke as so reliable, so convincing - and so alive despite his age! It seemed strange that his home for so many years would be devoid of memories.

Determined, Luke reached out more intensely with his senses. He could sense *something*, like the echo of the lowest whisper, a ghostly shadow of the hardly visible. A sadness, a resignation, and below that - though he could hardly know whether it was layers or only his own imagination seeing it as such - guilt, pain; both worn out by time, tempered with resignation. Luke frowned, concentrated, but couldn't bring anything more out from the stone floor and mudwalls; they were silent to him. It was as though their inhabitant never used the Force, never stirred up his feelings, had contemplated death more than cherished life.

Finding no help from the past, Luke brought his mind back to the present and could sense Chewie approaching. He smiled as the great Wookiee appeared, doubled over to squeeze through the door. Chewie tilted his furry head and barked a question, his blue eyes bright and friendly in that hairy and otherwise unsettling face.



here once, so it never became anything special to me.

Only as Ben's home. I was just... He hesitated. "Well, I dunno. Looking for good advice, I think, some kind of guidance.

He glanced a bit self-consciously at his friend but Chewie seemed to both understand and accept. He grumbled another question.

"I guess so." Luke mumbled. "Yeah, I'm kind of worried."

He turned to leave, at the same time focusing back at the looming mission ahead. "Mostly for Leia I guess, but of course for you and Lando too. Me too, obviously." He made a face. "If Jabba doesn't jump on this Jedi thing... The entire plan depends on that he feels threatened personally... and that sort of worries me." "ö

The Wookiee grumbled. Luke flushed. "Well, I mean that if he only sees a farm kid instead of a mighty Jedi Knight he might just offer me to the Empire instead of going for a glorious execution - and in that case I'm not sure I can get you guys out of the palace... probably not even out of the cells." "ö

Chewie whuffed and Luke smiled. "Thanks. I can't say I *feel* that way, though." "ö

Chewie whuffed again, ruffing his hair and Luke opened his mouth to tell him that he'd try, but closed it again.

There was no try.

He would *have* to do fine.