

**WHERE OUR
INTREPID HERO**



**DOESN'T
GET AWAY**

A story by sparklight

Where Our Intrepid Hero Doesn't Get Away

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A Star Wars Fanfic

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One-shots surrounding either AU situations of canon/legends works where Luke would normally have gotten away (or Vader is simply inserted into the action to come pick his child up) but in these instances doesn't, or completely new scenarios of the same. Any time an AU is mentioned to be based on a comics issue it's from the new Marvel Star Wars comics (2015) (unless otherwise noted).

There are no deep ruminations on consequences of the situations here, just our awful Sith dad picking his son up when he'd rather not be.



Chapter 1: In Which a Hutt Dies



This first one is an AU of Marvel's Star Wars comic, issue 9, so some vague spoilers for that!

"But... I'm not..." Luke took a step back, not at all liking what he was hearing - not that being threatened with death if he failed to do something he didn't know how to do was much better, but this was undisputably *worse*.

"What you are, dear boy, is the *last jedi*," Grakkus said, pausing incrementally and narrowed his huge, bulbous eyes slightly. The blue light caught in them, igniting a gleam that that revealed the greed and, darker, more unpleasantly, the desire to *possess*. "And now you belong to *me*."

"I think not."

The holocrons clattered to the floor, onto boxes, dark and closed once more as Luke lost his concentration and stumbled around, the Hutt's many hooked legs clattering on the duracrete beside him.

The fleshy thump of a body being thrown onto the floor briefly drew his gaze down, then past the body to the black boots - was that *more bodies* scattered behind Vader towards the doors and beyond? Patting himself down on pure reflex, there was of course no lightsaber to be found, because the Hutt had it.

Said lightsaber suddenly flew through the air to land in Vader's outstretched palm, and wasn't *that* a sour deja vu he really didn't need? Swallowing down confusion, anger and a trickle of fear, Luke balled his hands into fists and tried to ignore the cold, dark fire that emanated from the dark lord and filled the storage they were in.

“Take him!” Grakkus bellowed, gesturing to his magna guards as they surged forward. Luke hoped that maybe he could get a chance to get away now - but leaving without his father’s lightsaber seemed counter to everything he’d done today - a thought that disappeared in the shock of the floor likewise disappearing underneath his feet.

“Ack---” pulling at the collar of his shirt, the Hutt pulling it tight against his throat, Luke flailed and managed to squirm out of his jacket, but that left Grakkus’ grip on the back of his shirt, and Luke swore, trying to reach the hand to bend it loose, “let go!”

Behind them, purple and red arcs were drawn in the air as Vader and the magna guards fought, the towers of boxes around them shuddering as one of the droids was thrown into them, and they were moving *so fast* and he *couldn’t get loose---*

Metal shrieked, and then snapped in quick, sharp succession and a rattling thump went through him from the Hutt’s impact as he landed on the floor from the legs being broken, halting his escape. They stuck out at awkward - dangerous - angles and heedlessly pierced thick, slimy skin and flesh. A sweet, rank smell that was wholly unlike the iron of blood pierced the air along with Grakkus’ muffled noises as he landed on the floor and his own artificial legs.

Kicking his own legs, Luke had half a thought that if he twisted around he might have a better shot at freeing himself... Though he ended the attempted motion by pulling his legs up instead, twisting in the air and *barely* avoiding the half-broken magna guard as it flew past him and slammed into the Hutt instead, then dropped down to the floor, circuitry sparking.

Another shearing noise of metal drew his attention even as Grakkus swore, picked up the magna guard’s dropped staff, and slowly started to slither away, leaving a trail of slime mixed with something dark behind him. The last magna guard jerked and twitched unevenly as its limbs twisted around themselves, then were torn out of their sockets and the torso collapsed in a tor-

tured shriek of metal.

The droid was dropped onto the floor and Vader started forward with a sort of furious inevitability that had been lacking in their... meeting (he couldn't really call it a duel, could he?) on Cymoon. It was both frightening and made him angry; had he just not rated this level of seriousness, and why was Vader showing it *now*?

"Turn around and face me, Hutt. Attempting to claim that boy as *your property* will be the last thing you ever do." Dark rage dripped from every single word, though *why* he was so angry Luke had no idea - the Empire used slaves, after all.

"No closer, Lord Vader," Grakkus said, his voice rougher, wetter, now than it'd been when Luke first heard him speak, "why don't you take care of all this, ah... contraband, and I'll just be on my w---" Grakkus choked, the words disappearing in a strained rattle, and Luke grimaced. He tried once again to twist out of the Hutt's grasp, but with the staff being waved wildly around with Grakkus' convulsions, Luke was sure he'd end up speared or cut in half before he ever got to feel floor underneath his feet again.

"Oof---" grunting as said floor came up to meet him as the next jerking convulsion made Grakkus let go of him, Luke caught his breath and rolled away, trying but unable to stifle the shudder at the feeling of slime and who knew what else that was now coating his right side and back. Sure, he'd landed in trash earlier today, but somehow this was *worse*. "And these were new clothes..."

Glancing over his shoulder, Luke, despite having been involved in the Alliance and the war against the Empire for a good while now, rather wished he hadn't.

Grakkus was in pieces.

His arms, along with pieces of his tail, were twitching on the floor, and there were shallow, blackened cuts all over his torso. Vader seemed to be systematically hacking through the Hutt from the tail up, all the while still choking him.

The Hutt was also still - for now - *alive*, Luke knew. Not that he

seemed to be, his eyes rolled back in their sockets and his tongue convulsing with the rest of him, but, sickeningly, the trace of brilliant life that was the Hutt was still flickering fitfully in the Force, bright against Darth Vader's cold fire.

Shaking his head, Luke wasn't even sure how he was collected enough to have got that much from the Force. Eyeing the dark-armoured and cloaked shape, Luke bit his lip and scowled, wondering if he could risk getting close to snatch the lightsaber... probably not. Could he... grab it with the Force, maybe?

He wasn't sure he was good enough at that, yet. But he couldn't just *leave without it*.

The muffled death rattle of Grakkus as Vader finally cut off the Hutt's head sliced through Luke's new resolve, and he realised he'd squandered whatever moment of distraction he'd had. The head teetered precariously for a second before it slowly slid off the mass of Grakkus' torso, and Luke quickly looked away.

He couldn't close out the noise of it hitting the duracrete, though.

Trying to breathe shallowly in an attempt to avoid the stink now smothering the air, Luke took a few steps backwards, glancing around the towers of boxes and hoping to find something he could use as a weapon - one of the magna guards' staffs, maybe?

Darth Vader turned around slowly, slicing his lightsaber through the staff at his feet with a nearly negligent slash of the tip of the blade, hanging low as it was. Luke stared, swallowed, and then glowered. Vader stared back, and the moment stretched.

"Opening all of the holocrons at once was impressive."

Blinking at the sudden compliment after almost a minute of uncomfortable, noisy silence, Luke twitched, glanced around again.

"Yeah... *thanks*." Where was that second staff--

No floor under his feet again and Luke caught sight of the statue he was headed for right before he hit it, tensing up even if it'd be better to try and relax into the impact. Breath driven out

of him, Luke was, vaguely, more surprised that hitting the unyielding stone hadn't brought with it a concussion and an aching back as well.

For some reason, his impact against the statue felt very... *precise*.

He fell to the floor for a second time in quick succession, trying to catch his breath and get to his feet fast enough he might have a *fighting chance*, but he'd barely gotten his hands under him when the cold enveloped him. Then there were black boots right in front of his face and his arms were yanked up and he supposed this was *it* and he hadn't been able to avenge his father or Ben---

The cold snap of metal closing jarred Luke out of his sense of impending death, and he looked up, confused.

Binders.

Past those, an impassive, stark black mask, and Vader's loud, regulated breathing.

"Wha--- ah!"


He met the armoured shoulder with a thump, breath driven from him *again*, and he hadn't mistaken those lumps that'd been behind Vader when the dark lord had entered; there really *were* a trail of bodies all the way through the building and out.

"Hey! What's the big idea?"

Vader ignored his yelling, only tightened his grip and lengthened his steps, walking silently until they stepped out of the shadow of the building and the sunlight momentarily blinded Luke.


"Burn it down."

Luke looked up, trying to twist around to see who he was talking to, but he got all the view he could've wanted when Vader started walking again and passed the... the woman and two droids? that had been standing outside. Luke met her startled look, but he could tell there was no use in pleading to *her* for help even if he wasn't sure exactly why he could tell. He hoped Artoo would be all right...



Chapter 2:

In Which Darth Vader Arrives Early



AU of Luke's escape from the mercenaries on Kothlis, in Shadows of the Empire. Dad arrives early enough things go in very undesirable directions for Luke.

The cell and the guard now in it was two corridors behind Luke when a chill ran through him and he glanced up at the ceiling, swallowing. The time he had available was suddenly much, much less than it'd previously been, even from the reality of running around a base full of sleeping thugs and mercenaries.

Vader had, or would soon, land on the planet.

He was definitely *in the system*, since he was close enough for Luke to feel the sudden brightening of their connection. That there even *was one*... Luke had tried to avoid thinking about it, and he was still going to ask Yoda the first opportunity he had, but that link stood out damningly against the glittering fabric of the Force.

He didn't have such a connection with anyone else, not even his friends.

... Frowning as that thought felt somewhat off, Luke forced himself to push it aside for later consideration; he *needed* to get out of here, and preferably to get his lightsaber as well.

Now, he just needed to *find it* first...

Steps thundering down the corridor in front of him made him duck into a storage room to the right, pressing himself up against the wall to the side of the door. Glancing around the room reflexively, Luke did a double-take. He couldn't be *that* lucky, could he?

But no, there it was, laying right on the table on the other side

of the room along with his comlink; his lightsaber.

Grinning, he cast a quick look to the closed door and then crossed the room, his hand closing about the lightsaber just as the door opened. He opened his mouth to say something which would hopefully distract the thug long enough to give him a bit of a headstart, but cold fire suddenly licked against his back, and wrapped around his shoulders.

"... Vader." The word stuck in his throat, had briefly fought with another title entirely, but had won out when he turned around and caught sight of not just stormtroopers in the corridors beyond, but what looked like at least some of the mercenaries as well. That he could even get a glimpse of them around Vader where he stood in the doorway was rather impressive.

The black helmet inclined slightly, then tilted. A pause that stretched a moment longer than to be expected, and...

"Skywalker." Vader paused again, helmet still tilted, and then he gestured around the storage room, a pretty generous ten by ten meters, "not the most *advantageous* place to be caught, young one."

He would not blush. There was still a flicker of hot anger, but he took a breath and let both breath and frustration out, held his lightsaber loosely in his hand, but didn't ignite it yet. Surely, he could still get out of here---

Somewhere, an explosion rattled the building, causing the stormtroopers, mercenaries and even Vader to twitch, looking away. It was all of half a second of distraction, but Luke took it, throwing *all* he had into pushing at Vader with the Force.

Luke wasn't sure who was more surprised, him or his father, when the man actually *toppled over*, going down with a thump, crunches of not a few bones of the two thugs that had been trapped underneath him, and some cries.

Luke then ran, leaped, and used the doorway to swing himself out of the room and around into the corridor and over the stormtroopers' heads, landing just as a lightsaber was ignited behind him.

He wouldn't stop. He wouldn't *fight him*. It wasn't the time to do that, all he needed to do was---

"Ack-!" Ducking out of the way of both the warning chill that slashed through him and the lightsaber that scythed through the air *above him*, Luke also had to throw himself to the side, slamming against the wall, as Vader called his lightsaber back the same way he'd thrown it.

"Come with me, Luke," Vader rumbled, one hand outstretched, his lightsaber in the other; a towering black figure of warning and temptation both.

But this wasn't Cloud City; Luke had more options available to him at the moment than he'd had clinging to the gantry. He was pretty sure that whoever was responsible for the explosion was on *his* side, so all he needed to do was get there. He'd already thumbed the comlink to create a beckon call for Artoo to take his X-wing close, in case this other rescuer was either not a rescuer at all, or couldn't get to him.

He just needed to get out.

While avoiding his father.

"*I can't.*"

Had to rescue Han, had to help the Alliance, needed to... to help his father but he couldn't do that by going with him, he was pretty sure, and where had that thought come from? Was that possible?

Could he save his father?

Vader took two steps closer, and Luke took two back, finally igniting his lightsaber, holding it low. Didn't dare to look behind him, but the corridor ought to still be free, so if he backflipped, using the Force---

Too late, the warning stabbed through him, focused as he'd been on his father and backing away and not stretching his attention out behind him.

His whole back convulsed as the blue stun bolts soaked into him, the charge crackling through his flesh and leaving a numbing wave of twitching nothing behind, vision wavering fitfully

in and out as he fought for consciousness. The floor came up to meet him in starts and sputters, and he didn't feel it when he hit it.

His lightsaber clattered to the floor in slow motion, turning itself off, and was then picked up by a black glove.

Oh no.

Luke tried to fight, struggling to get through the crawling threat of unconsciousness and immobility, but as his father knelt down beside him and his hand rested, surprisingly lightly, on his head for a moment, he knew he'd lost.

Sleep, son.

It was a suggestion only, gentle and soft, in that very same rich voice all of his father's mental communication had been made in so far, and he couldn't fight it.

He managed one twitch of his hand, curling it into the cloak pooling on the floor, before the stun bolt and his father's Force-enhanced suggestion won out and darkness descended.



Chapter 3: In Which There Is a Duel, Interrupted I



AU of Marvel's Star Wars comic, #2!

The lightsaber went flying, and he wasn't really listening to the childish outburst from the boy as he yanked it away. He merely caught the weapon as it smacked into his hand, the ribbed grip similar enough to his own that holding it was more natural than most other lightsabers that he'd taken.

"So... Obi-Wan Kenobi gave you this lightsaber. A shame he did not teach you how to wield it," he said, glancing down at it with a sneer behind his mask, *almost* more intent on the topic at hand than the familiar design around the top of the hilt...

"He never did make for much of a master." He looked down at the weapon in his hand again as the boy stared, his confusion and incredulity bright in the Force, so at odds with his frankly abysmal mastery of it. He'd have looked away from the lightsaber again, pushed the weapon out of his mind and focusing on the more important matter of getting some information out of the foolish child, except...

Except this...

He stared.

This wasn't just *any* lightsaber Obi-Wan might have picked up between Mustafar almost twenty years ago and leaving Tatooine to end up on the Death Star some weeks past, from some random fallen Jedi. This was, he realised as all the disparate elements of the lightsaber's design slowly filtered through his brain and turned into a coherent whole, *hi---* Anakin Skywalker's lightsaber.

Helmet snapping up, he speared the boy with a glare sharp

enough to be noticed, mask or no mask, and the dark side roared up around him, making the untrained whelp freeze.

"Why do you have *this* lightsaber?" The words came out like Mustafar's gravel, hot, sharp pebbles that cut his tongue and gums, burned his lips - and strangely, his rage was answered with an equally passionately furious flare from the boy, who now looked like he was ready to jump him with his bare hands.

"I guess you don't recognise the weapons of the Jedi you've *killed*," the young man snarled, hands shaking at his sides, face twisting angrily; so full of righteous rage and need for vengeance... He'd disabuse him of the notion (because he *did* know the lightsaber of every single Jedi he had killed), but there were more pertinent things going on.

He didn't need to prod the boy, though, because he soon gathered himself again.

"That's *my father's* lightsaber!"

The Force heaved around them, dark lightning shooting through the solar brightness that was the boy against his own swelling black bonfire. A bonfire which reared up, poised to strike down the screaming child and then---

The hilts of the lightsabers in his hands, both of them his, one of them from another life, the other from his current one, the only one that mattered, creaked under the strain of his grip. The next breath out stuttered, burning hot like the poisonous air on Mustafar, the scouring dryness of Geonosis or Tatooine, and...

He was actually *looking* at the boy now.

It has been ages since he looked at himself in a mirror, but he could take a guess at the hair colour, despite the red haze. He certainly recognised the shape of the chin, and the nose---

Something wonderful has happened.

The nose.

The child's eyes were pale, he could tell, red tint or no red tint, and they were narrowed in an anger that was more than familiar - though it was slowly bleeding away into something like restless uncertainty when he did nothing but stare for a moment that

grew into half a minute and swelled further.

“Indeed.”

The boy - her child, *his son* - was backing up suddenly. Probably from the metal trembling and slowly, tortuously twisting until there was a sphere of ruin twenty meters wide around him.

Focus.

The boy was still backing up.

He turned off the lightsabers, hung them at his hips, heard the screech of metal tearing above him, felt the tingling warning through the Force.

Five seconds, maybe.

He raised his hand...

“Hey---!”

The child flew through the air even as he threw himself backwards, catching the boy against his chest as the foot of the AT-AT came crashing down through the ceiling, missing them both by less than half a meter. He'd have lost his feet, if not his legs, if he hadn't thrown himself backwards.

He didn't notice the impact as he hit the floor, merely made sure to hold tight, ignoring the boy's attempted trashing and yelling as he tried to get loose.

He rolled over, and, even with the mask in place, the wide, angry-startled stare seemed to find his gaze---

Growling, he caught the flailing wrists in one hand and stood up, pulling the boy up and along with him as he strode away from the ruined section of the corridor behind them. The foolish rebels hadn't attempted to crush him a second time. Had probably noticed the boy was right there, which suited *him* just fine.

“Hey--- what the... *let go!*”

Anger mixing with fear now, but there was no time to stop and explain *now*.

Later.

He'd deal with this first. Find some stormtroopers, get a pair of binders, set a squadron, a *platoon* to guard the child, get rid of the rebels infesting the facility and then...

The child tried to dig his heels in, stumbled and almost crashed into him and he slowed for just half a step, let him catch his balance, then he lengthened his strides again.

And then his Master would pay.

Chapter 4:
Which There Is a Duel, Interrupted

AU of the fight at the end of Weapon of a Jedi.

This means that, in addition to the general “Vader coming to interrupt the fun” AU, Fett would’ve found out Luke’s name earlier than he does in canon (as Wookieepedia puts Weapon of a Jedi before the comic starts).

Also, while Sarco's lines are all taken (almost) straight from the book, the narration is all mine since the book's style didn't really fit mine.

“Such feeble senses... so easily disabled,” Plank said, static crackling along the words out of the vocoder. Not that Luke could *hear that*, or the soft clack-slide of the Scavenger’s feet on grass and stone as he circled him, raising his electrostaff as if he was going to ram it into Luke’s back.

His ears were ringing, the noise seemingly vibrating all the way down to his stomach and making him feel nauseous and dizzy. He also couldn't see anything at all, merely a painful... something which he couldn't even describe as either dark or light.

He was also far too disoriented, too *afraid*, and couldn't focus or calm down enough to draw on the Force. Because while he thought it should be possible to track the being through the Force from the glittering life that he surely presented, he just... couldn't... grasp it at the moment.

Luke was unaware of the electrostaff being pulled close to his back, mere centimeters away, and then drawn back again as Plank turned to Farnay and his droids.

“Good news; I’ve decided not to sell your master to the Em-

pire,” he said, cilia flickering and his voice amused, “I’m going to keep him as one of my own trophies instead. I can’t wait to hear him sc---a---nghzz.” Static turned the choked sputtering into incomprehensibility, and while the droids and Farnay turned around towards the wall of white armour with its single point of black leading the march and the pikhrons bounded away as if they’d been stung, even Luke wasn’t unaware that something had changed.

The glade was filled with cold, and while he still couldn’t get a conscious grip on the Force, it seemed, suddenly, darker. Trying to regain his balance, Luke nearly pitched over and had to fight against the need to throw up when he shook his head in a desperate attempt at clearing his hearing and vision both.

“You should have kept to your plan of following the laws, *scavenger*,” Vader snarled as he hauled Plank towards him through the air, ignoring the two droids and Farnay, who had a hand pressed against her mouth, “as that course of action would have left you not only richer, but *alive*.”

Luke tilted his head, squinting into the light-dark-nothing he was staring at, and turned around towards the darkest, coldest knot present in the temple clearing.

“Master Luke! Oh, Master Luke, the Empire is here! Please run!” Threepio yelled over Sarco Plank’s static and choked cries, and Farnay looked over, drawn even when she shouldn’t - but whatever it was the large, black-armoured man was doing, he was doing it in a way no obvious damage was being inflicted on the Scavenger. He was merely twisting in the air, clawing all over himself... the cilia? She swallowed down bile and looked nervously to the stormtroopers, but they remained where they were.

Maybe... she could...

“Remain where you are.”

Farnay froze, eyes wide, and balled her hands into fists.

“Leave him alone! He hasn’t---” She couldn’t claim Luke hadn’t done anything; he was wielding a lightsaber, like the sorcerers had, and he was right here in their temple. “Leave him *alone*!”

she repeated instead, flinching as Plank was flung aside, slamming into a broken pillar and falling to the ground with a meaty thump.

The armoured giant of a man didn't even glance to her as he started slowly towards Luke, and she swallowed.

"Leave here now. You will not be stopped."

"But..." She couldn't just *leave Luke* here, to the Empire. Wouldn't they... execute him, or something? Wasn't that what they did with sorcerers like the ones who'd lived at the temple?

"*Leave,*" the Imperial's voice was like thunder and Farnay squeaked and turned around and ran, shame burning through her. She should stay, she should, but... she left.

Mopping shakily at his still-dripping nose (he'd almost hit himself in the face when he'd first tried it), Luke squinted, warily waving his lightsaber in front of him. That knot of cold, fiery darkness was coming closer, and it was... familiar?

Where had he felt this before? He couldn't put---

Wait.

Vader.

He needed to--- He stumbled just as he tried to take the first position again, his feet refusing to obey him. And while he waved his lightsaber again, hoping to ward Vader off for a few more seconds, because he was *sure* he could (no, he *needed to*) fight him, he just needed a little more *time*...

Steel grip around his wrist and his arm was yanked wide, the lightsaber forced into a harmless angle, and Luke didn't need to see or hear to know Darth Vader was now right in front of him.

"Let go and *fight me*, or are you just going to kill me like you did Ben?" His voice sounded funny to his own ears; distant and muffled, like he'd had his ears stuffed with something. But at least he *could* hear again... kind of.

The noise that rolled through him felt like distant thunder, reverberating from the contact of the vice-like grip on his wrist.

"No, child."

Child?

Child?

There wasn't really any *condescension* in Vader's voice, more like careful neutrality, but Luke *didn't care*. It was like the 'oh, look, the farmboy, right off his outer rim farm on his nowhere of a home planet' attitude again, and heat bubbled up within him, alongside the anger.

This man...

"I'm an adult, Vader, and if you let go of my hand I'll *show you!*" Luke yelled, yanking on his hand and twisting it in an attempt to get it free, but he also stumbled as he tried to step back, get away so he could *fight him* - Vader's other hand caught his arm, steadying him. Luke shook his head, nausea and dizziness crawling up to create static in his brain, across his eyes, and he refused to be *grateful*.

Then the hand let go of his arm, coming to rest on his shoulder instead, thumb sliding sideways to push his chin up.

He wished he could *see*, blast it all, so he could glare properly.

"You, young one, are not even twenty yet."

It was, strangely enough, like listening to Uncle Owen tell him 'you live under our roof and as such you do your chores before you go mess with your useless friends'. It baffled him for long enough that he didn't try to twist his head away out of Vader's grip, and long enough that Vader easily bent the lightsaber out of his hand and spun him around.

"Hey! *Give that back!* It was my fath---" Wincing and trying not to throw up on the flagstones at his feet when Vader suddenly shook him, Luke swallowed down the last word along with his nausea, stiffening as he was cuffed.

"Captain. Make sure there is a medic waiting for us on our return. Bring the droids," Vader snapped and yanked at him, presumably to simply turn him back around, but the ground spun, turning the light-dark nothingness into a spinning kaleidoscope and Luke, finally, couldn't keep his thoughts or consciousness under control.

It was nearly a relief to feel the darkness rear up to swallow

him, especially when Vader apparently caught him right before he fell.

He didn't want to deal with this right now.



Chapter 5: In Which There Is a Hospital Visit



A completely original scenario this time, post-ESB. We'll return to the AUs next time.

Trying to clean up with one hand being partly out of commission from being broken but now healing wasn't the easiest thing, *especially* when he was feeling shaky and slightly dizzy. He knew Artoo wanted to risk contacting Leia or Chewie and Lando, or the Alliance, but the level of technology here made it a chancy business and it was very likely the Empire might intercept any messages.

Especially when the planet was only slowly integrating galactic-standard tech (in some ways even Tatooine had a higher level of tech, in others it was very similar), and he wasn't anywhere *near* the capital.

And then there was... this. The whole reason he couldn't stand for more than fifteen minutes at the most, the reason his vision swam when he focused too hard and he was barely strong enough to lift so much as his lightsaber.

Well.

If he'd had one.

He still hadn't had the time; his plan *had* been to set about rectifying that, right after *this* mission. Or rather, Luke thought as he slumped down on the bed, letting the cloth drop back into the basin with a quiet splashing noise, the mission he'd finished and was on the way back to base from, when the damage to his X-wing had gone critical and messed with the scatter protocol jump and left him doing a more-or-less controlled crash landing.

That he'd only ended up with a broken wrist (left, why not his

right? That he could have repaired himself), and a few scrapes and bruises, was a blessing.

Two weeks into his stay at the medical center in the city nearby (four hours away) where he'd landed, though, he'd gotten sick.

Something viral, the medics had said. A child's disease, nothing to worry about, though it'd take time. Luke was wondering if there was more to it, though, since what might have been practically harmless for the native children (Human, Twi'lek, and some alien he didn't recognise, probably the original natives) might not be harmless to *him*, who certainly wasn't born here.

Which accounted for this *third* week he'd been here, and while he didn't think he was getting worse, it didn't feel like he was getting *better*, either. He was tired, cold, dizzy and felt vaguely cranky, but didn't really have the energy to lash out.

He was also lucky that the planet was integrated enough that his credits were accepted, but he was running out and...

"You... might be right, Artoo. Maybe it's time to risk sending out a message. Can't really stay here for much longer, anyway," Luke said slowly, glancing over to where Artoo was parked in a corner of the small room. The astromech warbled, a mishmash of concern along with 'I told you so' - though the latter Luke mostly deducted from the tone of the binary Artoo was spitting out.

Drawn into a reluctant smile, Luke thought that this was probably the longest Artoo had gone without getting dirty. The medical staff had allowed the little droid to accompany him when it was obvious he wasn't going to let Luke out of his presence, but they'd insisted on scrubbing him clean - and continued to do so, apparently afraid even a few days would end with Artoo spreading... whatever it was they imagined he would be able to spread.

Artoo tweeted and set himself to rolling out, probably in search of something to make his message from, and Luke resisted the urge to just slump down face first on the bed again. He wasn't really sleepy, just tired. And aching. And *cold*---

Wait.

Frown slowly deepening, Luke realised just as slowly that that cold wasn't his body trying to fight against the virus, it was...

"Why have you not gotten yourself somewhere with *better facilities*?" Darth Vader filled the doorway, couldn't even plant his hands on his hips in the space that was left, even if, Luke thought, he was pretty sure he saw a twitch that meant he'd certainly tried.

Silence, then, but not even the awkward cut-off could've hidden the dark, nearly *offended* tone. Luke stared dully for a few moments, then reflexively (if belatedly) tried to look for the lightsaber - which he didn't have - and then the gun - which was in a safety locker because the staff hadn't let him keep it and it'd seemed reasonable a few weeks ago - but it wasn't like he'd have been able to lift *either* very well.

"Go away, Father." The last word slipped out before he'd filtered it properly. He still considered it with tired, dizzy resignation, and then decided that it didn't matter. Somewhere during these three weeks of having not much else to do but *think*, it had just not seem worth it to try and deny what he *knew* was true.

Startled, weighted silence, and for a moment Luke wasn't sure whether he was hot or cold or if the image of black flames drawing close was just his imagination or the impression from the Force - the latter, he finally settled on.

His healing wrist throbbed quietly inside its wrappings, and he was starting to have issues focusing *and* staying upright, so since his father merely *stood there* like a stunned dewback, he dropped down on the bed and buried his face into the pillow.

The fire, after another few minutes (or more? he didn't know), came closer, drew up and around him. Vader came closer as well, one hand fisting into the covers. He should try to get away, *anything* that didn't involve just laying there, but he couldn't quite convince his body to move.

This wasn't good. None of it was, but the thought was as dull and tired as the rest of him.

"You've been here for *three weeks* and are not better?" Anger,

fierce and throbbing, but not directed at *him*. It vibrated in the air around them, slowly spiralling outwards, seeking a target. Rather, many targets.

He needed to do something.

It took a moment, and then he shakily lifted a hand off the bed without looking to point it - he hoped, anyway, but since Vader was standing so close, pointing in the wrong direction should be very difficult - at his father.

“Leave them alone, or I’m *actually* going to have to... get up.”

There was a noise, distorted and twisted, from the vocaliser, and then something heavy was draped over him and Luke just *knew* his father wouldn’t just leave it at that. Wouldn’t just go away and leave him alone to suffer in peace.

Being lifted up like he was all of five, wrapped in the black cloak and cradled against Vader’s chest, was still *startling*, however.

He glowered up at his father, opened his mouth to protest... then closed it again. Tired crankiness mingled with frustration and acceptance, because what else was he going to do? It wasn’t like he could fight like this.

“Don’t... forget Artoo,” Luke muttered and let his head drop against the uncomfortably hard durasteel armour covering his father’s chest, and he knew he wasn’t imagining the anger-sharpened *anxiety* that stood out sharply against the brightness of everything else. It was as reassuring as his current position was, but definitely *shouldn’t* be.

The arms holding him tightened, and the response, in contrast, was even faintly amused.

“He makes himself very hard to forget.”

As Vader stalked out of the room, Luke knew that, in a few hours, he’d probably feel well enough thanks to whatever treatment he’d be given that he’d want to beat himself up for going along so quietly, but again, at this point in time, what was he *supposed* to do? At least Artoo’s shriek of alarm and rage when they met him in the corridor was pretty gratifying.



Chapter 6: In Which Ben Kenobi Is Late



AU of #7 of the Marvel Star Wars comic; Obi-Wan is late at a crucial moment.

If this keeps up I'm going to end up AUing the whole comic...

Tatooine's night air was, supposedly, still as chilly as ever, but he could of course not feel it. Even if he hadn't been in the suit, Vader's current mood might very well have burned the air around him into daytime heat; he still couldn't *believe* his Master had sent him *here* of all places.

To have a "discussion" with Jabba.

He doubted his Master would be entirely pleased, but the results followed the letter if not the spirit of the order, and that was as generous as he was feeling at the moment. Was he not better used *elsewhere*, with any number of things, rather than *this*? The growl that escaped him too thin and reedy to be picked up by the vocaliser, Darth Vader turned away, realising he'd wandered far off his intended short detour before he got back to the Star Destroyer in orbit and got *out* of here.

Lights and voices drifting on the night breeze made him pause momentarily, though.

Why, he wasn't sure, because there was not a single reason to remain here any longer than necessary. But the Force was dancing in twitching flickers around him, and there was a muted pressure from the direction of the night-time gathering.

Someone was registering in the Force. He turned that way nearly on reflex, stalking closer and listening carefully.

A Jedi?

Would he *maybe* get some challenge, something worthy to take out his frustration and loathing for this planet on?

“---water off the speeder.”

Weequayans. He felt his mouth pull into a sneer, which pulled on the badly-healed skin on his face, but he welcomed the slash of pain, the strained pull.

“That right, kid? You were trying to steal Jabba’s water?”

“It’s not Jabba’s. It belongs to the *farmers*,” someone said, and certainly not one of Jabba’s hired thugs. The voice was high, young. Practically vibrating with righteous - foolish - anger and a little fear. The Force hummed in tune with that bright voice, trembled along with the fear, rose higher with the anger.

The landspeeder’s lights made the small group practically blind, and Vader, standing outside the circle, was invisible in the darkness. He stared at the scene offered up; the thugs around a small, pale-haired boy, clad in the usual whites... couldn’t be older than ten, if that. Younger, he thought.

“I was taking it back.” Stubborn determination almost swallowed the fear, the child jutting his chin out as he crossed his arms over his chest. Trembling slightly, probably due both to fear and cold. He wasn’t exactly dressed for a night-time excursion.

“All by yourself, huh?” one of the Weequayans in front of the boy said, mocking laughter just underneath the words as he made a show of looking around, seeing, of course, nothing. Curiously, the boy’s gaze flicked sideways, *almost* landed straight on him, then continued around to the thugs.

Interesting.

“I’m... I’m not afraid of you.”

He was, though, and the Force burned brightly with it, the child transmitting so clearly through the Force that it almost blinded him - so much potential, and Vader couldn’t rightly understand how the boy managed to not have been noticed, or picked up by any of the stray Jedi that might still be around.

The thugs laughed, clearly not impressed. One of them raised their blaster, clearly not to shoot the boy, more likely to slam it

into his temple, but Vader stepped forward and reached out in that moment, and didn't rightly know why. He should kill them all and be done with it. What did it *matter* if the child got hit with the blaster?

"Do you have no better things to do than harassing *children*?" Not that he cared, really. There was still something rather gratifying in the way they all whipped around - except for the Weequay hanging in the air, not *quite* being strangled - and he glanced down, fingers twitching as those wide, pale (blue?) eyes stared up at him.

"No one steals from Jabba," one of the other ones snarled, but his eyes flicked nervously to the thug still hanging in the air, still not *quite* being strangled.

"Where are your parents?" he asked, ignoring the thug's reply and looking down at the child. It didn't matter where his guardians were, the boy would die anyway - though he'd need to make sure there was no Jedi close that would have been, or intended to, train him...

The boy hesitated, shifting on his feet. The Force practically screamed the child's yearning, the hesitation coming from... where?

"My mother's dead," he said finally, frowning down at the sand, "my father..."

Another pause, more hesitation coloured by that yearning, and Vader snarled, impatient. He didn't have *time* for this!

"Who were your parents? Is anyone training you?"

"... Uncle Owen's teaching me how to use a rifle," the boy said after a moment of confused staring. Clearly he didn't have a clue what Vader meant with 'training', which *might* mean there was no Jedi waiting here. Disappointed rage almost made him strangle the thug he kept suspended in pure reaction. And perhaps the boy picked up on his lack of patience, because he drew in a sharp breath.

"My father's *dead*. He was a navigator on a spice freighter," the boy said, sullen at having to *admit* it, then shrugged, "don't see

how it matters... I don't know my mother's name. But my father was Anakin Skywalker."

Crack.

The child flinched at the sound of the thug's neck breaking, but didn't give more than a glance up at the body now hanging limp in Vader's grip, right before he threw it at the remaining thugs, who scrambled away and back up into the speeder. He didn't care.

He needed to say something. He wasn't sure *what* however, because all he could suddenly think of was... her... proclaiming that she thought it was a boy.

The way she'd said she was pregnant.

Asking about the baby, if it would be fine.

None of those words that he needed at the moment.

"What is your name?" He was surprised to hear himself speak, and while they were now in darkness after Jabba's thugs had sped away, he could still see the boy perfectly well, if with that constant red tint. The boy... child, baby, how old *was* he even? Seven? No, it'd be eight - squinted up at him, body tense with wariness.

"... Luke Skywalker."

He didn't need to know more. Didn't need *confirmation* - he stormed forward, swept the boy up in his arms. To make sure he didn't run away, or lag behind; he'd only fall if he was to try and keep up with *him*, and he didn't have time to *slow down*.

"Let go! *Put me down!*"

Fear almost buckled his knees and he sucked in a weak, startled breath, out of tune from the respirator, shook his head.

"Where do you live?" Strange, to actually try to speak *softly*, a task made difficult by the shimmering anger in the background, around him. The child - Luke - stared at him, bit his lip.

"... Outside Anchorhead, west of Tosche Station," he said quietly, one hand fisting in the cloak, the other resting on the durasteel armour covering his chest.

Turning his head in that direction, Vader frowned. He was pretty sure he knew who Luke - *his son* - lived with, and he wasn't

sure what he thought about that. How? Why? *Who?*

It seems in your anger... you killed her.

Someone was lying.

He'd find out *who*, and then... Then... Luke was staring at him, his anxiety sharp through the Force, and Vader frowned and looked away. He'd need somewhere to *keep* the child. Faintly, bringing stirrings of an old giddy fear that had come in response to finding out he'd be a father, he realised he didn't know how to raise a child.

But her son needed him.

It did not occur to the dark lord of the Sith that not once had he thought of the child in his arms in terms of potential *power*.



Chapter 7:

In Which Negotiations Are Interrupted



RotJ AU of the negotiation attempt with Jabba in the throne room!

He'd never put a foot in Jabba's palace before, but it, like Tatooine, was familiar in the same way; dry and dusty, sharp with fear and the need for survival. Above that, Jabba himself.

Who, of course, wasn't affected by any attempts to Mind Trick him, but Luke hadn't exactly expected him to be. Darkness clung around the room, and it was, thanks to clever architecture and hidden air coolers, not just pleasantly cool in the ill-lit throne room, but actually *cold*. Ignoring it, he threw his hood off and stepped forward.

"You will bring Captain Solo and the Wookie to me." Technically he could've spoken Huttese, but why give the Hutt that? Jabba started to laugh, and he hadn't really expected anything less. Then Jabba stopped laughing, gaze lifting beyond Luke to something behind him, and Leia's eyes were huge and Luke suddenly had a very, very bad feeling about this.

"No, he won't," Vader rumbled as he walked down the steps into the throne room itself, larger than the shadows and colder the cool air and *how could he have missed him?* Where had he come from? *When?* The Force sung bright around him, like it *always* did on Tatooine, he realised now.

Swallowing anything with that light that wasn't right next to you.

Luke met Leia's gaze when the gloved hand fell on his shoulder and not a single idea came to him.

"You will bring them to *me*. And release the Princess."

Whatever he'd expected to hear, that wasn't it. Glancing up, all he could see - of course - was the implacable and sharp-featured mask, telling nothing.

*Father? What are you **doing**?* He'd deliberated on using *that* word, but the way the hand tightened with a jerk before it relaxed again made it worth it. Even if it made his shoulder ache.

"You aren't here on your master's command this time, Lord Vader," Jabba chuckled, but underneath that was an edge, a warning. Luke flexed his hands and glanced around the room, caught Lando's gaze. He looked stunned, too, but he twitched his head in a tiny nod.

*Collecting my **son**. And since you would only be difficult if your friends were left here, we are leaving **with** them.*

Maybe that was all there was to it, but even that... wasn't something he'd really expected. Something twisted faintly, unsettled, at the way Vader had said 'my son'. Oh, it wasn't like he didn't want to hear it - and hadn't that been difficult to come to terms with? - but... well.

"I do not need to be, Jabba. Bring them here."

'Or else' hovered in the air around them, a threatening storm that made Luke's teeth ache - no that was the sandstorm that would probably hit in a few hours at the most. It was like charged electricity just underneath his skin, making the Force dance in agitated twitches. And Luke realised that *that* was where his feelings always had come from when it came to predicting sandstorms...

He shook his head and refocused, just in time for Jabba to bellop and the bounty hunters and guards all around them to yank up their blasters. Luke twisted away from the hand on his shoulder and ripped a blaster right out of one of the thugs' hands and ducked - felt his right hand strain and pull him back against Vader just as the hum of a lightsaber sung up.

He glanced down even as he dodged shots and fired with his stolen blaster, stumbling a little when he moved the wrong way. Incredulity slammed through him like he'd actually not avoid-

ed the lasers aimed for him when he saw what was holding him back.

“Did you just *handcuff us together?!* ” Stars, he couldn’t believe this! In the middle of a *fight*, too!

Luke huffed and ducked, but moved *with* the large frame as it turned, this time, instead of almost being yanked off his feet. He ended up facing the throne, and despite his preoccupation with the lasers flying around the room, a small, darkly pleased thrill went through him at the sight of Jabba, dead.

Leia was behind Jabba, protected from the lasers by his bulk and strangling Bib Fortuna with the chain that hung from her collar. Luke was pretty sure the Twi’lek probably had tried to grab her for protection. Well, he was regretting *that*, now.

It will keep you where you should be, and ensure you don’t wander off before we’re finished here.

Stars. That was the word in his head but he muttered something far fouler in Huttese as he ducked and fired again, remembering suddenly what Leia had said about Vader deflecting Han’s shots with his bare hands on Bespin when he caught the blade flashing out of the corner of his vision. Artoo had his lightsaber, and right now he regretted that decision, but if Vader hadn’t suddenly decided to come in here he’d have ended up with his lightsaber exactly when he was supposed to!

*You couldn’t have **waited**?* Luke snapped across the bond before he made an effort to breathe out and let the frustration out with it, ignoring the sharp tilt of his father’s helm down towards him. The image of a just as sharply raised eyebrow that popped up in his head was somewhat harder to ignore, but he managed.

Somehow.

Somehow, they also emptied the throne room with no one actually hurt, Lando staggering out of the alcove he’d wedged himself in. Luke was somewhat worried that Vader would do something unfortunate to Threepio if he didn’t stop fretting like that, and Leia was glaring daggers even while awkwardly holding the trailing end of her chain.

“Release him, Vader.”

“Leia...” Luke winced a little when she levied her stare at him, because it wasn’t like he’d rather have his father do exactly what she wanted Vader to do, but he wasn’t sure demanding that at the moment was the best course of action.

Not that he knew what the best course of action *was*, at the moment. His brain was still empty.

Vader simply stared for a few silent moments and barely twitched his helmet as Lando came up beside Leia, dropping a filthy but still welcome length of cloth he’d pulled from somewhere in the deserted throne room around her shoulders.

He then turned around, though he raised his hand in the same moment, and with a soft, metal-on-metal noise, Leia’s chain and collar unlocked and fell to the floor. Leia stared, startled. Luke could see a tremble flutter through her and he reached out - only to get yanked back nearly clear off his feet as Vader stalked off.

Father!

“If you wish Captain Solo and the Wookiee to be able to follow you out of here, do not dawdle,” Vader rumbled as he stormed off, and Luke had to turn around and half-run along if he didn’t want to get yanked off his feet again. Lando and Leia caught up, and she reached out to touch his shoulder, dark eyes worried. He managed a small smile for her.

Threepio, behind them, cried for them to wait as he shuffled along as fast as he was capable of, and Lando called for him to *hurry up*.

We’re getting Artoo before we leave. Luke said, and he didn’t care if Artoo wasn’t coming with *them*, he wasn’t leaving him here! His father didn’t pause or slow his ground-eating strides, but he inclined his helmet just a shade. That, Luke supposed, would have to do.



Chapter 8: In Which Leaving For Dagobah Doesn't Go As Planned



Another early ESB AU, right after the battle of Hoth is lost.

“I see them, I see them!” Luke cried and swung his X-wing in a sharp turn, following the curve of Hoth away from the giant shadow of the *Executor* and the swarm of TIEs heading for him. Artoo shrieked something, but he didn't really have the time to spare to check.

He'd thought the fleet had *left*!

He'd been among the last left to leave the planet (of those who'd been able to), and the Imperial fleet had been breaking up to chase down the last of the fleeing Rebel transports before they returned to pick up their forces on the ground.

Luke had felt secure in the knowledge that no one would really bother with a single X-wing leaving this late in the game.

Apparently he'd been wrong.

Throwing his fighter in a corkscrew to avoid the hail of lasers, Luke scowled, swung away and glanced to the datascreen.

“How long until we can jump, Artoo?” The response was anything but *encouraging*, even as he shattered two TIEs while pulling up and away from the others, and, noting, out of the corner of his vision and half-obscured by the edge of his visor, another TIE coming up.

Not one of the regular ones, rather a curved-wing TIE Advanced, and Luke's gut flopped uneasily.

“I have a bad feeling about this...” Yanking on his controls to avoid another spatter of coordinated laser fire, Luke pulled down into a dive, then up again, the *Executor* in the upper right of his

view turning upside down as he did the same with his X-wing.

He turned a hard right, shot one of the TIEs in his way into dust and flew through the explosion, and only a sharp Force warning made him pull *left* right after, barely avoiding the TIE Advanced as it screamed past him, cutting off his intended path.

“What is your *problem*?! No, not you, Artoo,” Luke muttered at the inquiring twitters and the strings of text on the readout.

He couldn’t believe this.

Luke groaned loudly as he pulled a tight spin, aiming for a gap - which he had to yank away from at the last moment. It didn’t matter *what* he did, that TIE Advanced seemed to just *be there* every time he pulled his X-wing in a new direction, and it was becoming harder and harder to thin out the regular TIEs with that *blasted* bit of sarlacc fodder always in the way.

The navicomputer’s quiet noise through the cockpit almost made him jump, and he scattered an unintentional spray of laser fire in front of him, clipping a TIE but not doing more than inconveniencing it.

“*Finally*. Let’s see what you think of *this*---” With a grin, Luke pulled the lever to take him into lightspeed, but *right* before it should have happened the whole X-wing shuddered, screamed and strained against an invisible force. “What...” Looking around, because this wasn’t what he’d expect of his *X-wing* (the *Falcon*, yes, but not his fighter), Luke felt his stomach fall out of the bottom.

“Oh no...”

The *Executor* loomed large in front of his cockpit.

He hadn’t even noticed that he’d been herded so close to it... And, Luke realised now as he grimly, reluctantly, shut down the engines, he *had* been herded. The TIE Advanced soared alongside, just out of reach of the tractorbeam, while the other TIEs separated and flew back to their own hangars.

Staring at the seemingly mocking escort of the TIE Advanced, Luke sunk down in his seat a little. He was pretty sure he knew who that was, and why *now*? Right before he was to actually go

find someone who could properly train him!

The giant ship slowly drew closer, and while it wasn't as large as the Death Star had been, nineteen thousand meters of sleek, arrow-shaped durasteel was still an unsettling thing to be inexorably pulled towards. Staring at the hangar he was apparently to be put in, Luke undid the clasp to the helmet and pulled it off so he could rub his face.

"Great. Just *great*."

Three years of avoidance, near-misses and near-catches, and *now* this happened? He hoped he'd be able to get away... Unless Vader's plan was to execute him as soon as he'd gotten him out of the ship. But then he could just as well have had the *Executor* fire on him when he was caught in the tractorbeam, and anyway, the bounty he knew about implied very loudly the dark lord wanted him alive.

But *why*?

That was one question he still didn't know an answer to, but, Luke thought as he stared at the polished white and gray swathe of durasteel around him as his X-wing was set down in the hangar, he might actually get to find out soon.

He'd rather not find out, as it happened.

He'd have preferred to *never* find out anything beyond the jokes thrown around in his squadron, or Han's teasing... The TIE Advanced had now landed in the hangar as well, and what came out of it was exactly what Luke had expected and feared; Darth Vader.

He didn't pay much attention to the frankly worrying amount of stormtroopers that filed in, rather followed Vader's progress from his TIE over the polished hangar floor to where he came to stand slightly off to the left of the X-wing's nose, staring up at---

Luke looked away, felt a shiver run through him.

It'd been a while since they'd been this close, and while he was pretty sure (no, he *knew*) that he still couldn't take the dark lord in a fight, that he *still* couldn't avenge either his father or Ben, it was all the more frustrating for that.

The moment stretched, and then Vader made a sharp gesture with one hand and the cockpit suddenly popped open. Luke jerked but remained in his seat, throwing a scowl down at the assembled Imperials.

“Either come down willingly or I pull you out, Skywalker.”

Grimacing at that *delightful* ultimatum, Luke sighed and unstrapped himself slowly, wondering if he'd had to jump down or - a moment later a tech pushed up a ladder to the X-wing, and there really wasn't any reason to stall any longer. He still took his time climbing down, and it wasn't *all* because he didn't want to take that last step and end down on the hangar floor.

His whole body still rather ached from the recently healed run-in with the Wampa and spending a night out in Hoth's vicious weather, more than he'd like to admit. He hadn't said anything before, since they'd needed every single pilot and man in the attack on the base, and he *had* been cleared.

Then his boots met polished durasteel and he turned around, hearing a quiet snap and feeling a tug at his belt.

“Hey!” He *almost* grabbed the lightsaber before it flew out of his reach, fingers brushing against the end of the hilt, but then it smacked into Vader's hand and the black glove closed tightly around the hilt of the weapon.

“Give that *back*.” It was an utterly ridiculous demand to make, but he still made it, glowering up at Vader and suddenly feeling like they were back on Cymoon, in that very first confrontation... He shook the sensation away.

“Are you going to cooperate, or should I have you stunned?” Vader finally said as the silence stretched into nearly a full minute. Gritting his teeth, Luke crossed his arms.

“Are you going to hurt Artoo?”

He could swear the dark lord almost seemed *startled* as he stared down at him and then up at the droid, still nestled in the astromech socket, and Artoo let out a defiant whistle as the attention fell on him.

“He will be... left alone. If he behaves.”

Another nearly mocking trill of defiance, and Luke bit his lip.

“Don’t make any trouble unless they try to tamper with you or wipe your memories, Artoo,” he said and then sighed and stepped a little closer, “I’m coming.” Mostly because he couldn’t see any other possibility at the moment, *and* being stunned wasn’t very pleasant.

The walk through the *Executor*, following behind Vader, was long.

And didn’t, surprisingly - *strangely* - enough, end in a cell.



Chapter 9: In Which Artoo Is a Moment Too Late I



Hello naughty children it's more ESB AU time. Of the near requisite "the Falcon doesn't get away" sort. This one will have a companion one-shot from Vader's POV because it was necessary this time.

The *Falcon* shuddered, engines screaming, and it was all too familiar. The difference was that it was a giant capital ship that had caught the *Falcon* this time, not a giant battle station. Loud, shrieking hoots came from somewhere deeper in the ship, and Luke slumped back in the seat, closing his eyes.

It was over.

Soon, my son.

Father...

The word bounced around like a drunken Corellian in his mind, unvoiced through whatever mental link had suddenly appeared between him and Vader; that bond was doing just as much as the insistence from the Force of convincing him of the truth. Leia turned off the engines, squeezed his shoulder, then ran out of the cockpit.

Luke wanted to call her back, wanted to apologise, wanted to cling to her again, wanted--- He curled up in the seat, pulling his knees up and his head down to rest on them, pulse thundering in his ears, muffling everything else. The cockpit didn't seem quite real anymore, and he was shivering as if he was out in the cold on Hoth again.

Shock.

He knew that, but that word didn't seem quite real *either*.

There was the tell-tale shudder of the ship passing through the

hangar's magnetic field, and if he made any noise (a tiny, strangled gasp that didn't quite turn into a moan), his ears were far too stuffed with cold, frozen snow to register it. He was hot and cold at the same time, though it was distant. All of it was, except for the numb burn where he didn't have a hand anymore.

It throbbed, despite that it didn't exist, and it confused him.

In the Force, there was nothing there; had never been anything there (yes there had). His right arm ending in a stump was obvious and unquestioned. His body and mind didn't agree with the Force. Much as they didn't agree with the thundering echo that would probably ring forever in his ears and in Cloud City's reactor shaft.

Father... why? He hadn't intended to ask, not into the pulsating, two-way connection that was like a rope, the lifeline he didn't want, bright in the Force against the dullness of everything else.

The response didn't come in words, but rather in a dark caress, cold like Hoth's ice-encrusted wind and yet... somehow warm, brushing against his mind with strange sort of care.

Artoo came into the cockpit, beeped at him, and then rolled around to face the doorway. Would, undoubtedly, have looked as tense and grim-faced as any seasoned and battle-hardened bodyguard had he been organic. It would've made Luke smile if he could have at the moment. But he also knew he couldn't let Artoo get *fried*.

"... Artoo, don't," Luke muttered, wondering if the astromech had even heard him since he hadn't been able to make himself shift out of his awkwardly curled up position, merely tried to reach out with his hand (his left hand, the only one he had left) to try and make Artoo stand down. Artoo hooted sharply and stayed right where he was.

A muffled, sparking explosion rattled through the ship and Luke squeezed his eyes shut.

Han would be upset about the damage to the boarding ramp mechanism.

He expected the next noises, after the thunder of armoured boots, to be blaster fire. But the only thing that could be heard (except Chewie roaring a challenge and Lando yelling at Leia to get back) was the static hum of stun shots. Several of them. Was that good? It probably wasn't, but he couldn't even tell any more. Not being dead was...

Was *supposed* to be a good thing, but he *felt* dead despite definitely being alive; felt hollow and numb and on fire, and the hangar outside was drenched in darkness. Except it wasn't, because the light outside the *Falcon's* cockpit seemed nearly blindingly bright, but it could just as well *have* been dark.

His father was standing out there.

Vader.

The dark lord of the Sith.

Who, supposedly, undeniably, *impossibly*, was his father.

The next strangled not-quite sob that escaped was drowned out by Artoo's shriek and he really hoped they hadn't shot the little droid so that he couldn't be repaired.

There were voices, but they didn't make sense; the muffled, slightly tinny quality of the commander's voice - Luke was pretty sure he was a commander by that shoulder patch - bled into the noise taking up space in his ears. He stared up at the white and black helmet, thinking it was both alike and very much unlike, Vader's mask. Another faint, tinny burst of noise, but Luke just stared, couldn't make the words out.

The commander pulled at him - surprisingly gently - and caught him when his legs didn't quite hold for the first step. He looked around the cockpit as they left, but they'd already removed Artoo. And Leia, Chewie and Lando too. Nothing seemed quite real.

Not even when he stepped out of the *Falcon's* softer lighting into the harsh brightness of the *Executor's* hangar and walked until they had suddenly stopped and his vision went dark - no. There were little lights blinking in that darkness.

That meant it was Vader.

Father.

The word bounced again, and Luke slowly looked up, flinching when he met the blank, reflective visor. Not so much for the blank stare - there was a face beneath that, a human one; *Anakin Skywalker's* face, because otherwise Darth Vader couldn't be his father - but because a hand, as careful as the earlier mental brush, grasped his chin.

"Leave them *alone*." Luke had no idea how he said that, or even *if* he'd said it. He'd felt his mouth move, heard something that was, supposedly, words, but they didn't make sense to him. The arm the stormtrooper commander still had around him felt soft despite the armour.

Distant.

His hand - no, the lack of it - throbbed.

"If you behave."

If you can do that, son, they will be left alone.

That second set of noise, which wasn't noise at all, he understood better. Heard *all too well*, because compared to his ears, the inside of his mind wasn't fogged the same way (yes it was, but not *that* way). Heard the words, quiet, careful. The voice, softer, but no less authoritative than the one Vader used to speak with out loud.

He needed to *say* something, but even after swallowing, licking his lips and closing his eyes, all he managed was to droop in the commander's grip and tilt his head just slightly into that gentle durasteel grip on his chin.

He shouldn't be leaning into Vader at all, but Vader was his father - was demanding things he didn't want to, couldn't, give - so who was he supposed to be able to lean against if not him?

But that was the thing, wasn't it?

He *couldn't*.

But when the grip on his chin disappeared Luke was mortified to hear another one of those tiny, stupid noises escape, but the hand was soon back, this time on his arm, and the commander stepped away.

He was soon sitting down and then, maybe, lying down. He wasn't sure. He closed his eyes and tried not to think about the impossibility that was the sense of security that emanated from the dark shape that walked alongside the stretcher.

It shouldn't feel safe.

His father *wasn't* safe.

There was, for a brief moment, black-gloved fingers brushing limp hair out of his face.



Chapter 10:

In Which Artoo Is a Moment Too Late II



Vader's POV for the "Falcon doesn't get away" AU in the previous chapter.

The Princess, the Wookiee, and Calrissian were hustled out of the hangar, still stunned, but Darth Vader wasn't paying attention to them, nor the droids, shut down, that he'd ordered put in his quarters. What he was looking for were the shadows moving inside the cockpit, and, as they disappeared from sight he followed the unseen progress through watching Luke's Force signature.

Not that that was necessary, truly; there wasn't enough of a distance between the cockpit and the boarding ramp for any difference to be registered, but watching the fitfully flickering brightness, like a sun caught in the spasms of a surge of sunspots, reassured him he had, finally, irrevocably, *won*.

Balling one hand into a fist, the other resting on his belt, Vader briefly considered the sour, empty feeling of having *lost* when Luke let go of the gantry.

The rejection had stung, burrowed deeply in, and he hadn't caught the child even when he could have; instead he'd let him fall. Storming back to his shuttle afterwards, he'd cursed himself for a fool; of course his son had rejected both the offer and the truth in that situation. But that could be rectified. He'd just need a little more time to bring Luke around.

Something which he'd been sure wouldn't be happening.

And then it did.

He now had the time he needed, his Master being around or not.

The commander he'd sent in with the group subduing the Princess and her companions came walking down the ramp, arm around Luke's waist to hold him up and holding his left arm where it hung limply over the armoured shoulders. He stared as they slowly came closer, cataloguing the injuries Luke had sustained and was struck by how the boy's huge, glassy eyes seemed to take up half his face and by the bruising around his left eye that only accentuated the paleness of his skin.

There was a lingering desert tan stubbornly clinging to Luke, but that only left the paleness starker than it would, perhaps, otherwise be, and as the commander came to a stop in front of him and Luke slowly, dully, raised his head to look up at him, only one thought stood out in his mind; the child looked young.

How could he ever be twenty two?

Had *he* ever looked that young?

He doubted it.

Vader was grasping Luke's chin to keep his head tilted up before he had quite thought about it, and he suddenly barely dared to touch - the damage he'd already inflicted, while necessary and, thanks to Luke being a Skywalker, probably unavoidable, was already far too much.

"Leave them *alone*." The demand was surprisingly forceful despite the whispery rasp it was uttered in, and briefly Luke's unstable Force presence collected itself into a sharp, purposeful knife... which collapsed into wounded unevenness right after. Vader smiled faintly, a tiny, dry twist of his lips that didn't pull on his skin.

Of course he'd worry about his friends first.

Which was why they were alive. For now.

"If you behave," he said calmly, but by the way Luke stared up at him, eyes still wide, nearly unseeing, he wasn't sure the boy was actually properly registering the words. The medic and a stretcher would be here soon (should have been here when the *Falcon* was pulled in). In the meantime he reached out and added a few more words in a method Luke would inescapably be

able to still understand, even through the shock.

If you can do that, my son, they will be left alone.

Luke stared up at him for long enough that if he didn't have other ways of telling these things, he'd have assumed Luke had neither heard nor understood him. It was still surprising to feel the shifting weight of Luke's head in his grasp as he relaxed into the touch - though the way he drooped in the commander's grasp, Vader was *rather* sure the child hadn't intended this reaction at *all*.

Nonetheless it burned through his hand and down into the pit of his stomach and radiated outwards in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on.

He didn't need to, however, because the medic and the stretcher was here, so he let go and stepped away - and froze at the sound that escaped his son, a not-quite wounded sob that followed the same path the reaction to Luke relaxing into his grip had done. He stepped back in as the commander let go, and steered Luke onto the stretcher.

It was simply practical he do it, that was all.

As they walked through the ship to get to the medical bay, however, he stayed both far closer and for far longer than he'd planned. He had other business to attend to, but the small form on the stretcher, shivering even under a thermal blanket to ward off the chill of the shock, held him tied as firmly as if they'd been cuffed together.

He should leave.

But he also remembered Padmé's hands in his hair, on his neck, after he'd lost his hand, and the thick, limp fringe that had fallen into Luke's eyes looked like it would be quite... annoying.

He reached out and, carefully, brushed it out of the child's face.



Chapter 11:

In Which Something Impossible Happens



An early ESB AU I lost on Tumblr and found again, so this one isn't really new.

The corridors trembled around him and snow fell from the ceiling and walls with each thudding step of a walker or explosion above. His prey was still within the base, he knew - neither ground-based intelligence nor any captain on board the Star Destroyers above had reported sighting the (in)famous shape of the *Millennium Falcon* attempting to flee.

If he could not capture his son *directly*, he would get the boy's friends instead and use *them* to lure him close...

Strides faltering as something pulled at his attention, tugging him down another corridor rather than towards the main snub fighter hangar, Vader stopped, the snowtroopers behind him coming to a halt as well.

Cocking his head, he narrowed his eyes. Sometimes the issue with finding Luke even when they were relatively close was that his light spilled out far further around him, like a sun's helio-pause, which made it hard to pinpoint his exact location.

But...

"Commander."

"Lord Vader." The man stepped forward to his side and Vader pointed down the corridor in the direction they were going.

"Proceed towards the hangar and stop the *Millennium Falcon* at all costs. I have other matters to attend to." Turning on his heels, he stalked down the corridor the Force was tugging him in, reining in the twitching flutters deep in his stomach. Sith Lords were not *anxious*. Even less so for a situation that might not even

happen.

Luke had, so far, had exceptional luck in avoiding him, and that might be exactly what would happen this time as well.

But, at least, if he failed to snare his son, there was still the possibility of catching the *Millennium Falcon* and its crew and passengers; the freighter's frequent mechanical troubles would probably work in his favour. Still, he didn't turn back around and go with the commander, who was reasonably capable at his job. No, he stormed down his chosen corridor and felt the Force thrum with bright anticipation.

"Calm down Artoo, we're going, we're going," Luke said, checking things once more, but Artoo had already run preflight procedures, eager to be off. Luke was as well, because there was a creeping, heavy darkness in the air, shadowing the snow. Not literally, of course, but he was pretty sure it meant nothing good.

The only times he felt *that* was when Vader was nearby, from the few run-ins they'd had...

Shaking his head, he took a breath and secured his helmet and then the straps. A check out the canopy around him revealed the others had left, and the relief drove some of the cold, not all of it natural, away. Only him left, good.

All right, time to stop gathering sand and go.

"Ready, Artoo?" He chuckled at the nervous-eager twittering in response and ignored his fingers twitching towards the navi-computer. Not yet. He'd reprogram the course after they were up in the air, free of the scattering blockade of Imperial ships. He eased the X-wing up in the air and shot away—

Or would have, if the X-wing hadn't suddenly started to shake.

"Artoo! Do you know what's wrong?" Frantically flipping switches, Artoo's shrieks translated into 'issues unknown'. Which Luke could tell himself, because the engine was going full burn, there were no hiccups in power supply, repulsors were working. They'd *clearly* not been shot with an ion cannon, they weren't in

hyperspace in reach of any Interdictor to yank them out of it, so what was even *doing this*..?

Yanking at his controls once more, Luke looked around him, out the cockpit and there was *nothing*---

Nothing but a blotch of black barely in view behind him, down on the ground. Twisting around in his seat and trying to see over or under the wings, Luke stared.

Felt his stomach drop and his mouth dry up.

Darth Vader was standing in the snow, one arm stretched out, helmet tilted up towards him, and... he couldn't see how it was even *possible* for him to be doing this, even *with* the Force, but there was no other explanation.

"That's... that's *impossible*," Luke whispered, words coming out strangled as he tried to get them out past the desert in his throat, and then he slammed himself back against the seat again.

"Reroute *all* power to the engines!"

This wasn't possible.

It just *couldn't* be possible, and they'd get out of this, because no way could you stop a ship like this with the Force---

The engines sputtered, coughed, redlined. It was like being caught in a tractor beam.

They'd explode if he didn't turn them off.

Hand shaking, Luke ignored Artoo's electronic yelling at him and powered down the X-wing, leaving it on repulsors only. The second the engines stopped fighting against the force - and Force - pulling the snub fighter, the X-wing descended, and Luke's gasp joined with Artoo's shriek.

There was barely a thump as they were set down on the ground, though, and after a moment of stunned staring, Luke realised that while he didn't have engines anymore, he still had the X-wing's full complement of weapons! Smiling grimly, he reached out and then paused. If Vader could stop his ship from leaving, he'd keep it from turning around to fire at him with the cannons.

Muttering a curse, Luke weighed his next options as the cano-

py opened up.

Looking down, Luke sunk down in his seat a little. Vader was no longer alone, and there was two squadrons of snowtroopers, all of them pointing blasters up at him. And then there was Vader, standing there at the head of the group, hands on his hips.

“You do not want me to come up there and get you, Skywalker.”

He couldn’t quite hold back the twitch that snapped through him at that, but then he let out a sigh and grimaced. No, he probably didn’t. Fingering his lightsaber, Luke eyed the group, then Vader himself. Let out another sigh and unbuckled himself, ignoring Artoo’s protests.

“It’ll be okay, Artoo.” Which was definitely not true, Luke was pretty sure, but what else could he do?

He threw another look down at the crowd gathered on the snow, took off his helmet, and jumped down. His feet had barely touched the snow before his lightsaber snapped off his belt and went flying, and he almost stumbled trying to reach and catch it. A black-gloved hand around his arm steadied him, and Luke reared back.

It didn’t let go.

“Let. Go.” Glowering up at the towering dark lord, who seemed supremely unconcerned with the tightness of his voice, Luke yanked at his arm, but Vader still didn’t let go.

“I suggest you get used to this state of affairs, young one.” And then he turned around and practically dragged Luke after him. “Bring the droid, Commander. And be careful. He can be somewhat... inventive.”

Looking up at Vader at that comment, Luke was *almost* distracted from his confusion, because that sounded like Vader was familiar with Artoo, but that was *ridiculous*, right?

And, stumbling after Vader’s ground-eating strides, Luke tried to figure out why Vader’s earlier comment had brought to mind Uncle Owen towing him around through Anchorhead when he was nine, after he’d annoyed him and tried to run off.

It was a completely ridiculous comparison, after all!



Chapter 12:

In Which Boba Fett Succeeds



AU of #6 of the comics. Necessary, of course.

It was hard to tell, but by the noise it sounded like he had struck a good enough blow to not just stop the attack, but send the man sprawling. Luke felt a momentary burst of triumph, and couldn't help the next few words.

"Your armour's noisy." He might not be able to see at the moment, but he still had ears. Ears and hearing that was slightly aided by the Force, in what little ways he could control it, and he felt ready for whatever would come next.

"So's your *mouth*," his unseen assailant growled, sounding pretty *done* with the situation already, and Luke would, once again, have felt pretty smug about it - better that than worry if he was going to be able to defeat whoever this was and get away - except something roared loudly in the confined space, smoke and burning fuel sharp in his nose and he was *too slow*.

That very noisy armour slammed with all the weight of a tall, rocket pack-propelled man of some species right into him, and Luke choked on the breath that was driven out of him. They flew back and he crashed into the wall, head bouncing painfully off the pourstone. It made his non-existent vision spark, and then there was an iron grip around his wrist, twisting his lightsaber out of his hand.

"No!" Frustration bloomed up and he could feel the intent of the action he *could* take, the Force rising with his anger (he shouldn't use it like this). A hand suddenly got shoved in his face and his head was shoved back, the crack of his skull one again meeting the pourstone loud, and whatever he'd had the possibil-

ity to do with the Force evaporated as stars sang in his head.

The man - bounty hunter, probably? - stepped back, armour shifting subtly as he leaned down and probably picked up Luke's lightsaber while Luke slumped to his knees, trying to not fall down facefirst on the floor.

There was a warning whispering like cold night wind over his skin, but Luke barely had the chance to try and shift aside as the bounty hunter stepped close. Focusing past the pain and the wavering darkness that was his slowly adjusting vision, Luke yanked a hand up and slapped the arm he'd known was coming aside.

"You *really* don't---" Luke sucked in a sharp breath when his arm was caught and yanked wide again, unable to avoid it this time, and then he was pulled forward and there was a momentary razor bite at his neck. Slapping a clumsy hand over the area, he smeared the tiny drop of blood that welled up from the puncture wound the needle had left behind, and he looked up, eyes wide.

"The only thing I really don't feel like doing, brat, is being *careful*. Luckily for you I'm supposed to be," the bounty hunter grunted, seemingly replying against his own will as he pulled at Luke's arms and cuffed him. Returning sight gave an unfocused view of possibly-green Mandalorian armour.

"Up."

Gritting his teeth, Luke tried to make himself heavy, tried to grasp the Force that he could feel, bright, close, *right there*, so he could shove the man again, but his head swam when he was yanked upright. His pounding head combined with his suddenly leaden limbs and the molasses of his thoughts conspired against him, and he almost pitched over when they passed Artoo.

Artoo.

He couldn't just...

"Who---" There'd been more words, but his brain scrambled them and darkness pulled at him.

The thump of the body hitting the polished durasteel floor was loud, and it took some effort to remain staring out at the starscape outside the viewport.

“He had an astromech.”

“Leave it.” Turning around after another moment, Vader stared down at the boneless heap of untrained Force-sensitive boy that was sprawled on the floor.

The sandy, hooded robe spilled around him, making him seem smaller than he was.

Not that the young man was, by any stretch of the imagination, particularly *imposing*. It was the same one, however. The one from the Death Star trench, the one from the factory moon. Obi-Wan’s paradoxically untrained apprentice. Now, it was only a question of how to proceed...

One more question remained, however, and while he could just get it out of the boy later, he *had* paid Fett for this.

“His name?”

He didn’t feel like playing *games* with the young man when he woke up, as he was likely to resist answering any questions. And even if he would undoubtedly need to break him to reshape him into something more useful, his time would be better spent focusing said effort on more vital things than the *name*.

“Skywalker,” there was a hint of a sneer in Fett’s otherwise flat voice, “Luke Skywalker.”

If he wasn’t suddenly bolted to the floor, Vader had no idea what he’d have done.

Skywalker.

That single word ripped through his thoughts with all the viciousness of a hungry acklay, and behind him, there was the quiet, delicate noise of meter-thick transparisteel cracking.

“We’re done here, then.” Fett left, but he could have shot into the floor for all the reaction that wrung out of Darth Vader as he stood, staring, at the slumped body of Luke Skywalker on the floor. She had chosen that name, since she’d been so sure...

Something wonderful has happened.

Another meter's length of transparisteel developed a pattern of lacy cracks.

And the baby?

He had killed her, and with her, the baby.

He hadn't known what was going to happen to the baby when he'd seen her death in his dreams. The baby... the baby, which he had thought to be a girl, but his... *she* had thought would be a boy. A boy that had pale hair and eyes, the same slight build she'd had---

He had *killed* her.

His master had *said* he'd *killed*---

The dimmed Force presence of the boy spiked sharply as he moaned and twitched, eyelids fluttering as if trying to fight the drug still holding him in its grip. With effort, he reined in his rage and flexed his hands with slow, careful precision. Then, finally, his feet unbolted from the floor.

Ignoring the ruin around him, he walked down the stairs now riddled with dents and knelt by the boy. Hesitated before he turned him over on his back, grabbed the unresisting chin and tilted his head. Felt out the curve of the nose (her nose), and the shape of the chin (his) with his thumb, and noticed a very conspicuous little spot on the child's left cheek.

Lower than... hers had been, but there all the same.

Another uncoordinated jerk as the still-unconscious boy attempted to pull away alerted him to soften his grip, and he gritted his teeth. His Master would pay. He had given him *everything*, and in return...

"You are mine," the words rolled in a quiet, nearly soft bass around the room and he crouched there for another moment, then stirred, "it will *all* be mine." He stood up with his son in his arms and walked into the next room; an untouched office. Nothing much of use, but it had a chair he could put the boy in and then lock the door as he stalked towards the comlink unit and the holonet connection.

“The Emperor. Now.”
There would be *words*.



Chapter 13:

In Which There Is No Transmitter



AU #10 of the new comics, so proceed as you wish.

If there's no transmitter, it doesn't count.

If there's no transm---

"Hnngh---" Staggering under the hit, Luke caught himself before he fell to the ground, ducking away from another slam of one of those staves *just* in time to avoid it. He wove upright, not even thinking about blocking even as he swept his lightsaber up in one, the motion surprisingly effortless - but even so, he could tell he wasn't really keeping up. There was more than one developing bruise and scrape, and every single one of them was one more that would be a detriment if he didn't get away before the actual fight.

The purple plasma of the staves glowed in the lengthening afternoon sunlight, creating a cage just as effective (maybe even more so) than one with bars of any kind.

If he couldn't figure out some way to get away, he'd be in a real gladiator arena fight before long. He wasn't going to do *that*, even less *stay* for the off-chance of getting a closer look at that collection. Not because he was afraid of whatever they'd toss at him; he'd looked death in the eye enough lately that he didn't care.

No, what set his stomach churning was something that was only tangentially connected to the fight, but still absolutely connected to the rest. To the Hutt. To what he'd said.

If there's no transmitter, it doesn't count.

Luke clung to that thought as he dodged, gritting his teeth when the tip of one of the staves cracked his left shin and the

muscle jerked. Remembered all too well Aunt Beru murmuring about his grandmother and father and podraces that had been both the bane and the freedom of at least one of them. The weight and presence of the inert cuffs on his wrists burned through his thoughts and pulled up a memory of Aunt Beru brushing his hair out of his eyes, her hand dry and soft.

"You're the freeborn son of a slave, Luke. Don't ever let them make you anything else."

Throwing himself backwards and lashing out in a completely off-kilter slash, Luke grimaced. Well, he'd failed spectacularly *there*, hadn't he? Like with *everything else---*

No, okay, not *everything*, even if it rather felt like that sometimes.

A teasing flicker of *something* almost made him misstep as he distractedly cast a glance around the arena, but it was just him and the magna guards... but up in the stands, half-hidden among the shadows of the pillars, was Grakkus and that other guy. The one who was in charge of the fights.

Blocking one slash, stepping away from a thrust and parrying another, Luke wondered what they were talking about; it was too far away for him to hear anything beyond faint, distorted echoes and the loud, angry hum of the staves and his own lightsaber.

Again, there was that tugging shadow. Like something out of the corner of his eye but none of the shadows filling the alcoves were the right ones, and Luke shifted around, trying to face the doorway he'd been led through without knowing exactly why. There were no magna guards there, and he shouldn't turn his back on the rest of the arena, but it was impossible *not to*.

A faint breeze stirred, raising dust that wasn't kicked up by his or the magna guards' feet, and on that wind came a few, startlingly clear words from the two spectators above.

"... to die with some flourish."

Rolling his eyes, Luke ducked under a stab and then, too late, realised he wouldn't be able to avoid the blunt, charged tip that was coming for his face as if in slow motion.

It brushed his cheek, slowly pressing in - and was yanked away, sparks spitting from the droid as it crumpled up. Luke *almost* got whacked by another magna guard as he stared at the literal scrapheap on the arena floor, then raised his eyes while he blocked a slash and another magna guard got its limbs torn out before it was flung aside.

No.

How could... what was he even *doing* here?

Briefly, hotly, Luke had the burning urge to leap at Vader, to finally, maybe, get a chance to avenge Ben and his father, but maybe this was the distraction he needed. The walls of the arena were tall, but he'd jumped further just earlier today... Luke didn't know if he could repeat that *intentionally*, however.

Two other magna guards were smashed together as Darth Vader slowly stalked further out onto the arena floor, masked gaze briefly sliding over Luke (briefly, but weirdly, *unsettlingly*, thorough compared with how dismissive he'd been back on that moon) before it moved up to stare at Grakkus and the Gamemaster.

"Has he, by any chance, incurred any *debts*? Destroyed property?" What was basically a hiss shouldn't be capable of rolling like threatening thunder through the arena, but that's what it *did*. Luke took another few steps backwards even while still tugged by the desire to have another go at the black-clad giant, no matter how much of a disaster the first one had been.

The warning slash of cold that whipped through him made him jump aside and lash out, faster than he'd been today, faster than he'd *ever* been, and ozone and hot metal met his nostrils as the magna guard that'd been coming at him from behind fell into two pieces, cleaved cleanly in half.

He was so surprised by this that he *almost* missed the Hutt's reply.

"Anything that wanders into Hutta Town that I take an interest to is *mine*, Lord Vader. That boy is no exception," Grakkus called, voice pitched to carry through the arena and over the stands in-

stead of getting lost and Luke scowled.

*If there's no transmitter, it **doesn't** count.*

"People don't belong to *anyone*, and *I* don't belong to *you*!" There was a lava pit in his stomach, boiling him up from the inside out. But compared to any earlier anger, he was calm as he glared up at the distant figure, knuckles turning white around the hilt of his lightsaber and *all too aware* of the cuffs.

"As the boy says, Hutt." Calm, and deadly like the lit lightsaber in his hand, Vader gestured at him with the same, and Luke didn't at all like this feeling of, apparently, vaguely, being on the same side as *Darth Vader* in this.

Whatever 'this' was.

"What would *you* know about that?" Luke hissed under his breath and watched, startled, as Vader froze momentarily and then it was like something had slapped his *brain*. Staggering, ears ringing, he missed whatever Grakkus said next, but the remaining magna guards hummed to life... and suddenly the cuffs lit up.

"No!"

Straining didn't help. Trying to pull his arms away so he could keep them apart didn't help *either*, and with an implacable humming *snap*, they pulled his wrists close. He almost lost his grip on his lightsaber, and it was just *lucky*, the magna guards seemed to be going for Vader rather than *him*, because like this he couldn't fight!

Not that he'd been able to do much of that earlier, either.

"Blast it!" Reluctantly turning the lightsaber off, Luke looked around.

Stared as Vader ripped through the magna guards like they were *nothing*, despite their numbers. Looked up as movement above drew his attention, and watched, feeling both incredulous and a slow, pleasant burn of satisfaction as Grakkus jerked, hovering in the air and then...

... Was.

Luke looked away, swallowing bile, because Grakkus wasn't

being *choked*; he was literally being ripped apart by the Force. The arena was choked by ice, now, cold and unforgiving, the red and purple plasma standing out brightly against a darkness that stood in equally bright contrast to the sunlight flooding the arena.

Edging around the knot of fighting, Luke eyed the dark arch that was the exit. Sure, he was cuffed, but if he could just---

“Gah!” Throwing himself to the ground to avoid the broken magna guard that came flying at him, Luke rolled around and got to his knees just as Vader stepped in front of him, throwing another half of a magna guard down beside him. He refused to flinch, and glared up at the dark lord. Well, if he was going to die, now, he wasn’t going to die on his *knees*.

Strangely enough, Vader let him get up to his feet while he hooked his lightsaber at his hip and called *Luke’s* lightsaber to himself where it’d fallen when he’d had to toss himself to the ground. The large, black-gloved hands traced the lightsaber slowly, but the masked gaze never left him.

“Did they inject a transmitter?” Vader snapped, his booming bass short and irritable, and Luke was, again, startled by the feeling of *dislike* he could *swear* was coming from the man.

How did he even know to *ask*?

“Well?”

Teeth rattling as he was shaken, a large hand wrapped like a durasteel vice around his left arm, Luke scowled and tried to step away, shaking his head.

“No. What do you even *care*?” Why was he even responding? Was he seriously replying as if Darth Vader would bother to reply with anything *relevant*?

And then, for... whatever number it was today, Luke was left staring, flabbergasted, when the murderer of his father and Ben answered.

“... More than you would understand, Skywalker,” Vader said, surprisingly quietly, before he continued and his voice hardened, “and what are you even doing *here*, young one? I was under the

impression your Rebel friends does not deal with Hutts or criminals of *this* sort of filth. Though I'm not *surprised*."

And then he changed his grip on Luke's arm to the back of his jacket, dragging Luke along out of the arena when he didn't move fast enough. Vader also ignored the stumbling half-kick Luke aimed at him, which led to him almost getting tangled in the cloak and he swore, Huttese slipping out easily.

Vader shook him.

"You'll have to use an interrogation droid, because I'm not telling you *anything*," Luke finally snapped in between trying to catch both his breath and feet under himself. Vader turned his helm towards him in a twitch, and Luke didn't bother to deny the slight shiver that caused, even if he couldn't see the stare itself.

"I have other ways to find out what I want to know, child."

He'd have protested those *infantile* names, except that he was far too busy being unsettled by the implication of those words; not even the threat of death or an actual interrogation was quite as unsettling as that.

Especially as Luke had the distinct feeling that whatever Vader meant, he wasn't actually talking about rebel business or, necessarily, what he was doing on Nar Shaddaa.

"What--- what do you *want*?" Luke finally hissed while they marched along the corridors of the building the arena was in, and then out on the streets outside. Vader barely glanced at him.

"You will find out soon enough."

The shiver that went down his spine was only half trepidation; the other half was a distinct sense of foreboding.



Chapter 14:

In Which Luke Comes Home Early



ANH AU; Luke arrives at the homestead a bit earlier than in canon.

When he slowed the landspeeder to a crawl and then a stop, jumping out before he could think about it and ran across the sand, Luke admitted that maybe Ben had been right. Maybe he shouldn't have gone to the homestead. But what if he could stop this---

"You! Hands up," the stormtrooper that led the small group that had come up to meet him barked, and Luke stumbled to a stop, hesitating for a moment too long and was yanked forward, the butt of a blaster rifle cracking into his shoulder.

Stop it?

How?

He wasn't going to tell them where the droids were. He wouldn't do that to the princess who needed the help, and he wouldn't do that to *Ben*; they needed to get those plans, whatever they were, to the Rebellion.

But at the same time, some sort of hope glowed dimly in the pit of his stomach as he was marched forward to the black-clad officer in charge, relieved to see Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen kneeling on the ground outside the entrance dome.

"And this is?" the officer had a slight sneer curling his mouth, but otherwise he asked surprisingly civilly; Luke still pulled a grimace from the way the officer looked him up and down.

"Leave my aunt and uncle *alone*," Luke snapped, wincing at the cuff he got to his head for that. The officer, however, didn't make any of the follow-up questions Luke had half-dreaded,

half-expected. He was staring, eyes first wide and then narrowing, at...

... his belt.

Oh. Oh no.

Luke staggered when the officer first attempted to simply yank the lightsaber off his belt, but the locking ring was too sturdy for that. The man grunted, actually took the time to unhook it, and then waved a sharp hand over Luke and the two stormtroopers at his shoulders.

“Put him with the other two, I need to contact Lord Vader.”

Swallowing down his protest as the officer left with his father's lightsaber, Luke let himself be cuffed with binders and shoved over to Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen and smiled tentatively at them both. Uncle Owen, of course, scowled, but there was a tell-tale twitch of his cuffed hands that betrayed his desire to reach out and reassure himself Luke was all right. Aunt Beru had smiled faintly at him, but her expression crumpled nearly after, and she leaned towards him as much as she dared.

“You all ri---nh!” Swallowing the cry into a groan at the *second* rifle butt smack to his head, Luke gritted his teeth and glowered at the sand.

“No talking!”

Yeah, yeah, no talking.

He felt a little better at the brief, gentle weight of Aunt Beru's shoulder against his before she straightened up again, clearly not daring - and he didn't want her hurt so that was good - to linger any longer. What were they going to do now? He hoped Ben had some other way to get quickly to Anchorhead or Mos Eisley, because it didn't look like he'd be able to provide it.

Glancing up through his eyelashes across the sand to stare at the back of the officer, the blue light from the holo of his handheld holotransceiver washed out by the bright sunlight, Luke took a little petty pleasure in the fact that he, at least (he wasn't as sure about the stormtroopers) must be massively uncomfortable in his uniform here on Tatooine and what was early after-

noon.

When the man suddenly turned around, staring right at him, Luke wondered irrationally if he'd *heard him*, but he looked over to one of the stormtroopers around them almost immediately.

"Bring the boy here!" the officer barked sharply, and Aunt Beru drew in a sharp breath when he was yanked to his feet and pulled forward.

"You leave that boy *alone*, you hear me!?" Uncle Owen snapped and Luke heard the crack of another rifle butt meeting flesh, wincing and looking over his shoulder.

"Owen!" Aunt Beru cried while Uncle Owen was on the ground, but at least he was conscious to struggle to his knees again and Luke let out the breath he'd been holding, turning his head around in time to stare up at the black clad officer as they reached him. The man in question was staring far more suspiciously at him now, still clutching his lightsaber in one hand and the holotransceiver in the other.

It felt like his heart stuttered to a stop for a crucial moment as he stared down at the blue-cast holo projected by the transceiver, because that... was Darth Vader.

Trying to interpret the tangle of emotions that flared up - fear, confusion, anger from the new revelation of what had happened to his father - Luke stared down, watching the armoured man(?) stare at him, arms crossed, and swallowed.

He thought he heard something like another brief struggle behind him, and he hoped Uncle Owen hadn't done anything to get himself hurt any more. It didn't seem worth it.

"Where did you get that lightsaber?" the rumbling voice demanded after several moments of silence, a threat hissing right underneath the words, and the tangle of emotions resolved itself into a single one; defensive anger.

"It was my *father's*!" Luke cried, *almost* adding the accusation 'and *you* killed him!', but strangled those words in time. Behind him, Aunt Beru cried for him to stop, but he didn't understand why, gritting his teeth when he heard another meaty crack. She

better not be hurt more than a bruise or two.

Darth Vader stared.

Stared, and didn't say anything, and Luke was, admittedly, relieved.

It wasn't like it was a *lie*. Saying that the lightsaber was his father's was true, but it was technically not the proper answer to the question given that it was Ben who'd given it to him. But he'd hoped that that reply would head off any need to lie. He wasn't going to tell them about Ben, who, as an actual Jedi, would be hunted down.

"Do you want them executed as rebel sympathisers and Jedi collaborators, my lord?" the officer asked where he stood behind the projection of Vader, and Luke couldn't even look away, because suddenly it was like there was a weight bearing down on him, pressing down on his head, around his shoulders and arms and legs. He couldn't have moved so much as a millimeter even if he *wanted* to.

Darth Vader, when he actually said anything, didn't answer the officer's question. Luke had the faint feeling the officer and the stormtroopers could just as well not have been there.

"What..." Vader snarled, his deep, angry basso turning into a hiss at the end and was it his imagination, or was his hands, balled into fists at his sides, *trembling*? It took another awkward moment before Vader continued, and the weight was like a dew-back had collapsed on Luke. "Is your name?"

Was that a question, or a demand?

Luke wasn't sure, but he knew that if he didn't say anything within the next few seconds, things would get *bad*.

There was still the contrary urge to say nothing and take his punishment as was due; for his father, to make sure Ben got away. But... there was also Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen to think about. So he swallowed, didn't look behind him, and twitched his shoulders in a shrug.

"Luke Skywalker."

Daytime heat suddenly turned into night-time ice, and Luke

gulped down a breath, trying to take a step back without thinking about it, and knew there was a fist coming for his head---

“Do. not. touch. him.”

The stormtrooper froze, his armoured fist a bare shade away from Luke’s mop of suns-bleached hair.

“You better not be *lying*, boy,” Vader growled, low and deadly as a hunting krayt, and Luke, regardless of the logic of it, felt a flash of hot offense lash through him.

“Why would I *lie* about it? You’re the one who---!”

“Bring him with you, Commander, and make sure he remains *unharm*ed. Bring his guardians here,” Vader said, a snarl reverberating behind those words, cutting off Luke’s angry cry, and he was left sputtering as the stormtroopers hauled him off towards the shuttle that had been landed on the other side of the living pit.

Despite that there was now an expanse of sand between him and the holotransceiver, plus that both he and the stormtroopers marching him forward had their backs to it, Luke could swear he could feel the heavy weight of Vader’s stare following him. As he was pushed inside the shuttle, he caught a glimpse of Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru standing by the transceiver with the officer and felt a stab of worry go through him.

He hoped they’d be all right.

And what had gotten Vader so worked up?

Did he want to kill him *himself* or something? Just for the crime of being the son of a Jedi Knight he’d killed? What had Anakin Skywalker supposedly done to Darth Vader to garner *that* sort of reaction? Hadn’t Vader betrayed *him*?

Luke’s brain brimmed with questions as he was pushed into a seat and forced to clumsily strap in, his hands still cuffed, and was left trying to look down the the length of the shuttle and out for any last glimpse of his aunt and uncle.

They *better* be all right.



Chapter 15:

In Which There Is a Vision



Circa mid-ESB AU, the dark side cave on Dagobah!

It took several minutes before he so much as twitched after the vision of his head inside Darth Vader's mask had faded away, and the sudden lack of noise from his lightsaber as he turned it off was startling. Blinking into the gloom left behind, Luke knew he'd failed whatever test Yoda had meant for him by sending him in here.

Sagging a little and still staring at the very empty ground as he thought the whole thing over, Luke wasn't sure what the vision meant. A warning of what he could be? Would be? Something else? Feeling very frustrated, he kicked a rock and watched it disappear into the shadows, bouncing off the cave wall to roll back into view and into a small puddle on the muddy cave floor.

"Some Jedi I'm turning out to be," Luke mumbled as he reattached the lightsaber at his belt and dragged a hand through his hair, straightening up and, despite the still-oppressive sense of cold and trepidation, managed to run through a calming exercise.

There was a distinctive squish around his boots as he turned around, deciding he better had to go face Yoda and his failure. If for no other reason than that he really didn't want to stay in this cave any longer.

Ducking around an outcropping of rock and under a veil of lacy roots dripping water, Luke worked his way back towards the opening - or in the direction he was pretty sure the opening was, anyway. Sliding sideways between an old, half-petrified tree trunk and the rock wall, Luke glanced up into the darkness

in front of him. Froze as the shadows resolved themselves into something that wasn't rock, old trees, roots or animals.

Then he scowled.

"I'm not falling for this again."

This time, he wouldn't fight.

This time, he would simply walk right through the vision, ignore it like he was *supposed to*. He wouldn't reach for any weapons, regardless of how the regulated breathing echoed in the damp cave or the lights flickering on the chest reflected in the cloth and metal. They'd done the same for his other vision and he'd already been through thi---

There was a thump as he walked right into Darth Vader and the bottom edge of the mask cut into his scalp. Luke stumbled back, confusion and a sudden lash of fear leaving him sputtering, and he didn't even yank his arm out of the dark lord's grip when the large hand closed about it.

"Y-you're *real*?" Ice flooded his veins, and not at all due to the cave's dark side energies... or even for the Sith Lord's own cold, fiery presence in the Force.

"Your training is *abysmally* lacking if you cannot tell the difference between a vision, however solid it seems, and reality, Skywalker. Are you even paying attention to the Force?" Vader's baritone reverberated strangely in the cave and Luke straightened up reflexively, raising his head. And, belatedly, yanked on his arm, but Vader's grip on it was firm.

"This cave is pretty *distracting*," he said, stepping back to force as much of a distance between them as he could, trying not to think of the lightsaber still at his hip or the vision with his own head inside Vader's helmet. The gloved hand on his arm tightened and he was yanked forward and Luke had to swallow the urge to snap at the dark lord to *stop that*.

Instead, because by now it was painfully clear how different Darth Vader's presence in the Force was against the general ill intent and seeping cold of the cave, Luke settled into as much as a ready stance as he could, flexing his hands.

“How did you even *find me*?” And was Yoda all right? Hadn’t the old Jedi Master chosen this planet because it hid him - shouldn’t it have done the same for *Luke*? Had he, by going here and getting trained, led Darth Vader to one of the last living Jedi? Guilt nipped at his thoughts.

“Your presence grows in the Force every day, young Skywalker. You *cannot hide*.” There was something in Vader’s voice that was as much exasperation at what was apparently something glaringly obvious, and also... pride? Luke shook his head went for the lightsaber - and had his wrist caught in what might as well have been a durasteel trap.

“And your X-wing has been broadcasting a distress signal on an unencrypted, general band for two weeks, young one.”

“*What?!*”

How had he missed that? How had *Artoo*?

Sputtering, Luke followed more on reflex than thought when Vader let go of his wrist and stalked off, in the same direction Luke had been going earlier, retreading his steps to get out. Attacking Vader in the cave wasn’t a very good idea anyway. He could wait until they got out and *then* do it, if nothing else for (his father, Ben) Yoda’s sake.

When Vader suddenly stopped, Luke managed to avoid walking into the man a second time, glancing up at him and about to snap something when movement in front of them caught his attention. In the fear-hope that it was Yoda, Luke turned to look, and stared.

Too tall for Yoda, it came forward with slow, measured steps aided by a dark cane polished smooth and shiny, even in the darkness of the cave. The robe was black, and hung off the frame less like it was weighing the hunched body down and more like it was heavy with the weight of its own maliciousness.

It felt empty.

“... That... that’s a---”

“Vision. Yes,” Darth Vader growled, the grip he had on Luke’s arm tightening incrementally, and Luke gritted his teeth not to

make a noise. Wondered why he was seeing this as well, since it couldn't be meant for *him* (he hoped). Wondered if he could use this distraction to slip away... *if* Vader's grip lightened, that was.

"You know all about *visions*, do you not, my friend?"

Claws pinched the back of his neck and trailed down his spine as the voice of the Emperor floated through the cave, not *quite* with the right presence. Not that it mattered; vision or not, there was a very real weight to the words, a mocking edge that seemed like it would be perfectly at home in the actual Emperor Palpatine's voice.

Vader remained silent, and stock still. His grip, Luke was pretty sure, was leaving bruises.

"All these *warnings* so generously provided by the Force, Lord Vader, and yet you could never properly... use them," the cackle didn't echo as the apparition tilted its head, the hood remaining stiff, the shadows lurking within giving no more than the suggestion of a stark white chin and a rotten, yellow smile, "and now you have this. Maybe the dreams will grace you again. Maybe this time you will be able to stop what you see? Maybe this time, the fate of the son will not be the same like the mother's..."

"My mothe--"

The vision reached a gnarled hand out towards Luke at the same time as he swayed back, struck by those last few words and the cave exploded in a kaleidoscope of fury.

"SILENCE!"

The red lightsaber flared to life, casting flickering shadows of blood on the wet, muddy surfaces, and slashed an angrily humming arc through the air, cleaving the vision as easily as Luke had done with his own earlier.

The body fell in slow motion, the robe flaring up around it in a completely unnatural way and fog exploded as the body hit the ground.

When it cleared, it wasn't the Emperor lying on the ground, cleaved in two.

It was a woman, rich, brown curls spilling over the muddy

ground and her pale face. She looked peaceful, as if she was *sleeping* rather than dead from a slash that had severed her body in half. Fog shifted, and Luke blinked.

Felt a creeping sense of lacking context, and a return of the unpleasant shock that came with looking at your own dead body.

Why would Vader's vision include *him*? Even if Darth Vader didn't want him dead, why would him *being dead* be an unwanted end?

"*Move*," Vader hissed, pulling at his arm and leading them *around* the now-empty spot on the ground where the vision of the body... bodies? had been. Luke, startled and confused, didn't protest. Which was, he had to admit, partly due to the edge in the dark voice, absolutely *seething* with...

Frowning, Luke's hand strayed to his lightsaber, but he was too distracted to unhook it. Was unsure he was reading everything he'd caught from that single word right, because while the fury, hatred and even loathing seemed like nothing unexpected, there was also *sadness* and *guilt*. He *must have* read it wrong...

"Master Yoda!" Luke gasped as they stormed out of the cave from underneath the roots of the tree where the entrance was, his thoughts blown away by the presence of the tiny green Jedi Master and the dismay that bubbled up.

"Let young Skywalker go, you will, Lord Vader," Yoda said severely, leaning on his little cane where he stood on a tree root that arced out of the ground.

"Master Yoda, you should *leave*," Luke said before Vader had the chance to respond, twisting in the grip on his arm to glare up at the Sith Lord, "if you leave him alone, I'll go with you."

"To bargain with yourself for me, your place it is *not*!" Yoda snapped, thumping the end of his cane against the root. Vader stood, forbidding and silent and his lightsaber still in his other hand, and was staring straight at Yoda.

"You are *dying*, Jedi. If you listen to the boy, you may yet have time to train another." By Vader's tone, it was clear he didn't believe Yoda did have that time, and was relishing it. Luke bristled

on principle, but Yoda remained unruffled.

"Takes us all, old age will, unless other events transpire. Now, the youngling you will be letting go."

Darth Vader snorted, a rumbling sound that seemed to settle in Luke's bones - and then he tossed him back against the roots, and Luke could never figure out, then or later, if it'd been intended that his head hit one of the roots with *just* the right force to not just send stars flickering through his vision, but also make him black out for a short while.

When he sat up again, for a moment uncertain where he was or what was going on, Luke stared without comprehending at the flashes of red and green dancing around the clearing that surrounded the tree and the cave underneath. Then, just as the green blade flickered out and Yoda was sent slamming into a tree trunk, he remembered.

"No!"

Not *again*. He *would not* just stand by this time.

Getting to his feet and fumbling with the lightsaber, his head echoing with pain, Luke wondered if he'd lost his grip when the lightsaber flew away.

But no, of course not.

He whirled around angrily, but ended up swaying into the dark lord's side instead, darkness threatening to eat him again.

"Will you uphold your bargain?"

Looking up, staring for an uncomprehending moment, Luke gaped.

"What?"

"He is unconscious, not dead, young one. Are you going to come without a fight?"

Vader didn't need to offer him this, throwing his hastily made offer in his face or not. It wasn't as if he didn't have the upper hand at the moment, it wasn't like he couldn't just tow him off anyway. Luke, trying to think around his headache, swallowed down nausea.

"... All right. But what about---"

Shrill twittering cut through the glade even as Vader pushed him forwards, and the mask tilted back towards Artoo.

"I will lift the X-wing up and set your astromech in it. He can fly it back to your friends."

"And---"

"Ask later. *Move*, droid, if you do not wish to be left here," Vader snapped as he herded Luke along. The young man, meanwhile, tried to catch a glimpse of Yoda but couldn't see past Vader's bulk. Wondered if he really was all right. Wondered what Vader's vision had meant. Wondered what would happen *now*.



Chapter 16:

In Which There Is a Baby



Basically a late/end of RotS AU. Vader picks up baby Luke, has reactions.

A baby was screaming.

Obi-Wan Kenobi lay on the ground, a hole burned through his chest, sand already gathering in the folds of his robe, and there was a baby in the crook of his left arm, screaming.

Darth Vader swayed on his feet, his vision of red inside the mask bleeding into blood-tinged unconsciousness at the edges. Frankly, that he was standing at all was a miracle. Pure, furious willpower and the Force was currently the only thing keeping him upright, even less *conscious*, because with barely a few days after the surgeries, dark side feeding him or not, he should still have been horizontal somewhere.

But he stood, his borrowed lightsaber casting twisted splotches of red pools on the ground, and didn't hear the sounds of Bes-tine around him.

The only sound he heard was the baby's screams, which echoed in his head.

It must be Force-sensitive, Vader realised after another few (two, ten, thirty?) minutes of listening to the screaming, which was slowly tapering off into crying hiccups. Where Obi-Wan had found the time to go rescue a Force-sensitive baby, he didn't know, but there it was.

He should kill it.

New resolve giving strength to his legs, Darth Vader staggered the handful of steps forward, lifted his lightsaber despite the way his shoulders protested, despite the searing bite of the new con-

nections between prosthetic and burned flesh. Baby-pale, teary eyes met his gaze, even through the mask, and he collapsed to his knees before he finished the upward arc, the lightsaber falling onto the sand beside him, turning a swathe of it to glass before it automatically turned off.

Something wonderful has happened!

With a kick that hard? Definitely a girl.

What about the baby?

He couldn't *breathe*.

The respirator worked for him, breathed *for* him, but the dry, choking sobs disrupted its workings even as it forced him to continue breathing, evenly, relentlessly. He reached out without thinking about it, picking up the bundle of baby in its white blanket and lifted it up.

Stared, hands shaking.

Ani... I'm pregnant.

No. No, he wouldn't think about this.

Who are you? He'd reached out in the Force without thinking, and the response was immediate and staggering. Lonely, scared, hurting... *familiar*.

Darth Vader choked on the next breath, stopped breathing for two cycles, and his heart stuttered under the onslaught of a broken connection made whole. He blacked out, coming to before he hit the ground beside Obi-Wan's body mask first, only just catching himself with one hand as he changed his grip on the baby to keep it from falling on the ground.

He'd used the new arm. The stab that went through him from his palm hitting the ground almost lost him all strength in that arm for a crucial moment, but the pulled the pain close, pulled the *Force* close, and remained on his hand and knees.

He had lied.

Obi-wan had clearly taken his wife, and had taken his *child*, but his master *had lied*.

Sand stirred, turned into a miniature storm while the closest buildings - the docking bay Obi-Wan had been leaving when he

caught up to him and a warehouse - moaned under the power turned on them, walls shifting as cracks went from the ground up, like some alien form of lightning.

His master had *lied*.

He hadn't killed P--

Killed---

He hadn't *killed her*.

There was a noise.

An odd sort of ragged bellow - it took minutes before he realised it was *him*, and at the same time he felt something else.

Tiny, fumbling, tired, it still touched the seared edges of his mind with an empty sort of encompassing warmth. Vader slumped upright, ignoring the shrieking of his legs, and lifted the baby up with shaking hands. It was staring at him with a strangely focused, sober look, even as its eyes drooped in impending sleep.

The connection was still flooded by that soft, indistinct warmth, and Vader swayed back as if struck, grip tightening unthinkingly until the baby squeaked in protest and he almost dropped it in his haste to lighten the grip.

Babies loved without thought, without *reason*. Even so, he did not deserve this. It wasn't---

The sandstorm settled as quickly as it had blown up, and he remained there, staring, even long minutes after the baby had fallen asleep.

The baby.

His and--- and *hers*.

Their child.

An inane thought struck him, the banality of it only strengthening the feeling that he didn't deserve to know, but he carefully laid the baby on the ground and unwrapped the white blanket and the clothes underneath.

And once again stared.

Stared, and didn't move until the baby - his *son* - started to whine and wiggle in his sleep, clearly unhappy about being

exposed to Tatooine's night air. He almost couldn't get the boy wrapped up again, his hands were shaking so much.

She...

She had been---

Pulling the boy - Luke, she'd wanted to name him Luke if it'd been a boy - close, he collapsed down on the ground, and like this he would choke, the sand clogging up the intakes, but it was what he *deserved* wasn't it?

He needs you, Anakin.

Jerking upright as if he'd been shot, he tried to chase that brief, lingering whisper, the brush of soft lips on his ear the words had brought, but it was already gone and he was choking on dry sobs again. Sobs which soon burned away and Vader stood up, swaying but keeping a proper grip on Luke. Called the two lightsabers to himself with no thought and staggered away towards the shuttle he'd arrived in.

His master had lied.

He'd make this *right*, if only for the sake of the baby in his arms.



Chapter 17: In Which Luke Is Caught



Quite literally caught, as this is a late-ESB AU right after Luke has let go of the gantry in Cloud City's innards. More trauma abound!

When the boy let go, the rejection stung like hers had, burrowing down deep, almost leaving him slumped over the railing and apathetic. Vader *almost* let it get to him. But in a flash of sudden thought - thought which would've happened a little later if he had let the sharp point of the rejection stab as deep as it *could have* - he realised it wasn't odd that things had gone as they did.

And that that child was still *his* and he was *not* about to simply *let go* and let him kill himself. Nevermind that that probably wouldn't have happened either way, but still.

That thought crystallising, Vader flung an arm out with his awareness and power both, *reaching* for his son.

Had he been a second or two slower, had he not been as strong in the Force, had Luke been less battered and more focused, he would have failed.

He didn't.

It was surprisingly silent.

The wind rushed around, over, him, and it should probably have been a roar in his ears, but Luke couldn't hear anything.

He felt numb.

Everywhere, except for one brilliant point of screaming pain, and even that was distant. But that was all right. It wouldn't last forever. He wished he could've said goodbye to Leia, Chewie and

Artoo, and Threepio as well, since he ought to be with the others here, right?

Well, not *here*, here, because he wouldn't want any of his friends to be right here with him (except he did), because that wouldn't be good. At all. But he was alone, and there was only the air rushing around him, pulling at him, the shaft's walls distant but getting closer and he didn't need to---

The only way Luke could tell he'd suddenly stopped was because the throbbing in his wrist turned into a brief stab, and half his face was suddenly apparently on (distant, quiet) fire from the lack of air soothing over the scrapes and bruises.

No.

No, no, no!

He was *not* going back up! How had Fa--- Vader even caught him?

The pulse in his ears throbbed through his whole body as he tried to grasp what he needed; pure desperation gave him slivers of connection to push at the dark, gentle (so very gentle), but perfectly implacable hold he could tell was there, dragging him up.

Luke pushed against it, tried to bend it loose, hammer on it - he slipped, missed, didn't have the strength. He couldn't even twist or curl up, as the hold kept him immobilised.

There might have been a scream, or a sob, Luke wasn't sure. The closer he got back up to the maintenance hub, the stronger the sense of Vader got, the brighter the connection burned.

It was the only thing he could really *feel*, and he *didn't want to*.

Distance made it easier to ignore, to deny; to hope Vader had lied, or that there had been some sort of *mistake*.

But the closer he got - and briefly he tried to grab onto the gantry when he passed it again, tried to hold onto the metal, but he was too clumsy, too slow, couldn't lock his hands--- hand around it, wincing as he banged his right wrist against the pole and he passed it after a few desperate, scrabbling seconds. The closer he got he could tell that the connection *was* there, had *al-*

ways been there, and the only reason he hadn't noticed it before was because he hadn't known it was there.

Now he did, though.

The grating of the walkway loomed up close, but while the coldness of it shocked the overheated skin on his face and hand, at least he'd learned the lesson with the gantry and tucked his wrist in close to his side. The walkway shuddered as the towering, icy flame of darkness that was Darth Vader came closer, and Luke dug his forehead against the metal, shaking his head.

"No. *Go away.*" The words sounded funny in his ears, and felt stranger to say them, his mouth and tongue feeling clumsy. Maybe that was because he'd jumbled up Basic and Huttese, but he couldn't really keep them apart in his mind at the moment.

The bonfire knelt behind him, concentrating down and over, cutting off the distant rush of wind in a muffling softness - but no, that was just the hand that had, slowly, hesitantly, run through his hair before it grasped his shoulder.

Luke grit his teeth and tried to pull away, tried to curl up, but he was shaking too much and there was just not enough coordination. He didn't have anything to focus on, nothing to stave off the shock, so there was no way to stop Vader from turning him over.

The black mask hovering over him sent an electric shock through him because he *really* was no longer falling. He wasn't in the shaft, he was lying on the grating of the walkway and *lacked a hand*. Also his father's lightsaber, and despite the revelation - maybe because of it - that loss seemed even more terrible.

"Luke..."

"No..." his eyes were burning (he was crying) and he tried, uselessly, to push Vader away, lacking any strength to do more than flail, fingers sliding against the durasteel armour on his chest, catching in the black cloth of the tabard, "Father, *stop!*"

Vader - his father, because he *was*, even when he couldn't, shouldn't, be - froze, one hand around his shoulder, the other under his knees, clearly about to lift him. Luke made an aborted

attempt to... get up, roll off the gantry, curl up, he wasn't sure, but it didn't matter because he didn't get anywhere.

"Why... didn't he *tell me*?" Focusing on that black, implacable mask past the tears even as they stopped welling up, Luke clutched at the cloth, so close to the switches and controls, whatever they were and did, but there was no thought at all to do anything with them. They were only fitfully blinking little lights that meant nothing, made no sense.

Much like everything else.

"Who, son?"

Luke shuddered.

That word, though, it made sense.

All too much sense and he swallowed the next noise, whatever it was, and closed his eyes. Vader stood up, and the sudden change in position brought a rush of vertigo. Maybe he was dreaming this, maybe he was already dead, maybe---

The wind cutting out as they passed into the maintenance hub at the end of the gantry made him shudder again, and reality, slow like molasses, cold and distant, slotted back into place.

Of course he wasn't dreaming. Or dead.

"Ben," he said it so quietly Luke wasn't sure he'd said it at all, but the sudden, noiseless roar of angry flames that wrapped around him and the minute tensing of his father's grip made it clear he'd heard, "he didn't--- why *didn't he tell me*?"

One beat.

Two.

The fire didn't back down, but softened, muffling the surroundings and the ache in his head.

Ask me later.

Distantly, Luke wondered if that quiet, thrumming mental voice was closer to what his father should sound, without the vocoder altering and enhancing it.

He clung to those three words and didn't notice when the stormtroopers joined them as they got back up into the main parts of Cloud City. Didn't notice the white corridors passing by.

He did notice when they arrived at the shuttle, making a brief, desperate attempt at getting *away*, but ended up sprawled on the floor of the shuttle and then didn't bother with resisting when the hypospray was used.

His last thought as his mind started to grow fuzzy and the darkly warm connection to his... father bled out into a muffling blanket, was the one which had been plaguing him the whole trip through Cloud City.

Why hadn't Obi-Wan told him?



Chapter 18:

In Which Plans Are Derailed



RotJ AU of the Tydirium's approach on Endor and the Executor. This one also ended up longer because when I was given this prompt my brain just HAD TO come up with a way that wouldn't leave the Alliance utterly crushed.

As the shuttle glided closer to the hulking capital ship, the vague sensation that had stirred only minimally when they entered the system now reared up, bloomed out, stretched. It was cold fire, edged in apathy, anger and... a hollow sort of aching; self-loathing. If Luke wasn't so distracted by the fact that he knew his father must be getting *something* similar from him, knew he was here just as he knew Vader was, he'd allow himself to be distracted by the emotions themselves.

"Vader's on that ship."

He didn't exactly listen to Han's reassurances. He let the words wash over him, the attempted optimism, let them buoy him against the cold certainty... and some vague anticipation. What for, he didn't know; was almost embarrassed to admit it was there. Guilty. He hoped Vader couldn't sense *that*.

On the *Executor*, the Sith Lord Darth Vader cocked his head at the sudden brightening of the connection that had exploded up on Cloud City. He'd sensed the growing brightness during the last months, even more sharply than the slow brightening of the three years previous. Luke was a veritable supernova by now.

His Master would be pleased.

He could admit that *he* was as well, if only---

He turned sharply on his heel, strode down the central walkway and over to the comm station, a flickering sense of determi-

nation, calm and stubbornness sitting warmly in the back of his mind. And more than that... anticipation.

He did not dwell on it.

"Where is that shuttle going?" He already knew - the moon or the Death Star; the first an unknowing trap, the second suicide. He did not think his son would be walking quite this obviously, eagerly, or *at all* to the Emperor, so that meant the moon.

The response to Admiral Piett's inquiry confirmed it and he paused there.

Reached out; brushed against the glowing galaxy that was Luke, felt the growing apprehension muddying the calm, self-re-crimination and... still the guilty thread of anticipation stayed. Luke had rejected him on Bespin, and nothing since seemed to have suggested any more favourable interpretation, and yet, now...

"Shall I hold them?" Admiral Piett's quiet voice cut through his thoughts and, elsewhere, elsewhen, Darth Vader would let go of these thoughts. In this other time and place, his Master's plans and words would have pulled any sense of hope or ambition out of the thoughts as impossible.

As too late.

Here and now, however, the last dredges of Anakin Skywalker's defiance, of Darth Vader's rage at having been *lied to*, reared its head and took a searing, stubborn breath, which fanned the flames which had, almost, been beaten into cold coals by his Master.

"Pull them in, Admiral."

The sudden yank on the *Tydirium* went like a shock through the Rebels within, and Luke sunk down in his seat, hid his face in his hands.

This was *his fault*. Again. Now it wasn't only his friends who would suffer, not just the strike team, but the whole of the Alliance as well. He'd just wanted... what?

To help?

Of course, but what did *that* matter when the connection he'd known was there, had tried to deny for almost a whole year, pretend it didn't exist but finally had to admit that it *did* had led to *this*?

Han said something, Leia's hand was warm on his shoulder, her concern shoring up his fraying calm, and he rubbed his face.

Felt the *Tydirium* settle down on the floor of whatever hangar they'd been dragged into.

Maybe he could still be of *some* use.

"I'll go out first, we might still be able to salvage this," Luke said as he walked into the main hold, pulling off the poncho and dropping it on an unoccupied seat.

"Kid, *what*?" Han stomped up in front of him and put his hands on his shoulders, "don't go makin' any more self-sacrificial decisions, Luke. We do this *together*."

He shook his head and ducked out of Han's grip, turned around right into Leia instead. Leia, who had her hands on her hips and was staring up at him narrowly. Leia, who was---

Don't think about it.

Not this close to *him*.

"This is *not* your fault, Luke. This was a gamble, we all knew that."

He almost let the hysterical laughter out, but merely shook his head and smiled faintly. Grabbed her hands and squeezed them.

"Let me go out first." He leaned in and brushed a kiss against her forehead, hoped this wouldn't be the last he'd get to do, and ducked away from Han's grab even as he caught the flailing wrist in his own grip and squeezed, then turned around before he let them convince him to not go and hit the release for the ramp.

The lights of the hangar were bright compared to the shuttle, and he walked right into a waiting committee of... a lot of stormtroopers.

He wasn't going to guess how many. Merely let his gaze wander over the white wall surrounding the shuttle and waited. Tried

to actually be as calm as he was trying to project, and if the general muddled feeling of stormtroopers was correct, he was managing *that* at least.

To project the calm, that was. Because he certainly wasn't *actually* that calm.

It didn't take too long for the fiery background hum to turn into an approaching roar, and Luke swallowed as he watched the stormtroopers part to let the huge, black-clad form of Darth Vader through.

Took a breath and held out his lightsaber, and it was *not* his imagination, the way his father's last step jerked him to a stop. The startled flare from the darkness emanating from Vader wasn't his imagination either, and Luke tried not to feel smug about it.

"If I stay, could you let them go?" This wasn't just a gamble, Luke knew; this was basically an impossible request, Vader being predisposed to being lenient with him because of their connection, if he still wanted to acknowledge it that was there, or not. He was asking something that no military commander would, in any good circumstances, agree to.

"You will be staying regardless," Vader said, cool and self-assured, and Luke was both relieved and rather apprehensive at the resurgence of the dark triumphant pleasure underneath that, compared to the apathy he'd sensed earlier.

It was similar, very, very, similar to Bspin. But not quite the same.

"We could--"

"We are not having this discussion *here*."

Luke blinked, staring as his lightsaber was practically wagged in his face in some parody of a lecture. He had to forcibly push away the image of a stern Aunt Beru and an irate Uncle Owen and focus on the here and now.

"Leave them in the shuttle for now? Please," he said, reaching out before he thought about it and *what was he even doing?* He stopped with a hand's span still to his father's arm, and there

was a tension to Vader's shoulders that, despite that he'd halted himself, didn't disappear. If anything, those shoulders went even stiffer underneath the weight of the durasteel armour resting on them.

"That can be arranged," Vader rumbled, turning around and not even glancing at the commander that stood beside him, even if his next words were clearly *for him*, "stun only if anyone attempts to leave; do not approach the shuttle otherwise until I give the order to do so."

"Yes, Lord Vader," the commander said, snapping off a precise salute and gesturing to the surrounding stormtroopers, who rearranged themselves accordingly. Luke was, to his own surprise, left to follow his father at his own leisure. He couldn't help the glance back at the shuttle, catching sight of his friends hovering by the entrance, and gave a small wave.

Not much of a reassurance, really...

Unable to resist, as he turned to follow before Vader could decide to change his approach in how they were doing this, he reached out for Leia's warm blue, brushing against it and getting a stumbling pulse in return, confused but determined.

He looked up to see his father stop in his stride, staring right at him for an uncomfortably long moment and then raising his head to gaze at the shuttle. He'd noticed. Luke felt his heart stutter to a brief stop as the moment dragged on... but then Vader turned around again, and while he didn't say anything out loud, there was a definitive sense of a pulling demand over the bond.

Which, Luke realised as he caught up, staring straight ahead as he walked, felt somewhat similar to what he could now tell he had with Leia. He pushed those thoughts away, because he'd *already* done too much and he'd never forgive himself if his father paid more attention to Leia. She had enough to deal with.

There were no words exchanged as they walked the *Executor's* corridors and rode several turbolifts. Luke wasn't sure what to say - there were questions he wanted to ask, things he needed to say, *should* say, attempts to convince his father... and he didn't

know how to voice any of it. It was probably just as well to wait, either way.

When a heavy pair of doors slid closed behind them at last, Luke was once again distracted from what was going on and what he should say by staring at the polished black sphere that dominated the room, wondering what it even *was for*.

Briefly, he had a vague, fanciful vision of some sort of Jedi-appropriate cell, but the rest of this room was clearly not the detention area.

"I am currently affording you the benefit of doubt, which is why we are here," Vader said, cutting through his thoughts and imagination both, and Luke wondered if he'd read his mind.

"As compared to a cell?" he asked quietly, managing by sheer force of will to not let any taunting or sarcasm slip into his tone, but couldn't help the tilt of his head.

"As compared to the quarters prepared adjacent to mine, which *are* capable of dealing with your abilities regardless of my presence." Vader turned around, cloak flaring about his feet, and planted his fists on his hips. Luke refused to follow the tug of his imagination that Vader's pose inspired this time and only stared up into the black mask. His father stared back, and the moment lengthened.

All right, they were no longer in the hangar, and... he couldn't stall for much longer. Even if he still didn't know what to say.

"That's... um. Thanks, I guess?" he paused, mostly to give himself a little more time, but it allowed him to catch the nearly startled little flare from Vader again. A startled flare which quickly turned into flames reaching *towards him*, and Luke wasn't sure if that was much better, but there wasn't anything to do about *that*. Could admit that, good or not, there was some part of him that definitely liked that reflexive reach.

But that being whatever it was, all he could do was...

"... what happens now, Father?" Luke raised his head, stared up into the impenetrable mask and waited, as patiently as he could, for a reply. His father had frozen, helmet inclined just a

shade, large hands grasping his belt and if it weren't for the respirator's even sound, he'd have thought the man was no longer breathing.

The pause slowly morphed from stunned to awkward, and Luke was sure that, if Darth Vader was inclined towards shifting nervously on his feet, he *would be*. Luke sure felt like doing so, but pulled the Force close and breathed out, allowing it to take his anxiety with it. He was... partially successful.

"We will wait. The Rebels will be crushed and then---"

"Then *what*, Father? Do you really think the Death Star is a good thing to have around? The Emperor's distracted now, but what about *after*? I won't turn, but isn't this the best time to---" Luke grappled, again, with this. Could, should this be the way to confront the Emperor as a Sith Lord? Was he doing it the right way?

Was *any* way the right way?

"To do something about him? Together."

There.

Luke closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. He hadn't intended to say it like that. He'd intended to ask his father to come away with him, to say he was sure he wouldn't bring him to Palpatine... he still, honestly, wished to just ask him to leave together, but something held him back, for now.

"The Death Star is a tool," Vader said, snorting, gesturing sharply, "a mechanical abomination next to the Force, but a tool. And you cannot hope to take the Emperor without the dark side, young one."

Luke shook his head sharply and stepped closer, reaching out again, but didn't get close enough to touch. Wasn't sure what would happen if he let himself do that, or if Vader would *allow it*.

"Shouldn't *I* get to decide that? You might not approve of it, Father, but I think I can decide how I fight my own battles," Luke said, thrusting his chin out, feeling like he was grasping for... what, he wasn't sure. Something. Something which was just right beyond what he could reach or see.

It was important, whatever it was.

Felt the shift around them as his father shifted his weight slightly, and forged on before he could say anything.

"If I'm wrong, you can lecture me later," he paused, felt the smile escape, amusement at any number of scrapes he'd gotten himself into and the various rescuers thereof; Ben, Biggs, Han, Leia. "I'm used to getting rescued, you know."

The cold fire that was his father flared up harshly enough the flames almost seemed real, and Luke took a startled step back, but just as suddenly they collapsed into a tiny, cold, hard ball and Vader turned away.

"I am... not the right person to ask for *rescues*, Luke," his father said, so quietly the vocoder almost failed to make it audible, even less give it the proper baritone rumble, and Luke felt like he was standing in the middle of an ocean of memories he could *almost* touch. It was hard to breathe. He could *almost* see what it was he needed.

"So come with me," he said after several moments of silence, quietly, slowly, "let the shuttle go and let them to their job and we can take another one and they'll deal with both the Death Star and the Emperor. Father---"

"I do not believe you would thank me if I sent your friends into a *trap*, son," his father growled, and that ocean was definitely gone. Suddenly he was pushed sideways roughly with the Force, a door set on the opposite side of the room opening and closing right against his arm the moment he was inside the room and before he was quite aware of what even had *happened*.

Staring at what was an empty office with a very empty desk and dark computer, Luke whirled around.

The door refused to open.

Father?

The bond was shuttered; it was like throwing his thoughts against a durasteel wall - or maybe more like a transparisteel wall, because he could still 'see' his father's presence beyond, but couldn't *reach*.

“Great, Skywalker... you blew *that*.” Groaning, Luke threw himself on the couch set against the wall next to the viewport, scrubbing his face. A trap. They should have known.

The Emperor being on a defenseless and unfinished Death Star had seemed pretty improbable. Luke’s stomach twisted into knots and he wished he could warn the fleet.

He should take Luke to the Death Star.

That was the thought that had been echoing in his head for the past several hours while he remained locked in his hyperbaric chamber, tense for any attempt from Luke to break out. It wasn’t like the boy wasn’t strong enough to do that, now. But no such attempt came, even if he certainly was agitated - something he only briefly checked once he was sure Luke was distracted and not paying attention to their connection or him.

He *should* take Luke to the Death Star and to his Master.

He should probably have gone to his Master immediately after capturing the shuttle. Should’ve put his son in the quarters prepared for him and gone to his Master for advice.

He hadn’t.

And he was still not moving.

Carefully, slowly, he rested his face in one hand, ignoring the fiery prickle of screaming nerves from the sensitive skin as the leather pressed against it.

A rescue.

A *rescue*.

Said so flippantly, so *trustingly*. Luke didn’t even know what he was saying, *trusting* him with. And he was incapable of expressing that Luke turning to the dark side would pre-empt any rescue being necessary. Because he... he shouldn’t be trusted with such things.

When Vader finally left the chamber, it was well into the night.

He was about to leave for the bridge when he caught sight of the closed and locked door to the disused office he’d shoved

Luke into out of the corner of his vision. Vader hesitated for several minutes before he turned away from the door out and slowly crossed the floor, opening the door to the office with barely a thought, and slipped inside.

The computer was on, but idling, lighting the room with a muted, flickering glow.

Luke wasn't at the desk, however, but lay sprawled on his stomach on the couch, one arm dangling off it. The only noises was the soft humming from the computer, and his and Luke's breathing.

Even slower than he'd walked to the door, he walked over to the couch and stared down at his son.

Sleeping, he looked... almost painfully young.

So many years missed.

And now? What was he even supposed to do *now*? If Luke kept refusing to turn, his Master would merely dispose of him, regardless of if they would get a chance to kill him. And *could they*?

That had been his intent back before Cloud City. The thought had died after that and now... His son was naïve. Running away would yield nothing, and his Master had surely planned for any contingencies for his stay on the Death Star.

It was operational, even should the shield be knocked out...

The flickering glow from the computer played over Luke's pale - blond, he knew, like his when he was... younger - hair, and he shifted in his sleep, leaving Vader for a moment to think he'd roll over and fall off, but Luke subsided and slumped down again, his expression relaxing.

It was *almost* tempting to follow Luke's request of setting that shuttle and it's load of Rebels free, but his Master had *planned* for that, and Luke would forgive him even less now that he knew it was a trap. But what other options were there?

Vader paused, tilting his head.

Remembered, suddenly, something he'd done while still in the grip of the need to crush his Master for the lies, for the *lost years*. He had, riding the rush of his discovery of Luke and when he

found out this second Death Star was being planned, put a few... contingencies in place.

But...

Would that even matter? The Rebels would be up against the Death Star *and* the Fleet hiding beyond Endor; could he trust them to be able to win against those odds, *and* gamble that his Master wouldn't be able to counter that?

Luke sighed in his sleep, and Vader looked down. Took a step closer, and then another, reaching out--- stopped before he could brush his fingers over skin or hair.

Come (away) with me.

He let out his next breath slower than the respirator would have, felt it protest, ignored it. Relaxed his hand and brushed his fingers over Luke's cheek and hair, brushing it away from his face. How come the child had said almost the exact same thing *she* had? But then as now...

It was not that simple.

And yet...

Well, his Master had, either way, told him to stay on the *Executor*.

Vader turned on his heel and left the office, stopping in front of the intercom in his quarters and stared at it for several minutes. Still not sure what to do.

In the early hours of pre-dawn, a comm officer on duty on the *Executor's* bridge got a short, simple message to relay on to a particular comm frequency.

The recipient, who had been sleeping, dreaming about chasing away those annoying and fluffy natives that infested the forest moon of Endor when her comlink went off rolled over. Woke up when the noise persisted and fumbled for her comlink and then properly woke up when she recognised the tone. Froze for a moment and then checked the message.

Ah.

Show time.

She would start her day a *little* earlier than usual today, then.

On the Death Star, Master Sith Lord and Emperor of the Galaxy, Sheev Palpatine shifted in his seat, not so much sleeping as meditating. The Force swirled around him, but the changes were tiny.

Insignificant.

His apprentice was where he'd been told to be, the Rebels were coming...

The trap was still in place.

Anything else was beneath his concern; he was sure Skywalker was coming with the Rebels, and nothing told him he wasn't.

Luke woke up with a protesting back and a cold arm. It was a sharp contrast to the rest of him, which was rather comfortably warm. Blinking into the black cloth of the couch, his sleep-addled brain for a moment occupied with his *cold arm*, he reflexively pulled it under the blanket---

Wait.

Sitting up, Luke stared at the heavy, black cloth pooling over his legs and the couch.

He hadn't gone to sleep with a blanket. Not that he'd intended to sleep at all, but he had definitely not gone to sleep with a *blanket*. And this... wasn't really a blanket, either.

Tracing along the lined edge of the cloth, Luke had a strong suspicion what it was he'd been covered with, and despite the situation, smiled faintly.

The door opening didn't startle him, but maybe that was because he'd sort of been expecting it - and he was definitely starting to get used to the contained cold bonfire that was his father, who was absolutely the one beyond the door. What came in before his father, however, was surprising; a droid with breakfast.

The noise his stomach made was, while embarrassing, making it clear said breakfast was certainly *wanted*.

Vader walked in and stood by the desk, arms folded over his chest and looking out the viewport while Luke ate. He allowed himself to take time with it, but when there were finally only crumbs left, Luke was finding it harder and harder not to shift in his seat. Tried to relax, let his tension go, but couldn't... quite do it.

"What're we doing today?" Luke finally asked, looking up from carefully crushing the last crumbs into dust, keeping steady when his father tilted the mask down to look at him.

"Waiting. As my Master has commanded me to stay on the *Executor*."

There was something in his father's voice Luke couldn't put his finger on.

"We're just... staying here?" He carefully put the tray on the floor and started to fold the cloak up - his father was wearing another one, but that only made it obvious he *had* covered Luke with *this* cloak.

"If you wish, we can observe the battle from the bridge."

Gritting his teeth, trying to hold back his temper because there was, once again, something in Vader's voice that was... different, Luke still scowled.

"And watch the whole Alliance get slaughtered? No thank you," he said, turning away to look out the viewport.

"... If they have some sort of plan to tackle the Death Star when the shield is down, they might not be slaughtered, son."

Frowning, Luke caught the reflection of his father in the viewport, the angle of his helm, and after another silent moment of studying it and trying to read it, turned back around.

"You mean you let the---"

"No. The stolen shuttle and your Rebel friends are still in the hangar," Vader rumbled, his Force presence shifting uneasily... nervously, almost, "the critical failure of the shield generator on the moon will, doubtlessly, be of *some* assistance to your Rebel

fleet, however.”

Staring, feeling suddenly dizzy, Luke didn't even try to swallow his grin.

“And if he figures it out?”

There was no question of who ‘he’, was, here.

“We will deal with that when he comes to deal with *me* in that scenario.”

He shouldn't laugh. A few chuckles slipped out anyway, and Luke stood up, put the folded cape carefully down on the couch and turned to his father.

“Could I have a tour? We'll end up on the bridge sooner or later, that way.”

Darth Vader tilted his head and gestured towards the door, which opened ahead of either of them.

“That could be arranged, young one.”

As it happened, they *did* end up on the bridge in time to see the Death Star blow up, partly obscured by the curve of Endor itself since Palpatine hadn't called the fleet out of its hiding spot. Hadn't had the time as the shield generator suffered several failures in function and he was bombarded with panicked reports and the attempts to repair said failures.

Luke said nothing when his father ordered the fleet to move on the Rebel fleet after the Death Star's immediate destruction had wound down. The Rebels, while surprised, still had time to flee with no more than casual losses to the Imperial Fleet.

Staring at the disappearing ships, Luke just hoped he could convince his father to let the shuttle and its contents go, now, regardless of whatever else happened. Glanced up at the tall man he stood by in front of the bridge's wide viewports, and felt pretty optimistic about his chances.

He kept his smile purely internal, however.

Gloating is unbecoming, Luke.

Apparently he hadn't kept it *shielded*, though, but he just let

the smile bloom out and aimed it up at his father.

You're doing it as well, Father.

Darth Vader did not deign to respond to that, and Luke allowed himself, against his better judgement, to reach out to Leia.

It's okay, Leia. We won.

Her response was jumbled; confused, angry and relieved all in one. Luke, as he pretended to ignore the sharp jerk of the helmet to stare down at him, just hoped he hadn't just lied.



Chapter 19: In Which Luke Is Trapped



An AU from the new Marvel comics in a more general sense than an AU of a specific scene. This assumes Luke does succeed in getting to Coruscant as he said he wanted to do (in #8), but then things start to go pear-shaped.

This was one of the most *stupid things* he'd ever done.

Staring at the shimmering wall of energy in front of (and behind, and to the sides, and above) him, Luke had to resist the urge to reach out and touch. He'd already done that once and the electric shock he'd been hit with had knocked him unconscious for, he thought, a few hours at least. He wasn't sure, honestly, since his chrono had short-circuited with the shock.

Scowling, Luke crossed his arms and looked around again, but he couldn't see *anything* in the dark, rundown hall that seemed to be the controls for the forcefield.

He wished Artoo was here.

Artoo *had been* of course, but while the astromech had been able to follow him down through the levels until they found somewhere to sneak into the lower, unused base levels (to be honest, Luke wasn't sure *what* they were supposed to be; not deep enough to be foundation levels, he was pretty sure, they were also too rundown to be maintenance levels) of the Palace, the deeper they got in the harder it got for the droid to follow him.

Finally they'd gotten to a point where Luke couldn't heave Artoo over the obstacle or pull him up onto it, and while he'd attempted to lift him with the Force, something he was sure he *should* be able to do, he couldn't get Artoo to budge that way.

Reluctantly, he'd left Artoo behind, to loud, screeching protests. And now he couldn't even contact him through the com-link to let him know he was trapped, since that was busted as well.

His stomach growled, and Luke bit his lip. Not that he'd never been (or gone) hungry before, but the first stages of quiet hunger were always the hardest. Leaning forward as he tried to peer up into the shadows near the wall to his left, Luke almost leaned against the forcefield again, swaying back just in time.

Didn't want to get shocked again. But he did need to get rid of it *somehow*.

... Maybe he could... use his lightsaber?

Eyeing the forcefield uncertainly, Luke slowly unhooked the lightsaber and ignited it. Paused for a moment and then...

"Well... what do I got to lose?"

With a shrug, he took a breath and shoved the blade forward. Halfway through, the field convulsed, blue arcs of electricity blooming up like angry sand devils, and the lightsaber shorted out just a *second* too late.

Striding out of the turbolift and already fingering his lightsaber, Darth Vader was displeased. Of course, he'd been 'displeased' for weeks now. Furious since finding out about his son. Enraged at his Master's lies. Frustrated at the near misses he'd already had - especially since that involved *almost killing the boy*.

And now this - barely through the doors of the throne room and his Master informed him with a blithe handwave that "it seems we have a rat in the basement, my old friend. Get rid of it."

The Emperor couldn't even bother to send someone far closer to kill what was most probably one of the utterly *last* straggling dregs of the Jedi that had fallen into the traps set into the lower levels of the Imperial Palace.

This was *beneath him*.

But then, the last few weeks rather had been as well. So now his Master had even waited two days until he got back temporarily, to send him off to kill a trapped Jedi or half-trained Padawan that couldn't resist the possible lure of what might be left of the Jedi Order in the Palace (there was none).

A job that even the most shoddily-trained stormtrooper could've performed, given that all the traps down here were designed to keep any Jedi that fell into them well and truly contained.

Joints straining as he squeezed the hilt of his lightsaber, Vader jumped down a level, avoiding the ruined stairs, and took a left. He'd seen the trap that had been triggered on the map, and there was the vaguest sense of a fitful presence - unconscious at the moment, he guessed, or just weak enough to barely present through the Force.

Probably the latter; what was left of the Jedi Order was barely worth mentioning, insignificant Knights or Padawans - or just barely trained ones, in the latter case. Another few dozen meters, and that vague light took more solid shape as he ducked under a ruined archway.

He *hated* this place. There was nothing---

Pause.

Vader stopped, frowning now.

The presence in the Force was... familiar. Which didn't necessarily *mean* anything, except...

It bloomed up, now, still distant but stronger, proving itself to have been unconscious earlier and glittering with potential as awareness returned.

That---

His heart fluttered and he half-choked on the next breath the respirator carried, the air dank and smothered with death and wet, rotten failure, even nineteen years after the fact and many levels below where the actual massacre had taken place.

Vader didn't run when he started walking again.

Darth Vader *did not run*.

His steps may have lengthened and his pace quickened, however.

Waking up to his stomach being a knot of dull anger from lack of food, Luke slowly, carefully, flexed his fingers. The joints ached, but at least the motion didn't send him into spasms this time. There was a lingering stink of smoke to his clothes, and there was a now-dry, dark spot on the floor where he'd emptied what he'd *had* to empty his stomach of right before he fell unconscious.

That was... he didn't know how long ago *that* was.

Sitting up carefully and just as carefully stretching stiff, aching arms and legs, waiting for more spasms and feeling relieved when they didn't come, Luke knew he'd woken up at least once. Running hands through his hair gently to avoid putting pressure on his still-tender scalp, he grimaced.

"Okay... Shoving the lightsaber into the forcefield was a bad idea." Hand falling reflexively to his lightsaber, which he'd pulled close during one of his brief spells of consciousness between unconsciousness or sleep, Luke was dismayed to notice his hand shaking when he picked it up, and it felt *heavy* in a way that was just ridiculous.

But he remembered *all too well* the way the lightsaber had shorted out, thus breaking the contact with the forcefield and the electricity, and what if it was *broken*?

Hitting the activation switch the first time did nothing, causing anxiety to join the throb of hunger. But the second time, after a delay a moment longer than usual, the blade lit up with its usual brilliant light. Relief flooded him and he grinned despite the way it made his whole face ache.

Of course, he was still *trapped*, but maybe he should just use the lightsaber as a glowstick. Maybe he could actually find something useful if he tried to look around again. He didn't even need the controls, just something that he could use against the

forcefield...

Footsteps.

Stiffening, Luke twisted around before he thought about it and cried out as his back and thighs protested and a spasm went through them. Seconds later the muscles had locked up, and when he could move again not even the echo of footsteps could hide *that* noise.

Slowly raising his head, Luke was faced with the eerily lit mask of Darth Vader for the first time since the factory moon - something which just sent a stab of fresh failure and shame through him. Refocusing on Ben and his father's killer in time to watch him slowly stalk closer, allowing the white-blue light of the lightsaber to highlight more of the huge frame, Luke gritted his teeth.

There was nowhere to go.

Not even to make one last, useless attack.

"The places I find you, young Skywalker..." Vader said slowly, the baritone echoing oddly in the presumably-large space of wherever this was, and something between panic and smug pride speared through Luke - Vader *knew his name* now. But *how*?

A brief memory of an exasperated, unimpressed growl of *so's your mouth* and Luke blinked. Shook that thought away and lifted his chin, trying not to wince at the way the muscles in his neck protested.

"I guess you get to decide if I'm worth wasting the energy to kill, this time," Luke said and wished he dared to try and stand up. He didn't like sitting here having to look up at Vader. He was short enough as it was, especially compared to this giant of a man. Said man let out some sort of noise following what he'd said that Luke couldn't interpret, staring at him.

"Perhaps. I could also train you, young one. Obi-Wan was clearly wasted on you."

Train... him?

Staring, stunned, Luke turned that sentence over in his mind

while the light from the lightsaber coloured part of Darth Vader's black into pale blue and sent the rest of him into unfathomable darkness.

Train him?

"Never," Luke hissed, finally finding a word to encapsulate the incredulity and anger he was suddenly feeling.

Let Darth Vader, who killed Ben and his father *train him?*

As if!

Vader shifted, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned forward, looming. Completely unnecessarily so, considering Luke had nowhere to go and couldn't, he was pretty sure, stand up at the moment.

"You do not know what you are rejecting, Skywalker. I---" he cut himself off, that grotesque mask swinging around to look behind him despite that there was no noise of approaching footsteps or anything. Then he turned back, and Luke got the sense of a sudden... sharpness to the dark aura that seemed to emanate from Vader.

Pressed, somehow.

"Has anyone been here? Talked to you? Did they *know your name?*"

A cold, heavy weight pressed down and in and Luke was finding it hard to breathe suddenly. Almost responded on reflex as that weight sort of demanded it, but then he shook his head, gathered himself and *pushed*. In what way, he wasn't sure, but it lightened the weight on and around him. He barely noticed when Vader took half a jerky step back.

"No--- What does that even... Are we *finished* here or what?" Luke cried, annoyed and aching, and starting to get confused.

"Yes," Vader snapped, waving a hand sharply - Luke didn't even see where the controls might have been, because the moment the forcefield disappeared Vader swept in, yanked the lightsaber from his shaking and admittedly weak hand and gestured at him, "get up."

Staring up at Vader, Luke scowled and didn't move.

“Why? You’re just--”

“*Get up*, boy, before I take the matter into my own hands,” Darth Vader thundered, his voice rolling through the darkness and Luke jerked. He was halfway to his feet before he could think about it - and then his muscles jerked with another spasm, but he bit down on the cry that wanted to escape.

Surprisingly, he didn’t meet the floor.

There was a large hand wrapped around one of his arms, having caught him before his knees hit the floor, and Vader yanked him upright, though Luke could feel his legs threaten to give again. He knew he wouldn’t be able to stand without assistance, and still he yanked on his arm, though Vader didn’t let go.

“What did you *do*?” the same pressured, whip-crack demand and Luke scowled. Wasn’t sure why he felt like he’d been caught out doing something he shouldn’t while also getting injured in the process. That aside from the fact that that was what had *happened*, but it wasn’t like Darth Vader would care. Or should care, either. Had any *right* to care.

“... might have... stuck the lightsaber into the forcefield,” he said, almost managing a breezy shrug and grinned, feeling decidedly - strangely - *vindicated* by the way Vader reared back at that revelation.

“You did *what*?” the hiss that escaped out the vocoder could’ve burned through durasteel while the grip on his arm tightened.

Luke stared up at Vader for several moments and then shrugged again. He didn’t have to explain himself. After another long stretch of silence Darth Vader let out a low, rumbling growl before he shook his head slowly and then unceremoniously whirled around.

“I would advice you to come quietly and *be silent*, unless you desire an audience with the Emperor,” Vader finally snapped and started to walk - more like storm off, and while Luke found that while he could walk, it was a precarious affair and after three steps his legs locked up and he staggered into Vader, fell and would’ve ended up dragged along if Vader hadn’t stopped, pull-

ing him upright without much thought or effort.

"I didn't know you got audiences before being executed," Luke said, unable *not to*, and got shaken for his trouble. Surprisingly gently, however.

"You will not be executed," Vader snapped, helm angled in a way that made it obvious he was staring down at Luke for a silent moment, "though you may wish that that was actually happening if you attract the Emperor's attention. It is, however, obvious you cannot walk out of here on your own." Annoyance coloured Vader's tone as he reached into his belt and plucked something out, though Luke missed it at first, staring up at Vader as he was.

"Why do you care? I'm not going to let you train me no matter what you say!"

There was nothing in the whole *Galaxy* that would make Luke agree to *that*.

Vader paused, holding, Luke realised with a sudden lash of horror, a hypospray.

"You may come to revise your statement, young one."

Luke wasn't sure if it was his imagination or if Vader had sounded particularly sinister - or maybe the word was *ominous* - at that, but he was a bit distracted as he tried to pull away. His muscles weren't at all agreeing with him and protested angrily, leaving Luke to fall against the armoured giant as he tried get away from that hypospray. In a last, desperate attempt, he tried to slap the hand and the offending hypospray away. He wasn't successful.

"No! You're not going to--- gah!" It didn't really hurt when the needle sunk into his skin, but the shock of the tiny bite and the sudden tightness of his skin as whatever drug the thing contained was injected startled the exclamation out of Luke.

Shaking his head, grimacing at the wash of dizziness, Luke wondered if it was too soon to feel any effects, and stared up at the mask.

"Why'd you do *that* for?" the sulky accusation was slightly slurred, so Luke had to amend *that* statement at least; it wasn't

too soon to feel the effects.

He was also starting to feel sort of... numb.

Vader stared down at him, and it took Luke several moments to realise that aside from the hand on his arm, there was now another large hand resting at his waist, probably in preparation for when he couldn't fight the drug any longer.

That was strangely *considerate* of the murderer of his father.

"You cannot walk. It may also be the simplest way getting you out of here without too many questions."

That... seemed odd.

Luke frowned, fumbling as he reached forward - not sure what he intended to do, but he was caught between horrified fascination and confusion at the fact that he couldn't really feel his hand or the cloth it ended up clutching. Which was the... tunic? that covered Vader's chest. And it further wasn't any lighter in here than it'd been moments before, but he could still see more clearly.

The visor-covered eye-holes of the mask, Luke realised from this not-change in lighting, were slightly red-tinted.

He wondered why.

"... So? Why'd... you wanna..."

Whatever he'd intended to say got lost between one moment and the next, though it was also questionable how coherent those slurred few words had even *been*. A moment later and Luke slumped into the Dark Lord's expectant grip.

"... Because I have been blind," Vader muttered, wondering how he could even have missed the child being his son when he first met him face to face. Shaking his head, he hefted the boy in his arms. Now to leave with the minimal amount of questions - the drug would, at least, make Luke seem pretty dead to anyone who didn't look *too close*.

Hopefully it would be enough to avoid any unwanted attention.

Darth Vader wasn't aware that he clutched his son closer to his chest as he glanced upwards at that thought, before he deter-

minedly strode back the way he'd come.

All he needed to do was get out of the Imperial Palace.

◆

Chapter 20: In Which a Shuttle Comes to Hoth

◆

Another ESB AU because we all love ESB AUs. This time Luke's still out freezing his butt off on Hoth when Darth Dad comes calling...

“Han! STOP!” Leia yelled, her cry cutting through the din of the Tauntaun holding pen and Han yanked the reins back on pure reflex even as frustration welled up. Even *Leia*?

“*What*, You Highnessness? I thought *you*, at least, would wanna let me go and save Luke,” Han snapped as he turned in the saddle, and for some reason her fierce expression paused him. Paused him long enough the doors to the pen rumbled closed, but he didn’t even pay attention to that, he was looking down at Leia.

At Leia and the pained, almost teary, tension in her dark eyes, the way her nails were biting into the palms of her hands.

“*I do---*”

“So *let me go*, then, nine hells, Leia!”

Maybe he took some vague pleasure in the way the vulnerable darkness in her eyes flash-froze into more familiar anger and she straightened, spine suddenly ramrod straight. Around them, the pen was a mess of people running - though it seemed rather more frantic than it ought to, this late in the evening.

“A shuttle entered atmo just minutes ago, Han, and there’s a Star Destroyer in orbit. We’ve raised the shield and we’re expecting the rest of the fleet shortly,” Leia said, her voice tight, and a leaden weight settled in the pit of Han’s stomach. She looked vulnerable again, for a brief, aching moment, then her expression hardened. “We’re evacuating, and Luke might even be *safer*

out there if they start attacking.”

“*Safer?*” Han didn’t like the way his voice rose in pitch, but couldn’t care at the moment, “the kid’s gonna *freeze to death* if no one gets to him---”

“Which might be better. If we can’t get transports off, we’re trapped here, Han,” Leia said and then whirled around, storming off. Han sat on the Tauntaun for a frozen moment, glancing between the now-closed blast doors and towards Leia’s retreating back. The slight shudder to her shoulders was what made him swing off the beast and follow her.

Hold on just a little longer, kid.

Because like *hell* was he just leaving the kid out there, Imperial Fleet about to drop on their heads or no!

He had *expected* to be landing next to or right on top of the Rebel base when he finally was close enough to pick up the glowing trace of his son’s Force presence, as difficult as it was to separate it out from others’ when the connection wasn’t mutual. The reality, however, was that he was clearly nowhere near whatever pitiful base the Rebels had carved out of Hoth’s ice and snow - and there *was* one, he knew - but rather out in the middle of Hoth’s snowy wasteland.

In a blizzard.

What, by all the stars in the Galaxy, was Luke doing out in a *blizzard*?

Tilting his head up as he stepped out from under the nosecone of the shuttle, the wind tearing at his cloak, Vader considered the roaring whiteness around him. The attack would have to wait until the blizzard settled some; while he could expect the troops to be well-trained and able to handle the weather, the storm, in conjunction with the dropping temperatures of this side of Hoth turning towards its night side would do nothing for the equipment.

He also knew the Rebels had raised their deflector shield;

bombardment, however practical, wouldn't be possible.

Stalking off into the snow, the quiet incredulity grew the farther he walked. Incredulity and, quietly, sharply, worry. He knew exactly where he needed to go thanks to Luke's presence, but while it was growing stronger the closer he got, it was also growing *weaker*. The boy was clearly exposed to the elements and incredulity slowly edged closer towards anger.

Said anger bloomed hotly in the pit of his stomach when he crested the small hill he'd been trekking up and spotted the barely visible form of Luke Skywalker collapsed in the snow at the bottom of said hill. Giving it half a thought after studying the incline of this side of the hill, Darth Vader jumped and landed at the bottom, snow exploding up around him.

Another two swift steps had him kneeling by the boy's side and after a cursory check to make sure there was nothing broken and that it would be safe to move him, he rolled Luke over.

The quiet coal of anger that had been lodged low in his torso near his spine roared up into a bonfire as he saw the injuries, and Luke winced, even barely conscious and probably confused, in reaction to the dark, cold swell in the Force. He even, surprisingly and rather accurately, grabbed the wrist of Vader's left hand and pushed it away, crying out for---

Growling, Vader ignored the weak attempts at pushing him away and tried to close his ears to the pleas to 'Ben' to come back, and scooped Luke up in his arms. Obi-Wan had been dead for three years now, why was the foolish child crying out for *him*?

"He cannot help you, Luke," Vader snapped, though he hadn't intended to say that. Silently, managing to keep his mouth under control this time, he added *he never could* in the privacy of his own head. This time, there was no obvious response or action from Luke, which was... rather worrying.

How long had he been out in the snow, clearly injured and probably also lost?

The answer was, of course; too long, but such an imprecise assessment was less than helpful when it came to the actual

medical assistance Luke would need. Medical assistance that the shuttle couldn't provide, Vader thought darkly. It had, at best, basic first aid supplies, and while a stimshot and thermal blankets would help keep his son *stabilised*, it wouldn't rectify the damage incurred.

Striding up the ramp and closing it with barely a thought and push through the Force, he carefully put Luke down on the floor, taking out what medical supplies the shuttle did have.

It wasn't enough. Nothing but a fully equipped medical bay or center would be *enough*, but he administered the stimshot and wrapped the boy up - and in a fit of frustration pulled off his cloak and added it on top of the thermal blanket before he moved Luke to one of the shuttle's two rows of gravity couches and strapped him down.

The cockpit revealed the blizzard to be too strong to chance a lift-off, but he *almost* took off immediately either way.

Had he been younger, he would have paced.

As it was, Darth Vader crossed his arms and stared out the cockpit's viewport at the flowing curtain of white outside, nursing the frustrated anger that bubbled in his veins.

Soon. He'd gotten this far, and Luke would manage until he could get him up to the *Executor*.

And then that Rebel base would be wiped out.

He wasn't cold.

That thought rose slowly in his mind, seeming quite extraordinary.

There was some worrying dark memories smudging his recollections of stumbling through the snow, seeing the ghostly form of Ben, and failing to get up again... but those snow-caked flashes of black gloves and a frozen face (mask?) was, Luke was pretty sure, just delirium-induced nightmare images.

Han had probably found him, and he was in the base medbay. Or maybe he was actually *dead*, which would be...

Luke frowned, felt his face twitch in response to the mental thought of the expression, and if he had a face he couldn't be dead, right?

So, base medbay. That established (and with some relief, he could admit to that), Luke finally managed to open his eyes, ending up staring up at a white ceiling. That, on its own, was definitely expected.

But, there was... something just slightly *off* with it.

Frowning up at the ceiling, Luke tried to figure it out.

It was a very shiny ceiling. Clean, sharp lines and polished white metal. It looked, for all intents and purposes, new. Or at least not as worn out and scuffed as basically everything in the Alliance could be expected to be. Slowly, as that thought settled deeper into Luke's head, a trickle of dread started to pool in his stomach.

This wasn't right.

The realisation setting in, Luke jerked upright and stumbled off the bed - or *tried to*, anyway. Instead, gasping in surprise, he ended up half-on, half-off it, flailing. Finally catching himself on the edge of the bed and pulling himself upright, he yanked the covers off and stared at the offending, and very much metal, cuff that kept his right ankle chained to the bed.

"*Great*," Luke muttered, glowering at the cuff and wondering where his lightsaber was as the doors at the other end of the bright, well-lit room opened and allowed a severe-looking woman inside. She looked up from her datapad at his mutter and he caught a narrow eyebrow quirking upwards into the shadow of the brim her cap.

"Lord Vader would be most displeased if you got lost somewhere, so there's been precautions," she said, a brief flash of teeth bared in what was *almost* a congenial smile, "how are we feeling today?"

Luke stared warily as the medic - clearly that was what she was, even if he couldn't recognise the rank bar on her chest - put down her datapad and picked up a scanner from a shelf and

came up to the bed. She was tall and thin, and while her cap sort of hid it, her head seemed a *little* too long for her to be completely Human. A hybrid of some sort?

“... Vader? Where *am* I anyway?” Luke demanded, attempting to crawl backwards when she stepped up to the bed, but of course he didn’t get anywhere and instead he quickly dropped the covers back over himself, even if he was dressed in a pair of pants and a singlet, which was... something, at least.

“The *Executor*, of course.”

That thin thread of dread that had slowly been collecting quickly balled itself up into a veritable yarn of anxiety, which tangled itself up in his innards. The medic didn’t seem to notice or care as she finished running the scanner over him and straightened up, giving him another knife-edge bland smile.

“You’ll be pleased to know you’ve fully recovered from the lacerations to your face, the concussion, various swellings and contusions in addition to the effects of hypothermia that you’d sustained when you were brought on board.”

Staring into pale - almost gold - brown eyes, Luke felt another few organs get wrapped up in the dread-yarn inside of him.

“How... how long have I been here?”

What about Han, Leia and Chewie? The base? The Empire must have known they were there if Vader had found him...

“You were in the bacta tank for two days, we took you out twelve hours ago,” the medic answered crisply and then turned around as the door opened again, saluting as if she’d known who it was that would be entering. Maybe she *had* known, Luke didn’t care.

What he *did* care about was the cold that suddenly permeated the air, and the tall, black-clad figure of Darth Vader.

He gritted his teeth and fisted his hands into the covers, but Vader didn’t even look at him; all his attention seemed trained on the medic.

“He is recovered?”

“Completely, Lord Vader. With a few more days of proper nu-

trition and additional boosters, we'll have rectified the various nutrition-related deficiencies as well." Picking up her datapad and making a few quick notes, she then handed it over to the Dark Lord and walked off towards an office at the back of the room. The office wasn't so much hidden behind the transparisteel wall as much as it simply separating it from the surgery theater and offering some privacy.

Luke, however, would rather she'd have stayed.

He was *practically* naked and unarmed, after all, and cuffed to the bed in the same room as Darth Vader.

Darth Vader, however, took his time looking through whatever information the datapad contained, and it was several minutes before it was lowered and he raised that mask to stare at Luke, who frowned and tried not to pick at the covers.

"I want my clothes back," Luke said after what felt like several minutes but was probably not even one of drawn-out silence. Vader stared and then dipped his head.

"You will be brought replacements."

Trying to *not* let out the noise that wanted to escape, Luke roughly dragged a hand through his hair.

"I don't want *replacements*, I want *my* clothes back! What do you even *want*? What's the *point* of all this, and what about my fr--- the base on Hoth?"

If he'd had something to toss, Luke was pretty sure he'd have tossed it, no matter how childish that was. Vader took a few steps closer, and Luke tried, again, to shift away, with as much success as earlier.

"Your *Rebel friends*, you will no doubt be relieved to know, got away. I cannot say the same for the rest of the Rebel forces on Hoth, but they did have some success to their evacuation," Vader said, and Luke didn't at all like the dry tone. At least Leia and the others had gotten away, then. That was *something*.

Then he realised he wasn't questioning Vader's truthfulness on this matter, but... and strangely enough, it didn't seem like he'd lied. There wasn't any reason for him to, was there?

“As for the... *point* to all this...” there was no dryness this time. There was, instead, a quiet sort of hesitation that deepened - *darkened* - into determination even as Vader trailed off, staring at him silently for several moments, hands wrapped around his belt. “You said I killed your father.”

Blinking, quite thrown by this non-sequitur and blast from three years past, Luke rallied and scowled after a moment of surprise.

“Ben told me what you did. You betrayed and *murdered* my father! Like you did to Ben!”

Vader’s hands around his belt tightened, leather creaking into the silence as the air got heavy and colder.

“No.” The single word rolled through the empty medbay, and Luke was suddenly aware of that dread-yarn wrapped around his intestines again. He didn’t want to hear this. He shook his head, swallowing against the sudden dryness in his mouth, and tried again to get off the bed as Vader took another step closer, looming, now.

“I didn’t kill your father, Luke.”

That should be a good thing.

It should, but something *was wrong* (or maybe right), and Luke stared up at the Dark Lord, frozen still, and hanging on the words he was, somehow, sure he actually already knew what they would be. He just couldn’t... quite... grasp it.

“I am your father.”

“... no.”

That... that couldn’t---

“That... that’s not true.” Luke shook his head, feeling panic clawing at his insides, tearing up the dread-yarn. Denial didn’t help, though. He could *feel* that Vader hadn’t lied, that it *was* true. He shook his head again, sharply, felt like he couldn’t breathe and was trapped - more than he *actually* was.

“Search your feelings, Luke you kn---”

“STOP IT!” Luke screamed, uselessly clapping his hands over his ears as if *that* would help, and the pressure that had been

trapped inside got ripped out of him, slamming outwards in what felt like a physical wave - the sudden crash of cascading noise that descended surprised him and Luke opened his eyes into what looked like a hurricane had went through the medbay.

Loose equipment lay everywhere, and Vader had - apparently - been slammed back into the wall, several meters away from his bed. He was now on the floor, and if the situation was different Luke might have been inclined to laugh at what was a rather ridiculous-looking image. The medic ran out of her office and stared at the mess, eyes wide.

“Lord Vader! What---”

“OUT.”

She staggered back as if physically hit, fleeing out of the medbay completely, not just back into her office, and Luke was trapped again, *alone* with---

With...

Staring as Darth Vader stood up, he leaned back as far as he could go when Vader slowly walked closer, and even though he *tried* he couldn't grasp the earlier panicked outburst. All he had was the echo of the aborted demand to search his feelings and he already *knew* what they, what the *Force* was saying.

“That, young one, does hardly help your denial,” Vader said, and Luke bit down on something that seemed almost like hysterical laughter at the dry tone and the *implication* that that Force-borne outburst was supposedly a *familial* trait. He shook his head again even as a heavy, gloved hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“We can set things right, Luke.”

Shaking his head again, Luke crumpled up as well as he could with one leg kept trapped by the cuff, clutching at his hair. He didn't even notice that he might have been leaning *towards* Vader a little. Not until he was already leaning against the black armour, trying to squeeze his eyes shut firmly enough no tears escaped.

He wasn't going to listen.

He'd already heard enough and he *wasn't going to listen*.

He needed a moment.

"He lied. Why didn't he... why didn't he *tell me*? He *lied*."

The heavy weight of Vader's... his *father's* hand on his shoulder, squeezing lightly, was both anchor and chain while he tried to get his trembling under control.



Chapter 21: In Which Our Heroes Learn...



That going into ruins sometimes is a Very Bad idea.

A Halloween-inspired special for those of you who celebrate it! It's sort of original, sort of AU of the current comics as it refers to some events from there as having happened (but since the crossover event Vader Down isn't out yet, this one doesn't account for any possible meeting between our heroes and Vader in that one as having happened).

“Artoo, you think you could use the ship’s scanners to give us a better idea of what the layout looks like?” Luke asked while standing very, very still and speaking slowly and precisely - he still wasn’t sure how much of that even got out, and Artoo’s responding whistle broke up into static several times and then the comlink went dead.

Again.

Much like it’d had when he’d tried to talk to Leia and Han, who were, at least, still together. At least they had been the last time the comlink had deigned to work, and Luke hoped they still were. Looking around with a sigh after trying to fiddle with the comlink and finding it stubbornly dead, or just receiving static from what *ought* to be recognised frequencies, Luke dragged a hand through his hair.

How had they even gotten separated?

He was sure he’d been just a step or two behind Leia, and Han had been behind *him* (Leia insisting on being in front, Han then waving him on and telling him to ‘get on with it, kid’, and he hadn’t seen any reason to argue). How did you get separated from two other people when you were walking *between them*?

But he had.

The passage he was in was cramped, the walls almost transparent-smooth under his hand despite definitely being stone, and the only reason he wasn't slipping on the equally frictionless floor was because there was some sort of patterns carved into the stone, raised up from the rest of the surface. Or maybe the flagstones had been sanded down around the patterns.

Whichever it was, it gave enough traction he could walk, even run. Not that he was taking these corridors *running*, despite the way the charged air prickled against his neck and the echo of his own steps sometimes coming back as if an army was on his heels and he could practically *feel* the murderous intent, and sometimes the echoes died away into long, mournful trickles.

Running around in unknown corridors might end up with him running face-first into a dead-end or falling off something, after all. Flexing his hands, Luke resisted the urge to grab his lightsaber and light it up.

He was alone in this passage.

There was nothing else here, and the only reason it *seemed* to be something around was because the air was just hot enough to feel like exhaled breath, and there was an air current from somewhere that flowed erratically, almost like---

Whirling around, whipping his blaster up, Luke stared down the way he'd come - the stairs went down military-parade straight for fifty meters, then made a sharp turn (he'd almost run into the wall when the turn happened, and for a breathless second thought he'd met a dead-end).

Something...

But no.

"Get it together, Skywalker." Taking a breath, Luke turned back around and carefully started down the passage again, glad he was as short as he was; the corridor angled inwards up towards the ceiling, and had he been as tall as Han, he'd have had to bend over. Luke was rather sure the area he was in now was some sort of maintenance passages because he could feel the hatches

every ten meters or so. So far he hadn't been able to bend any of them open, and he didn't dare use the lightsaber in case he destroyed something irreparably.

His vague hope was to restore whatever power there was to these old ruins, not mess with the circuitry *further*. Another puff of air against his neck, and he *knew* it was just the air currents, but the rhythm of it made him think of towering black armour and a red lightsaber---

Freezing, Luke stared down the corridor.

Had that been..?

No.

Shaking his head, Luke snorted at himself as he realised he was watching a faint lightening of the darkness a little further along the corridor, light probably filtering in from somewhere further off from one of the many cracks ruins inevitably developed. It was more than half a year since the factory moon *fiasco*, and he'd promised himself he'd do better next time.

And he wouldn't do better if he jumped at the merest suggestion of red light flickering in the darkness. The fuzzy gray that lightened around a few steps of corridor didn't even *remotely* look like light cast from a lightsaber.

Except that it was flickering.

The air slowly thickened, every hair on his body slowly coming to stand on end and the warm-as-exhaled-air in the passage was suddenly pulsing, as if someone was gasping. Quite a few someones, in fact, and Luke unhooked his lightsaber and lit it, pressing himself up against the wall as the flickering grew brighter, came closer, the rush of air louder and maybe it was just his own steps but he could *swear* he could hear a scream---

"Luke?"

"Gah!" Jerking upright, he cracked his head against the wall, looking around wildly. He was standing squarely in the slightly lighter part of the corridor, feeling like he'd touched a live wire, and there was nothing here.

His comlink crackled again and he stared down at his wrist

and hurriedly lifted it up.

“Leia?”

“Where *are* y--ghzzz... we’re---” the comlink cut out again, and Luke resisted the urge to toss his lightsaber in frustration. Slapping the comlink did nothing, and the connect button could just as well have been a decoration.

“*Blast it!*”

And now he’d have to adjust back to the darkness again. Grumpily, he turned off the lightsaber, closing his eyes and focusing on breathing instead of staring into the darkness and trying to see. Better to walk around with your eyes adjusted as much as they could to the shadows, at least in caves, since then, whichever little light filtered in would help you and you wouldn’t be left blinded by the glowstick.

Biggs had told him that when they went on an (ill-advised) cave-exploration when he was ten and Biggs was thirteen.

Swallowing down the flash of grief, Luke opened his eyes again and stalked off, keeping a hand on the slick wall as he walked. The corridor took a turn, then suddenly there were three passages (which he mostly could tell from the *slightly* cooler rush of air that collided in the intersection).

Shifting on his feet, Luke eyed each passage in turn. All three of them were dark, but he could see the suggestion of cables hanging down from the ceiling in one of them - probably better to avoid that one so he didn’t get tangled up. But which of the *other* two..?

Closing his eyes, he tried to reach for the Force like Ben had shown him.

Relax.

Focus.

Breathe and---

Left.

The air was still unsettlingly warm, breezing past his cheeks and only just ruffling his hair around his ears and at the top of his head, as if he had (several) someone(s) standing right behind

him and breathing down on him.

His steps were echoing again, as if there were at least ten others in this passage with him and not just him. Luke scowled and stomped down extra hard the next few steps, trying to ignore the way his skin almost *ached* from the tingling pressure.

He was alone down here.

There was only him, Leia and Han in these ruins, with Threepio and Artoo by their ship outside.

Chewie was back at the Fleet trying to (again) repair the *Falcon*, which was the only reason they hadn't taken the *Falcon* or Chewie along on this excursion. They needed a new base ag---

Look out!

Staggering back against the wall to get away from the lightsaber slashing the air where his head had been, Luke reflexively brought his lightsaber up, ignited - and there was no Vader there to meet his blade, but there *was* a stormtrooper, just stepping around the corner.

Four, in fact.

There was a breathless (the corridor breathed for them), startled second where no one did anything and then Luke yelled, swung his lightsaber and swallowed down the nausea as the head flew off the body and bounced away behind him. He managed to stab two of the three remaining stormtroopers at once by charging the next one and impaling him, then the other.

The fourth brought up his blaster, red plasma painting the corridor in streaks of indistinct red along with Luke's blue, and he swallowed down a cry as the first bolt just barely missed him and burned through his jacket and shirt and probably melted some of it to his skin. He managed to deflect the next two shots, and the third ricocheted back at point-blank range, hitting *just right* for the stormtrooper's armour to be unable to soak up the shot.

Breath heavy in his ears, Luke stared down at the four dead - very dead, very *there* - stormtroopers. Hesitantly, he reached a foot out and nudged the closest one. Yep. There. What was

stormtroopers doing here?

“Leia?” Luke didn’t think he’d have any luck with the comlink, but he tried it anyway, trying to calm his breathing, “Han? We’ve got stormtroopers in here with us.”

No reply.

Not that he’d exactly expected one.

Still staring down at the dead stormtroopers, Luke reluctantly turned off his lightsaber again, though he looked around at first. What had that flash of another lightsaber been, and even more so, what had that call been? It hadn’t sounded like either Han or Leia. Or even *Ben*, but he couldn’t tell much else. It’d almost sounded like several voices echoing as one...

But it hadn’t echoed in the actual passage, though .

... Was that the corridor making its weird breathing noise, or was it a respirator?

Looking behind him, Luke couldn’t see anything, even as his eyes slowly adjusted again. Biting his lip, he gingerly stepped over the dead bodies, figuring that if he continued this way, he might get out of the maintenance passages. The stormtroopers had to have gotten into them somehow, right? Maybe he could get out that way...

Following close to the wall but not looking *at it* (even in the darkness the smooth, transparisteel-like stone seemed to throw twisting reflections out of the corner of his eyes, and they’d all twitched a lot at first until Leia snapped that they should just *not* look at the walls), Luke breathed slowly, then frowned.

Did it smell like smoke in here?

Maybe it was just from the dissipating blaster bolts, but the stormtroopers appearing made him think of the scene that must have occurred at the homestead---

Screams rang down the corridor and Luke fell back, the impact jarring through him and blaster up this time instead of his lightsaber.

“Au---ggh! Aunt Beru? Uncle Owen?” Gaze flickering around the dark, narrow passage wildly, he *knew* they were dead, but

that had sounded *exactly* like them...

The passage smelled of smoke and burned flesh.

Probably from him killing the stormtroopers.

Angrily scrubbing at his face, Luke jammed the blaster back into the holster and stood up.

Okay, whenever they got out of here they could *definitely* cross this place off the list of possible bases. Choking down a deep breath of warm, moist air, Luke stormed on, this time not even using the wall for guidance, just trusting that he wouldn't run into a dead-end or bend in the passage and that the ribbed floor would keep him from fall--

"Gah!" Staggering back and laying one hand on whatever was in front of him, Luke rubbed his nose. He'd feel *that* for a day or two. *Great*. Feeling around, Luke realised this wasn't a bend in the corridor, because it *ended* here. Was it actually a dead end? Had he missed a bend or hatch somewhere that the stormtroopers had come through?

Swallowing down his growing worry, Luke patted around the seeming dead-end and almost missed the slight indentation his fingers slid over. Going back again, slower, he grinned when the thing gave and turned under his hand, and the hatch slid aside.

Stepping out into a vast, open space, thin, dust-mote-filled beams of light spearing through the darkness, Luke breathed in the cooler rush of air with relief. The air still felt heavy and charged, as if there was a current being conveyed from molecule to molecule and it pressed down around his head, but it was at least cooler out here than it'd been in the maintenance passages.

A tinkling noise filled the air, and while Luke couldn't catch any more than flashes of light caught in water around the room, he was pretty sure there were numerous streams (tiny water-falls?) falling down along the walls and maybe even right down through the air from above. Looking up, he could see quick flashes of rainbow scatters in the darkness, suggestions of suspended crystals refracting both light and water.

Carefully stepping further out on what was a long, arching

walkway or bridge, Luke could see - just barely - more of them spearing through the space of this hall in the gloom.

Closing his eyes and listening to the crystal-like sound of water, falling too slowly to become a roar, it was clear that at one point, this place would've been beautiful.

Now, though, despite the suggestion of serenity that still remained, there was a discordant note of tension in the air. Anxiety seemed to echo every step he took further out on the walkway, with old, faded aurebesh inlaid under the clear stones that he walked on. The air was cool, but also seemed to hold a biting edge of pain and death.

What had even *happened* in this place?

Because by now it was obvious *something* must have.

Carefully keeping his eyes on the walkway, but not looking aside at the drop on either side, Luke was pretty sure by now that this must have been an old Jedi temple. How old, he wasn't sure, but the conclusion felt right.

Coming out onto a circular platform that had four (including the one he'd been walking on) bridges going from it, Luke scratched his sweaty scalp and tried to see which of them would get him across to the other side, and, hopefully, a proper corridor instead of more maintenance passages. People had probably died in the corridors as well, but at least a wider corridor wouldn't feel quite as... closed in.

"Luke? Hey, *kid!*"

"Han? Leia!" Looking up at the echoing call, Luke grinned and immediately took the right-hand bridge, as that seemed to go closer towards the side of the hall he could hear Han's voice from.

"You guys okay?" Luke called, paused and eyed a bridge that crossed the one he was running along a few meters above him and took a breath and jumped.

"LUKE!" Leia's yell cut through the tinkling tension just as he landed on the bridge, swaying but maintaining his balance. Then he could simply walk over to stand at another suspended

platform in view of the opposite wall, where Han and Leia stood peering out of a window - gallery? Was that what it was called when the corridor was sort of open to the space with a lot of windows?

Luke shrugged mentally and gave his friends a wave.

"We're *fine*, but are *you*?" He could just make out Leia's disapproving scowl before she shook her head, "have you run into any stormtroopers? I guess we won't use this place..." she said with a sigh and while that was unfortunate since this would be the fourth place they'd hit and would have to discard, Luke wasn't sorry in the *slightest*.

"Good thing too, Your Exaltedness. This place gives me the *creeps* and I know you ain't unaffected either, Princess!" Han huffed and Luke found himself smiling, relaxing for the first time since they'd walked into this place.

"It's *nothing*, Han---"

"You guys have... um... noticed things too?" Luke peered up at them, and he was *sure* he saw them exchange a look.

"Look, kid, it's nothin', right? This place's old, and creepy, and has ventilation problems. That's all." If Han had meant to dispel all worries and imply he hadn't seen anything, he failed *spectacularly*. Even with the distance separating them, Luke could see the tension in the older man's shoulders.

"I just want to get out of here. I ran into some stormtroopers as... well---" Trailing off, Luke felt a by-now rather familiar prick-
le of cold darkness stab him in the back, somewhere right between his shoulderblades. From there it spread down his spine and up along his neck. He unhooked his lightsaber without a thought as he turned to the right, staring down one of the bridges that connected to this platform.

"Luke? Luke, are you---"

"Can you guys get out?" Swallowing against the low pool of dread as well as anger now bubbling in the pit of his stomach, Luke knew the faint echo of even breathing that could just be heard underneath the singing sound of falling water was, this

time, *not* his imagination or a trick of air currents in the maintenance passages.

"We think this gallery leads down into the entrance hall, but Luke, what about *you*?" Leia's voice rose at the end and Luke was both glad he was down here and wished he was up there with them, but he gritted his teeth and turned on his lightsaber. He knew he (still) wasn't good enough to fight Vader, but maybe he could distract him long enough...

"Then run and I'll try to catch up!"

"The *hell*, kid---"

Luke didn't listen to Han, just stared along the bridge he was facing as the darkness reluctantly slid off the hulking form of Darth Vader as he strode out of whatever corridor he'd come from, making a single, heart-stopping jump across several bridges to land on the one Luke was facing. That nearly insect-looking mask tilted to (presumably) glance up at Leia and Han before he looked back at Luke.

"It would be *unwise* of the Rebellion to choose this place for their next base," he said slowly, his voice echoing like a judging bell in the hall. Luke rolled his eyes and bit his lip, judging the distance between them as Vader slowly advanced and briefly indulging his desire to attack the murderer of Ben and his father.

"I think we *noticed*," he muttered and then turned on his heels and *ran*.

"Luke!"

Strangely enough, Luke could *swear* it hadn't just been Han and Leia calling his name, but the third voice hadn't sounded like anyone else he knew. It had also been in his head, which made him think that it should have been Ben, but the ringing, definitely masculine voice hadn't sounded like the old Jedi at all.

Either way he ignored it, leaped off the bridge and almost fell off the one he landed on as he rolled forward - he probably imagined the slight tug *backwards*, he was sure. Staggering back on his feet, Luke hoped Vader wasn't as close as the thunder in his ears implied and rushed through the doorway he'd ended up by.

Hopefully he'd be able to find his way out before Vader cornered him.

If he didn't, he'd go down *fighting*.

The hum of their lightsabers were loud in his ears and his breath burned in his lungs. The corridor, wide and arching up far above him, had had its nearly mirror-like walls scorched black and cracked at some point. He could still see flickers of more colours than just his and Vader's red and blue out of the corner of his eyes, disappearing into the soot, refracting from the cracks.

The air was hot again, and smelled of fire.

There seemed to be more people in here than there *should be* and yet they were *definitely* alone--- Between one step and the next, something (the Force) gave him a single, harsh shove in the back and he lost his balance and flew forwards and sideways, slamming into the wall.

"Ahh---gh!" Rolling around along the wall, feeling a large crack dig uncomfortably into his back, Luke lifted his lightsaber in a barely-passable guard.

Vader slowed down and stalked slowly closer.

Ten meters away, he stopped, lightsaber held loosely in one hand and pointed down towards the floor.

"This was a foolish place to come to, Skywalker." Annoyance coloured the rich, intimidating baritone, and Luke sucked in a breath through aching back and ribs and blew a few strands of sweaty hair out of his eyes. They fell back. The charged air seemed to crackle, and the smell of fire lingered. The arched ceiling above was almost obscured by smoke.

There wasn't any smoke there, however. Not really.

"Not like we *knew* we were walking into a haunted temple," he spat out, then narrowed his eyes, "this another place you *razed*, Vader?"

Vader flicked the hand holding the lightsaber, sending a twisted red flicker of light over the scorched floor.

"This place has remained like this for thousands of years, boy," Vader said, then walked closer again, and Luke slid sideways.

Anakin!

Luke jerked so hard he cracked his head on the wall again, but even the pain shooting glittering stars through his vision couldn't make him miss the way *Vader* jerked as well, whirling around, lightsaber held high now.

"No."

The corridor flooded with darkness, and ice seemed to cut through the Force, freezing it. Rage and death rolled in, and the walls reflected spouts of fire - or maybe lava.

*Anakin... you're **breaking my heart**.*

"DON'T YOU DARE!"

Luke staggered away from the roar as much as from the Force pulse that slammed through the corridor and against the walls, widening the cracks. Trying to breathe, he decided that whatever was going on he better get away when he could.

There was a thought as he staggered to his feet, a wonder if the place, like it'd drawn on his memory of seeing the burning farmstead, he realised now, was doing the same for Vader... when he'd killed his father, maybe? But if so, why was he hearing a *woman's* voice?

And why was she calling for Anakin and not Vader?

... his mother?

Unable to resist, Luke looked behind him, and felt his stomach twist with vertigo.

The whole corridor seemed to be *wavering* behind Vader, a gaping maw of crystalline darkness. The effect was slowly slithering forwards as the armoured giant clutched his helm in one hand, lightsaber held in a vice-like cramp-tight grip in the other. Slowing, Luke turned around, walking backwards for another few steps before he stopped.

Watched the twisting shimmer reach to barely a meter or two behind Vader, felt the wall of *pain* that was reaching forward, eager to draw in the dark maelstrom that tore around the Sith Lord.

He could say nothing.

He could say nothing and that would probably be justice for

an uncounted number of beings. (Like Biggs.)

But this wasn't something Vader had had a hand in (he was sure of that), and the place was...

No.

"*Vader!*"

Darth Vader jerked again and he must have realised something was wrong, because he didn't even look behind him - he simply leaped forwards, landing beside Luke with a crack of stone. Jerking back in surprise, Luke lost his footing, but it didn't matter. A black-gloved hand swept out and caught him.

It was a good thing Luke had already turned his lightsaber off, the way he had his hands trapped between his own chest and Vader's, half hanging off his shoulder. The control box, whatever it was for, dug uncomfortably into his hip.

"What *is* that?" Luke yelled, staring as the twisting wave of pain and death in the Force reached forward - he could see it as much as he *felt it*, and it made him nauseous. Trying to gain some grip even with his hands trapped, watching that... thing that was the Force, it was unsettling enough he forgot he'd intended to yell at the Dark Lord to put him down.

Maybe it was better where he was.

Darth Vader had longer legs than he did, after all.

"Over six thousand Jedi were in this temple when the the split happened, young one. You woke up the pain of the dead," Vader said, and while his voice sounded rather clipped and tight and he was clearly still *angry* (Luke could feel it simmering just beyond his awareness, but it was a refreshingly clear and *clean* reaction compared to what he was *looking at*) his response was surprisingly cordial.

"Split? What *split*?" Luke yelled and then drew in a breath and almost bit his tongue when the growing, screaming red cracks in the scorched walls shattered a section of the wall - Vader caught them with a hand lifted in the air and flung the AT-ST-sized pieces behind them with an ease Luke could admit, even in the middle of this, made him envious. "And what do you mean *I did?!*"

He hadn't done *anything*!

"The Hundred-Year Darkness. It created the Sith from the Jedi," Vader rumbled and jumped off the landing at the top of the stairs they'd reached, landing with bone-jarring force at the bottom, "and you are a walking beacon, *Skywalker*. Who did you *think* it was that stirred the Force in here? The *smuggler*?" Disdain dripped off of Vader's voice and Luke huffed in offence, but the sudden re-emergence of sunlight cut off his intended defense of Han - as well as the distracted thought that he'd heard the phrase 'Hundred-Year Darkness' before - and he swallowed down fresh air.

Vader didn't put him down, but he did slow down.

"You may wish to leave in the event that the wound in the Force can reach beyond the ruins," Vader said, calm menace dripping off his voice, and Luke twisted around to try and catch sight of his friends. And they *were* there, standing at the bottom of the ramp into the run-down and illegally armed small freighter they'd got from the Alliance.

He was relieved they were out here. Really didn't want to think about what might have happened had they still been in there when that *thing* was woken up. Reflexively, he glanced back at the ruins and probably paled; the entrance was a seething mass, and the vines that covered the walls outside were withering, something like frost edging the leaves.

"As if we're gonna let you leave with the kid, Vader!" Han yelled, but Luke decided to cut in; he could *feel* the angry, poisoned tremble reach out in the Force, and they weren't far away enough from it yet.

"Do as he says!" he yelled and both Leia and Han looked pretty poleaxed, "that place's... I don't know. We need to get away! PUT ME DOWN!" Trying to wriggle his hands free, Luke buried a knee in Vader's midsection; Vader staggered but merely tightened his grip and the fear that had been purely for the wriggling crystalline poison in the Force that was now reaching outwards from the ruined temple was now also because he was *stuck*.

“We are *leaving*,” Vader growled, “and if you kick me again, young one, you will *regret it*.” There was enough dark threat in there Luke considered it for half a second.

“Leave!” he yelled again at Han and Leia, “you really *have to*, okay?”

And then he kicked Vader again. The response was instant and left him seeing stars, darkness threatening.

He got control of his limbs back just as he was dropped down in a seat, hands already cuffed. Trying to maneuver out of the straps with his hands cuffed wasn’t easy, and when the tell-tale tremble ran through the floor he realised he hadn’t been fast enough - they were already in the air. Swearing, he fell down on the floor when the shuttle took off.

He hoped Han and Leia and the droids had listened to him and taken off as well. Seconds later, the shudder of the shuttle being hit by something answered *that*, and Luke almost laughed. He didn’t though, since he was just a little busy trying not to get slammed into things. Hope warmed his insides for another ten minutes, but then the intermittent shuddering abruptly cut out.

Slumping down, Luke gently smacked his head against the floor.

Hyperspace.



Chapter 22: In Which Monsters Die



AU of #11 of the comics!

So in here there is an angry dad fighting a huge monster, Luke Skywalker performing yet another death-defying stunt, and Vader carrying his son under one arm.

Hutts.

Of course it had to be a *Hutt*.

This being Nar Shaddaa, it was, of course, improbable that it'd have been anything other than a Hutt, but Hutts weren't the only ones who kept slaves. Especially not in Hutt Space. They were just the most likely to be keeping slaves.

None of this was currently lightening the mood of the man striding through the corridors of Grakkus' palace towards the arena. Neither was his mood lightened by the opportunity to kill every single guard that was in his way (or attempted to *run away*), because they were slowing him down. Still, he took some pleasure in watching them fall, clawing at their throats or groping at cuts before they realised they were already dead.

A few he'd physically thrown into walls or pillars, breaking their backs.

One he'd broken the neck of, grabbed her as she rushed him, as foolish as that was.

All of them could consider themselves lucky for already being dead, however, if he reached the arena and found the boy harmed in any way. Anyone alive in the palace would suffer if---

Noise and light assaulted him for a brief moment before the mask compensated as he stepped out into the stands, staring down the sea of beings making up the audience, down towards

the pale oval sliced out in the center where Luke was on the ground, facedown. Prowling slowly towards him was a... momentarily torn between the building rage of seeing Skywalker on the ground (not dead, the Force told him; the child's presence was bright) and something like incredulous confusion at seeing the creature in the arena with him.

Shouldn't that thing be on *Mustafar*?

Then time and the situation caught up with his distraction as Luke rolled away, just in time to avoid the giant paw as it came down, driving deep gouges into the ground and sending a spray of sand up in the air. Despite lack of training, the boy had good, instinctive use of the Force - but that wouldn't help him for long, even as he dove for the lightsaber he'd apparently been given and rolled to his feet, swaying a little.

A snarl pulling his skin tight and sending a stab of pain through his head that he both ignored and drew close, Darth Vader ignited his lightsaber again and jumped.

The crack of bone and tortured twanging of metal when he landed on the creature's hips was *satisfying*, but not *nearly enough*. He leaped back off while it howled and half-collapsed to the arena floor, clawing more gouges into the ground. The boy was to the right, staring at him with wide eyes, and if he wasn't entirely wrong, he'd probably gotten a few broken ribs while being tossed around.

Not that that was the only injury; there were shades of bruises peeking out from under the jacket's sleeves, and those were too old for Luke to have sustained them in *this* fight.

Anger tightened like a fist around his torso and he turned around, raising his lightsaber to point at the origin of all this. The reason *his son* wasn't just in an arena fighting for his life, but was, for all intents and purposes, an arena slave. No matter how short Grakkus surely intended this particular enslavement to be.

"There will be no more arena fights, *Hutt*," he hissed, but knew he was heard.

The audience seemed caught - if they knew what was best for

them, there'd already have been a riot while they tried to get out, but not a single one moved. Not a single one, except...

An astromech droid.

Something pulled at his memory, but he turned away from both memory and sight of the small R2-unit wheeling itself away through the frozen crowds and instead, while still spearing the Hutt with his glare, waved his left hand.

The creature, which had been half-crawling towards him and the boy, blood and spittle dripping from its jaws, went flying into the arena wall with a bellow and a crash. It still staggered to its feet only moments later.

"You have no authority here, Lord Vader," Grakkus sneered and straightened up on his ridiculous grafted metal legs, seemingly even spindlier than they actually were against his bulk, "we tolerate the Empire's presence here, but y---"

The gasp was as much Grakkus' as it was the *audience's* as the Hutt went up into the air, stately despite the drooping shape of him. He struggled, but got nowhere until he dropped to the arena floor with a wet, meaty splat, right between the Dark Lord, Skywalker and Kongo.

There was a moment of complete stillness, a breathless silence where Vader caught the child mouthing 'oh' silently as he stared past him to Grakkus and the creature.

Then the creature whipped an arm out, claws half as long as the Hutt was, tearing chunks out of Grakkus with crude efficiency. Vader turned away and looked Skywalker over, just to make sure he hadn't missed anything. But no, for all that he'd spent three days in the Hutt's care, the boy seemed relatively fine.

There were bruises, unknown other injuries, the danger inherent in being a slave itself, but the young man was standing stubbornly tall, gripping the hilt of the lightsaber tightly. Vader still didn't feel satisfied, even listening to the gurgling screams that dripped away into simply *gurgles*.

This was not enough.

Perhaps throwing Grakkus to the creature had been too kind a

fate for his crimes.

"It's... uh," Luke muttered, shifting on his feet and gesturing vaguely behind the Dark Lord, and Vader snorted.

"Stay out of the way, boy."

He wasn't taking any *chances*, even with the creature partly disabled. Whirling around, he leapt at it, dodged under a swipe and buried his lightsaber in a drooping knee, tearing the blade through flesh and reinforced metal with raw strength more than the lightsaber's superior cutting power.

It whirled around, trying to reach him - he was already gone.

And then he was left with a furious stab of--- he wasn't sure what, exactly, it was he was feeling (too long since he felt it), but spotting the child dodging around the creature's limbs doing...

What was he even *doing*!?

The only reason he didn't yank him away and throw him to the ground on the other side of the arena was due to Kongo's flailing limbs and claws. He'd be liable to throw Luke right into one of those if he tried right now.

A deep snarl rattled through him, tore up his throat and he threw himself at the creature again, stabbing at a shoulder this time, letting gravity do its work as he dropped down, slicing through metal, flesh and tendons.

The shriek bit into his ears and prosthetics both, setting metal singing and his teeth on edge.

Luke finally threw himself out of the way, clutching something in one hand and Vader still wasn't sure why the reckless child had done that; he'd already been wielding a lightsaber in the fight (but not *his*, some tiny, offended part of him noted. He pushed it away).

With Luke at least temporarily out of the way, one thing became clear; this was taking too long, and the longer it took the greater the risk was that the boy would get underfoot again. With another growl, he leaped up on the creature's back, grabbing one of the protrusions to swing around on and aimed for its neck.

It wasn't that easy, but while the creature might be big and re-

inforced for its former work, *he* had the Force. And a lightsaber.

When it finally fell to the arena floor with a wailing moan that died away into a sucking rattle, Vader was already looking for what he *actually* was here for before he even leaped off the dead body.

He spotted Luke trying to jump to the top of the wall to reach the stands, failing several times. The crowds, meanwhile, had *finally* realised what they were looking at and were desperately trying to get out of the arena, all of them at the same time. They were trampling each other, but Vader dismissed that and reached a hand out just as Luke actually managed to jump up, landing precariously on the ledge.

It didn't take much of a pull to yank him back, and he allowed himself a tiny smirk at the angry yell that produced. Since he was close enough, it was ease itself to catch the child, which caused an even more amusing shocked expression to flash over a face that carried more than one trait of... hers, he could see this close up.

He pushed away the stab and turned to leave, taking advantage of Luke's surprise. That only lasted about as long as it took for him to take three steps, however, and then he got a(n unlit) lightsaber slammed into his mask.

Growling, he tore the lightsaber (his, he noted absently; so that was why Luke had been tearing around the arena floor like he wasn't mortal and in danger of dying; looking for the lightsaber among the ones Grakkus had worn) out of the boy's grip and swung him around. Hooking an arm around his midriff and pulling the boy close, like this Luke could *squirm* but he couldn't reach much of anything hanging from his arm to be much of any trouble.

He'd have done something more permanent (shook him when some impressively foul Huttese started to come out) about Luke's ability to struggle, but he needed one hand free to pull out a comlink.

"Status?" he snapped into it while storming down empty cor-

ridors and ignoring Luke's attempts at getting free. Taking the route out via the innards of the arena instead of the palace corridors the audience was attempting to squeeze itself through all at once had some advantages, despite the smell and deplorable state of the place.

"All finished, Lord Vader! We can blow this baby up whenever you want."

Aphra was, as always, *far too cheerful*, but at least she was dependable.

"Meet me where we went in." And she better be there when he walked out, otherwise he'd simply use the Force to trigger the explosives Aphra had spent some time rigging the arena and closest corridors with. It wouldn't take down the *whole* palace, which rankled, but it'd take down... enough.

Barely.

"Let go!"

The boy was making a nuisance of himself again.

Ignoring the demand, he simply tightened his grip until he could feel the slight grind of the *definitely cracked* ribs against his arm, and Luke gasped, going limp if only for a little while.

It was enough, really, and he pulled out the binders and snagged one hand up as they walked outside, Aphra coming around a corner with a grin - and a cocked head as she spotted the boy. Who froze, momentarily surprised and distracted, as he spotted *her*. Which made it all too easy to snap the cuffs closed, and left Luke swearing again.

"Got what you wanted, then, Lord Vader?" she was eyeing Luke knowingly before she grinned sharply at him and Vader caught the boy's defensive scowl in the edge of his vision. He didn't reply, merely held his hand out and she obligingly dropped the remote detonator into his palm. "We should maybe--"

He pressed the button and took barely a thought to make sure the three of them remained unharmed as the explosion tore through the palace behind them, building-sized pieces of wall flying past them. Would've *crushed them* if not for the bubble of

safety he was holding up around them, pushing away the debris as it came.

Aphra's little gasp and glittering eyes meant nothing. Luke's startled wince and the following flare of envy was... satisfying.

Luke had so much to *learn*, and despite a lifetime lost, he would still be the one to teach his son.

And getting to see a Hutt's palace crumble was just a bonus to that, really.



Chapter 23:

In Which Darth Vader Figures Out a Thing Or Two



And gets a two-for-one special as he has his little revelation on the Death Star.

He had been blind.

So very, very blind.

Pieces of metal and plastic from the holodevice fell to the floor beside and then behind him as he stalked off, the words from the recording he'd just watched ringing in his ears.

The moment he'd gotten a report on the progress of the search for the droids on Tatooine seven hours ago and he'd read through it, it had been obvious that the men on the ground had had the droids within their grasp. It wasn't, *precisely*, the patrol's fault there'd been a Jedi with the droids.

The description of said droids, though...

He'd dismissed it at first.

Dismissed it and gone into Princess Organa's cell, spending well over two hours trying to squeeze the information they were looking for out of her with the use of the drug and liberal additional mental pressure. It hadn't worked. But standing there, letting his words do his work for him as she twisted on herself, trying to ground herself to get out of the imaginary tortures the drug was making her think were happening...

Brown hair, brown eyes, so perfectly *tiny*.

Spitfire, stalwart defendant of democracy and ethics. (Which of them was he even thinking of, at that point?)

The droids had been on the *Tantive IV*. The droids, whose descriptions matched droids he was... *familiar* with, had been on a royal diplomatic ship. Belonging to the Royal House of Alderaan.

Bail Organa had been a good friend to... Senator Amidala.

Bail and Breha Organa had adopted a child mere days after the Empire had been established.

Those were the thoughts that had, slowly and inevitably, dripped into his head, one after the other, even with the distraction of Obi-Wan's presence tainting the air, fouling his concentration. Nonetheless they had stacked on top of each other, wearing down his desperate, unconscious attempts at ignoring the conclusion; it hurt too much.

Then, on a whim, as he left the conference room after he'd informed Tarkin Obi-Wan was present - still ready to chase down his former master and put an end to *that* at least, especially since if what his thoughts were leading to was true, then *he* must've had a hand in what had happened after Obi-Wan had spirited Padmé away from Mustafar - he'd requested the surveillance from the Princess' cell prior to her escape.

(Not a Princess, not an Organa, *his*. Padmé's.)

He wasn't sure what he'd expected from the surveillance, what he'd *thought* he would get, beyond seeing that delicate, fierce, *strong* slip of a girl possibly slide out of his fingers unless they were stopped.

What he got, instead, was an additional punch. Another layer to the betrayal.

I'm Luke Skywalker, I'm here to rescue you!

He would kill them.

His Master for lying, but he would have to be patient. The Organas were out of his reach, though, and while their passing was now pleasing, the method of it was no less distasteful.

His old master, however...

That one he could get. Get him now and make him pay for that additional treachery, but if he chose to do that...

If he chose that, Vader *knew* he would lose the children. For how long he wasn't even certain, and even the homing beacon on the ship would not help. Especially not since it was intended to lead the Death Star to whatever rebel base the Princess (not

the princess of Alderaan, his *daughter*) would lead the others to, and if that happened she might end up *dead*.

The boy (pale hair, pale eyes, hurriedly, brightly, exclaiming *I'm Luke Skywalker, I'm here to rescue you!*, his son) as well.

He would not stand for it.

So instead Vader stalked through the corridors, filtering out his old master's presence and instead tried to find two others, in this sea of one and a half million. It wasn't easy, but he would have what was *his*; the last of *her*. Special and precious. So he walked, slowly, scattering officers, stormtroopers and aides before him with the ire that hung around him, and *reached*.

The girl was easier to find, merely from a greater familiarity; he'd met or seen her in the distance a few times, and he'd spent two hours (spent two hours interrogating his own daughter with highly questionable truth drugs) in her company. She was fire and steely determination, iron-clad will coated in anger. It hid desperation and tears and tiredness, and even more rage.

Three corridors away from them, he was close enough to not just vaguely feel the boy as they were, thankfully (perhaps inevitably) together, but get a closer read on him. He was actually brighter than *her*, though not as bright as Vader would've expected him to be having been in Obi-Wan's company.

Had he not trained the boy?

He lengthened his steps as that brightness flickered dimly, alongside the fire of his sister, beckoning him ever closer. It was excitement fuelled by adrenaline and righteousness, anger and kindness woven together. Beneath that, yearning and tears. The child had lost as well (he remembered reading the commander's report, recognising the names, knowing executing suspected rebel collaborators was standard practice, but he could've told the commander not to bother with those two. Owen Lars would never have been involved in anything beyond his own farm).

He stepped into the corridor the children (twins, they had had *twins*, one of each and he couldn't tell if it was his heart aching or his memories) were running down, and they stumbled to a

stop twenty meters down, gasps echoing after their footsteps, eyes turning huge.

The boy reached for something hanging at his hip (another stab went through him), but the girl stopped him, yanked on his sleeve and pointed down the corridor behind them.

“No, Luke! That’s Darth Vader! This way!”

The boy hesitated, and then he grasped her hand and they turned around and ran.

They wouldn’t get far.

They had gotten *so far*.

He should’ve stayed and distracted the man (the man who killed his father), to let Leia get away. But maybe she’d need his help if they *did* get away, so he’d let her pull him away from the lightsaber at his belt and ran with her.

And they’d gotten so far; if they could just get past the blast doors they could close them and destroy the lo---

Two steps away from the blast doors, they closed on their own accord.

“Ah--!” Luke stumbled, catching himself with a hand against the sudden wall of metal that had just closed the rest of the corridor off from them. Leia swayed to a stop before she fell against it, expression fierce, and then immediately whirled back around. Luke followed suit as he felt a prickle of cold scratch down his spine.

“It’s not *opening*!” Leia cried, repeatedly slapping the controls set beside the blast doors, and Luke swallowed. Well, now he could try and do what he’d intended to do earlier, since there was *nowhere else to go*.

“Here, take the bl-- gah!” He’d barely turned around to hand the blaster over to Leia when it went flying out of his grip, and he stared, wide-eyed, as it flew through the air and landed, as neat as you please, in Darth Vader’s gloved hand.

It was then tossed away behind him with absolutely no care at

all.

"There is nowhere to go," Vader said, his voice echoing slightly, the rumble of it magnified by the wide corridor and Luke suppressed a shiver. Pulling himself up and scowling, Luke stepped in front of Leia, lightsaber in his hands. He wouldn't let their (his, Leia's, Han and Chewie's) efforts go to waste *now*, blast it.

Somehow, they'd get out of this.

"You can obviously not wield that weapon, young one. Put it down." The baritone was threaded with something that seemed to lie between admonishment, annoyance and incredulity... and wariness.

That last one was odd. Why would Darth Vader be *wary*?

It was a very brief thought only, however; Luke glanced to Leia, caught her gaze and twitched his head.

"When I attack, you run past him. Get to the blaster if you can," he muttered and then turned to face Vader again, took a breath and raised the humming weapon; it felt like a live thing in his hands, "it was my *father's*!"

Then he rushed - he might have yelled, or maybe that was Leia, Luke wasn't sure. What he *was* sure of was the brief, almost *exhilarating* moment where the red and blue blades met in a crackling crash. Leia rushed past him and briefly, Luke grinned. Right before he lost the battle against Vader's strength and he stumbled to the ground, right before he saw Leia suddenly yanked sideways into the wall by nothing he could see.

The floor drove his breath away and then the lightsaber flew out of his hands.

"No!" Groaning, he rolled to his feet, maybe he could get to the blaster---

Luke wouldn't admit to the startled gasp he let out when the floor disappeared underneath him, and he almost bit his tongue when Vader's armoured shoulder drove into his stomach. Flailing and trying to right himself or push away so he could get back on the floor, Luke yelped and grabbed onto the cloak when Vader bent down again and then shortly thereafter righted himself, fol-

lowed by Leia's angry yell.

"If you struggle, I will get sedatives," Vader said, the rumble clearly threatening and this close his voice seemed to vibrate through Luke, settling itself somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach. Blinking, still clutching onto the cloak, Luke looked sideways, into Leia's wide, startled brown eyes.

Then she scowled and he was pretty sure she kneed Vader; he grunted, but Luke couldn't tell if he did anything else, though Leia squirmed and let out an angry gasp. The crunch of Vader stepping on the blaster he and Leia had been trading off between them was loud in the sudden silence, and Luke's heart sank.

They'd gotten so far...

Hopefully Ben, Han and Chewie and the droids would get away.

Chapter 24: In Which Two Fighters Crash

AU of the first issue of Vader Down - but if you haven't read it all you need to know for this AU is that Vader has found out where Luke is, gets "shot down" (by Luke ramming his X-wing into Vader's TIE) over the planet when he gets there, and both he and Luke crash.

Artoo's concerned (and berating, Luke was pretty, if dimly, sure) chirping was a background noise which almost bled into the hiss of gas escaping, the crackle and pop of something on fire, and the thunder of his own blood in his ears. He was pretty sure he'd lost consciousness shortly after landing - *crashing* - and now he... well.

He ached, but it was surprisingly enough not that bad. He slowly shifted each limb in turn and nothing seemed broken and he didn't have any cuts anywhere.

This was, on the whole, a rather spectacularly *good* crash-landing.

That didn't mean Luke didn't have to take a moment to get his heart down to a manageable level; there was a certain amount of thought-blinding, weak-limbed *relief* that came with realising you weren't dead. He'd taken the decision to ram Darth Vader's TIE, yes. He knew what the probable, intended, *desired* result of that was, and it'd seemed like the best course of action and, more than that, no matter what he wanted to do beyond that moment, *worth it*, in the greater course of things.

Still, having survived that, Luke was struck by the heart-rushing half-panic of *I could've died*. Because he certainly didn't *want* to die. He'd just decided that the course of action taken was the

only one he could see to minimise further loss of life and if that meant he died, nothing much to do about it.

So yes, Luke Skywalker was exceedingly relieved to be alive.

And very uncomfortable.

It wasn't just hot from the sun and the electrical fire (which he needed to get away from, and soon) but there was also an insistent, biting *cold* nipping the back of his neck and his ears. And, more strangely, familiarly, his brain. Frowning, Luke rubbed his face and undid the clasp for the helmet, dropping it beside him without looking.

Why was it familiar?

His brain whispered that it had something to do with why he had crashed at all. Which meant it was--- Artoo *shrieked* behind him, just as a shadow fell over him and the battered X-wing shuddered from the weight that landed on top of its nosecone.

"Gah!" Luke threw himself back on pure reflex - not that he got very far at all, what with the crash webbing in place and still sitting in the seat - and yanked his blaster free just as the canopy was ripped off by nothing but a wave of cold darkness that slammed against his mind. Luke didn't even think, just raised the blaster and *fired*.

The shot burned through the bottom edge of the cockpit canopy, then grazed the side of Darth Vader's helmet as he twitched his head sharply to the side. The blaster went flying off in the distance and Artoo beeped furiously behind them. Heart in his throat, Luke attempted to get at his lightsaber with one hand and undo the straps with the other.

"That was unwise, young one," Darth Vader rumbled, reaching down and wrenching the lightsaber out of his hand just when he'd managed to get it up in a position where it *could* have been useful. He'd been *sure* Vader had crashed some distance away from him! He'd also hoped the man had died in the crash... But glancing past the black-clad giant (who definitely didn't seem any worse for wear) he could see the smoking wreck of the TIE no more than fifty meters away and cursed.

How had he missed *that*?

He shook his head and ducked under the hand grabbing for him just as he finally got the straps undone - and then the noise of engines thrumming through the air distracted him, causing Luke to look up reflexively and spot the three approaching Y-wings. Briefly, he grinned. Sure, he might end up dead anyway, now, since there was no way for him and Artoo to get clear in time before the Y-wings dropped their bombs, but he'd die *anyway* since Vader wouldn't be---

His arms were jerked forward and up and Luke groaned as his stomach smacked into the steering and the control panel.

"What---" staring dumbfounded at his cuffed hands, Luke raised his head to glower at Vader, who had already turned to face the approaching fighters. "What's the point of this? We're *both* going to die in the next few minutes." Nonetheless, he slowly eased himself up, freezing when the helmet tilted towards him a fraction.

"That is where you are wrong. A few fighters are no match for the Force."

Luke sort of *wanted* to roll his eyes at the declaration, but... Vader had held up the weight of a whole AT-AT by himself and he'd seen him wipe out two squadrons just minutes before. And while he wasn't sure what Vader was supposed to do *on the ground* against the bombers, that didn't mean Luke didn't believe him. So instead he used Vader's distraction, stood up, and awkwardly clambered along the broken wing of the X-wing, trying to keep his balance as best as he could with his hands cuffed in front of him, and came up to Artoo.

How they'd landed as they had, with him practically uninjured and Artoo safe too, Luke wasn't sure, but he'd gotten lucky, he supposed. It'd happened more than once with the Skyhopper, after all, though crashing from orbit was different than crashing from a limited distance to the ground while in atmo.

"Hey, Artoo," he whispered as he leaned over the astromech, but he knew he wouldn't be able to help him get down. With a

sigh, even as Artoo twittered something quietly, Luke looked up as the roar from the fighters reached a crescendo... and a huge block of stone went flying into one of the fighters, sending it into the second one.

Luke stared, and swallowed.

Artoo chirped loudly through the noise of the fighters exploding and something poked him, so Luke looked down and grinned at the sight of the tool the little astromech had poking out of one of his compartments.

"Great! Come on, let's get--- gah!" Legs swinging in the air and a firm fist at the collar of his flight suit, Luke would just ignore the noise that escaped him as Darth Vader *picked him up* and then jumped down from the crashed X-wing, putting him down on the ground sharply enough to rattle his teeth.

"Walk." There was, briefly, a hand at the small of his back pushing him forward for a staggering step or two to follow up the rumbling order. Not that Luke was going to just obey that, and he turned around to try and catch sight of Artoo, who was, slowly, working himself out of the astromech socket. But if he fell wrong when he rolled off the X-wing, he might not be able to right himself and move away, and the downed fighter was an explosion waiting to happen.

"You should just kill me now, you know," he said, hunching his shoulders and taking half a step to the side to avoid the hand reaching for him, trying to keep Artoo and his progress in view. Vader stared at him for an uncomfortably long, silent moment, and then *snorted*, turning to look at Artoo as well.

"Your astromech is resourceful. Now, either you walk under your own power or I will make you."

Luke wasn't sure what he thought about the fact that apparently Vader had figured out he was worried about Artoo, or even *more* the fact that he'd basically... reassured him? Confused, he didn't twist away from the hand in time and it closed around his shoulder - and some bruises, leaving him trying to bite down on a hiss - and pushed him forward.

Artoo shrieked angrily behind them, and Luke dug his feet in for two steps before he almost fell over and was yanked forward, stumbling until he could catch his balance and maybe he should just walk. For now.

Of course, Luke (still) had no intention of coming along *peacefully*, regardless of whatever Vader's intentions were, which was confusing enough. Had the Empire figured out he was the pilot who destroyed the Death Star? Maybe, but why not just... execute him now, then?

Frowning, Luke flexed his hands in the binders, glancing down at them sourly. He was wearing cuffs *way too often* lately, even if it'd been a little while since Nar Shaddaa. This was still too soon.

Biting his lip and eyeing the slowly rising ruins in the near distance, he figured they could work as a good cover. He was rather short, and the orange of his flight suit would work as reasonable camouflage compared to if Vrogas Vas had been a more hospitable planet with forests or grassy plains. The sandy rocks and equally hard, dusty ground, after all, while reminding him too much of Tatooine, wouldn't leave him standing out like a sore thumb.

Concentrating on staying at least a step in front of Darth Vader as they walked closer to the broken pillars and statues littering the ground, Luke admitted to himself it was partly because the *presence* of him was... unnerving. This was the longest he'd been in close proximity to Vader, and the cold, dark fire that lingered at the edges of his awareness pressed down like an oncoming sandstorm. Not to talk about his much more *mundane* presence, which was almost as unsettling.

But he kept his back straight and pressed his lips together and *walked*. Couldn't help glancing at the broken head of a statue that they passed, staring emptily out at the wasteland. The expression was solemn and weighty, and almost seemed somewhat... reassuring.

"There is nothing here for you, boy," Vader growled, his voice rolling between the stones and poisoning the air, and Luke nar-

rowed his eyes.

"I'm sure I could find *something* that hasn't been destroyed." He could almost *feel* the power in this place, settling gently along his bones and easing some of the weight of Vader's thunder. A thunder which suddenly bloomed and flared past him, sending a slight shockwave of sand rolling outwards. Luke stopped, though whether that was because of the surprise or because of the *power*, he wasn't sure.

"You will do best to listen, young one; there is *nothing* for you here, regardless of if there is something that has been left untouched or not." Vader was right behind him now, a towering mass of icy darkness which seemed to curl around his shoulders, and Luke stiffened, shifting his weight.

"That's where you're *wrong*." Briefly, Luke envisioned turning around and yanking either his own or Vader's own lightsaber off his belt and striking him down, even with the binders in the way. Instead he leapt, breath catching in his throat as he landed far further away than he'd thought he would, behind a fallen pillar and scattered pieces of what looked like both bits of wall and a statue's broken arm and hand. He didn't stop to wonder over it, merely took off running, sliding a little as he ran around a wall, the sand shifting under his feet.

He kept his footing however and briefly grinned. He just needed to get lost in here and Vader wouldn't be able to--- soft, thudding thunder, weaving together with his own muffled footsteps burst up behind him, and Luke swallow a choked cry as he bit his own tongue when a hand closed around the collar of the flightsuit and *yanked*.

Coughing and swallowing past the pressure of the collar of the flightsuit up against his throat, Luke kicked - but thanks to Vader's cloak and the trailing ends of the cloth he wore, completely misjudged and hit nothing except cloth.

"You will not escape, Skywalker."

Groaning, he glared up at Darth Vader, balling his cuffed hands into fists.

“Why don’t you just *kill me* already? You’ve killed my father, and if I get the chance I’m---!” Eyes wide, Luke cut himself off more out of surprise than the fact that Vader’s glove would’ve muffled his yell. The leather was warm against his skin, the gloved fingers digging into his cheeks, and he scowled up along the arm and jerked backwards; Vader didn’t let go.

The glare he could all but feel coming from Vader was colder than Tatooine’s night.

“In such a hurry to *die*, Skywalker?” the snarl was quiet, probably as quiet as the vocoder would allow. Luke grimaced and ended up shaking his head... as much as Vader’s grip would allow. No, he wasn’t in a hurry to die, but if it’d get rid of Darth Vader, for the Alliance, for all the dead, for *his father and Ben*, he’d do it.

“Then take care what you sa...” Vader stopped, straightening up from the slightly hunched looming he’d been doing, and looked around. Luke glanced around as well, but he couldn’t see anything but the ruins around them, broken walls and pillars and dark, empty doorways leading nowhere, or perhaps down underground. Vader let go of him, and Luke grimaced, trying to shift his jaw and cheeks to get rid of the feeling of hot leather pressing up against the abused skin.

Then he was hauled up to land with a breath-stealing whomp over Vader’s shoulder, and briefly, Luke stared, stunned, at the ground.

“Hey! What *gives*? Let me *down*, you---” that ended in a surprised, and very inarticulate, yell when Vader *leaped*. There was a thud that rattled through him, but Luke didn’t have the chance to twist around and check; instead he was shrugged off Vader’s shoulder and pushed back, his back hitting wind-polished, rough stone and feet dangling in the air.

“Stay here,” Vader ordered, then he let go of the pillar and dropped down on the ground, a cloud of dust rising around him. Luke tried to roll upright, then froze as he almost *rolled off* the pillar. Mostly because it was at that moment he actually understood that Darth Vader had jumped nearly straight up, deposit-

ing him on the broken-off end of one of the tallest pillars in the vicinity.

The ground was dizzyingly far below, Vader a dark shadow against the sand and... an approaching group of rebels were stealing through the ruins. That must be what Vader had noticed, even if Luke hadn't heard anything. Breathing in slowly and *carefully* sitting upright, Luke peered down at the ground. He wasn't afraid of heights, but having this little safe ground to stand (or sit) on, and with a severely limited range of motion, was... unsettling.

Shaking his head, he blew his fringe out of his eyes and eyed the approaching group.

Twenty rebels.

That... wasn't enough. Not *near* enough, Luke just *knew it* and ice settled in his stomach.

"Hey!" Luke yelled and very determinedly didn't look down to catch Vader's reaction to that. The patrol all jerked to a stop and aimed their weapons up at him, though they were far away enough that even a stray reaction shot probably wouldn't reach him. "You need to leave!"

"... *Skywalker?*" The wind tugged at the confused shout, nearly stealing it. Luke grimaced and wondered why they couldn't just listen, and opened his mouth to answer.

That was when Vader made himself known to the patrol.

Luke sat still, staring, for several stomach-clenched seconds before he grit his teeth and turned away, trying not to listen to the yelling and looked around the pillar instead.

It didn't really have any good grips anywhere, within his reach or not; it was weather-worn, with some cracks running down it, but it had also been smoothed down by the wind and sand. That didn't mean Luke wasn't going to *try*, though.

Carefully shifting around on what little flat surface he had, painfully aware of his legs dangling in thin air and kicking at the stone, he grabbed the edge of one side of the pillar and eased himself down on his stomach. It took a moment to brace his legs

against the pillar, but well there it seemed pretty... possible, what he was about to do.

There were still screams and the noise of blasters being fired - and even explosions from a thermal bomb or two - echoing in the air, but Luke focused on what he was trying to do and slowly scooted down the pillar, carefully letting go of the edge and gripping the flat of the pillar's end. That went pretty well until he was hanging down from the edge of the pillar on *this* side, and tried to find handholds.

There were none.

The binders were an extra bit of obstacle to keep his hands from slipping, but they also made it more or less impossible to properly try and climb down.

Glancing over his shoulder, Luke stared at the ground so far below.

This would hurt.

Closing his eyes, he cut out the aches from the crash, the strain on his arms from hanging from the pillar and tried to... reach. The warm light of the Force was *so* close, and it wrapped around him with an ease he hadn't experienced so far outside of realising after he'd already done something, in a situation where there was no time to do anything but *react*, that it'd been there.

A tight smile on his face, Luke let go.

"Ooof!" Breath driven out of him a second time in short order, it took a stunned moment to realise he wasn't standing on the ground (he knew he should have, *could have*, landed on his feet, unharmed!), rather, he was--- "Put me down!" snarling, he twisted around and pushed against the armoured chest, then almost spilled to the ground when Vader suddenly let go, his hand vice-like on his shoulder.

"First you fly your fighter deliberately into mine, potentially dooming yourself, then you drop down from this pillar despite having limited manoeuvrability and no way to ensure you do not, at the least, break your legs---"

"I wouldn't have!" Luke snapped, refusing to listen to what

amounted to a *tirade* - something similar to what he'd expect from Uncle Owen, and he *did not* want to go there.

Or listen to this.

Raising his chin and trying to ignore the heavy pressure of Darth Vader's barely contained anger, Luke met the masked stare head-on, wishing he could see the eyes behind the opaque lenses so he could glare at him properly.

"Perhaps you would not have," Vader said, the voice much softer than Luke had heard it so far - it was startling, actually - and the grip on his shoulder softened slightly before it changed and Vader turned, stalking off. And now Luke wasn't given the courtesy of walking freely; instead he was half dragged along, trying to keep up with Vader's ground-eating strides no matter what protests he made.

Two hours later and Luke was feeling sullen and frustrated and a lot more aware of all the bruises the crash had given him. They hadn't stopped once since leaving the ruins, and an uncharitable thought lurking underneath the surface of his mind wondered if some of the rumours weren't true, that Darth Vader actually was a droid---

But no, he knew *that* couldn't be true. Not with Vader being a Force-user. He wasn't exactly sure how he knew that, but the few things Ben had told him and some niggling sensation of *certain-ty* told him Vader was very much not a droid. Was, probably, Human.

"In here," Vader said, pushing him in front of him for the first time in two hours to leave him staggering into the shadows of a shallow cave, well-hidden among the rocks at the mouth of a ravine.

Blinking at the darkness and willing his eyes to adjust, Luke breathed in the dusty, if marginally cooler, air of the cave and carefully walked forwards. There wasn't supposed to be any wildlife on this planet, but you never knew... But the cave, with a single, diffuse shaft of light falling down at an angle from a crack somewhere in the upper left, was empty.

Turning around, Luke squinted against the late sunlight falling outside the mouth of the cave, which made Vader into an impenetrable shadow aside from the scattered blinking lights on his chest and belt.

"What're we even doing here?" Luke winced at the way his voice cracked slightly - he might have kept his mouth shut for nearly one and a half hours, but the sand and dust got *everywhere*. It also made him aware of how thirsty he was.

"Waiting." Vader's voice echoed in the cave, the close, low-ceilinged space tuning the baritone into a trembling, grave-like echo. It was unsettling, but Luke only groaned in frustration, feeling annoyance bubble up as the silence stretched. Apparently he wasn't going to be given any further explanation. Not that he technically was due any either, he supposed, nor could he make Vader give him one, but the day had been long enough already and Luke's patience was running out.

"For *what*? You gonna drag me to Imperial Center and have me executed *there* instead of just killing me *here*?"

Between one blink and the next, Vader was right in front of him and gripping his chin, forcing his head to tilt back.

"You seem very clear on what you think I want for you, Skywalker," Vader said slowly, the rumble still drawn out into that nearly otherworldly tone. Luke shook his head - or tried to - confused and frustrated still, and also tried to step back, but the hand on his chin tightened.

"Well, why *wouldn't* you? You killed---"

"You also seem to belabour under the delusion that I killed your father," Vader interrupted in, his voice suddenly a whip-crack in the shadows, "why?"

A demand.

Luke narrowed his eyes, shifted on his feet and momentarily considered just not answering; it wasn't like Vader *didn't know why*! Tired and angry, however, the words came out before he'd fully decided whether to say something or not.

"Ben told me you betrayed and murdered him!"

Silence.

Then, a few seconds later, the hand on his chin tightened and the whole cave (even the ground) seemed to *shift* just slightly, with a tortured, grinding noise while small rocks and dust rained down upon them. Then everything suddenly stilled. Even the air seemed to have frozen.

“No.” The poisonous hiss ate into Luke’s defensive anger, leaving him trying to shift away, heart loud in his ears. The hand dropped from his chin, *finally*, but clamped around his shoulder instead. “I did *not*.”

Glaring, Luke opened his mouth, though what he was going to say he hadn’t decided yet, and then snapped it shut again as the cold fire around Vader flared.

“Obi-Wan lied to you, young one. Your father is alive.”

“W-what..?” He couldn’t breathe suddenly, and his heart seemed to be trying to escape his body. That... that couldn’t be. Sure, he’d had secret hopes that Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru were wrong; that Anakin Skywalker wasn’t dead, just missing or still off out in space, just not knowing he had a son. Then Ben had, unintentionally, crushed those half-hopes and half-dreams and now...

Now those words only brought up dread.

He wasn’t even sure *why*, either, but when Vader’s breathing cycle shifted slightly to allow for speech, Luke shook his head, tried to back off, got nowhere.

“I---”

“No.” It felt like every drop of blood had suddenly escaped his body, and he was light-headed. His next attempt to get away missed, and he slipped - but the hand on his shoulder and the other on his elbow kept him upright.

“I am your father,” Vader finished, relentlessly, and Luke closed his eyes, swayed.

“You... you’re lying.”

The hand on his shoulder was light now, thumb rubbing the cloth of the flight suit. The shadows in the cave burned down his

throat.

“You know I’m not. Search your feelings.”

He wanted to be angry, he wanted to scream that Vader was *absolutely lying*, but all he could think of was that a few hours ago, he’d flown his X-wing into Vader’s TIE. He’d attempted to shoot him. He’d wanted to kill him since he heard Ben say *he betrayed and murdered your father*, except that wasn’t even *true*, was it, and Ben had *lied*.

Because he *could* feel that; he’d have had to been unconscious (and maybe not even then) to not pick up the singing truth that danced around them, carried on the brightness of the power that lingered on Vrogas Vas. He was going to throw up. The hand on his shoulder pressed him down, and Luke collapsed more than sat.

“You’re--- Why would he...” The thought refused to finish, and again he wanted to be angry, but tired confusion wove together with the bone-shattering force of the revelation and all he could manage was something dull and flat.

“Obi-Wan wanted to---”

The roar of engines drowned Vader out, and he whipped around, unhooking his lightsaber and stalking to the mouth of the cave. Luke watched the boots go, the cloak swirling behind them like a living shadow, and didn’t move. Tried to scrub his face, but realised he couldn’t turn his crossed hands over to do that and let them drop. A few second more, then he was staring at a gloved hand held out to him, palm up.

“Come.”

A demand again. Luke scowled and pulled his arms close to himself, away from that hand.

He was *not* moving. He needed to... he needed a moment and even if Darth Vader was his father, even if he’d tried to kill him today and a few other times, Vader had done the same to *him* (he hadn’t known, then? When had he found out, in that case?).

Something ached deep inside at even just acknowledging the *possibility* that the truth he could feel was right.

Vader let out a strange noise - Luke wasn't sure what it might have been, if the vocoder just couldn't convey certain sounds, or what. He didn't care.

"Go *away*--ah!"

Not that Vader cared what *he* wanted, that much was clear as he was yanked to his feet and... surprisingly gently pressed forward. Luke dug his feet in for a step, then went, slowly and reluctantly. The pressure at the small of his back remained constant, but didn't force him to speed up. Didn't let him slow down, either, but it was a marked contrast to a few hours ago.

Outside, a brilliant blue and white starship sat on the ground, dust settling slowly over its dramatic lines. In the shadows that it cast in the late afternoon light, a slim, dark-haired woman stood, smiling brightly.

"It's a good thing that short-range comm you've got wasn't being jammed! No problem at all picking up..." she trailed off as her gaze went from Vader to Luke, and he met her dark brown eyes with a frown. Wanted to dig his heels in again, but it felt like all his weight had disappeared with his blood.

"Ohhh, so is this Sky---"

"We are leaving, Aphra," Vader snapped, all the while he kept that hand at Luke's back and gently, *insistently* pushed him onwards. Luke felt like screaming, but nothing came out.

"Yes, Lord Vader!" Aphra snapped off a rather overwrought salute, letting the two of them precede her inside.

"Wouldn't want to hang around for all those rebels to catch up with us."

Somehow, those words stabbed right in and Luke snapped upright, drew a sharp breath and threw himself around Vader, running back towards the ramp - before something cold and dark and invisible snagged the whole of him and he just couldn't *move* before the hatch had closed, right in front of him.

Abruptly, his blood rushed back into his body.

"No!"



Chapter 25: In Which Revenge Is Planned I



Right after the Vrogas Vas incident, someone with the means and the motive to take revenge finds out about Luke Skywalker. Things go down.

This is a looser AU again, basically going off after some sort of probably slightly AU ending of Vader Down. It's also a two-parter, because it got away from me.

Commander Karbin's ship, above Vrogas Vas.

"The Emperor will know--!" Whatever else Commander Karbin had intended to say was cut off when his head went flying, finishing the wetly muddled Basic with an equally wet, meaty thump of the head hitting the floor, one eye squishing into the metal. Stalking forward, Darth Vader buried his lightsaber into the body as well, pouring his frustration into the already cooling corpse.

The Rebels had gotten away.

His son had gotten away, despite all efforts.

At least *this* threat had now been eliminated, and Karbin's knowledge of who the pilot who'd destroyed the Death Star actually was would be wiped out with him. How the Mon Calamari had found out when he'd wiped out his presence on Tatooine and there should be no way for anyone else to know, Vader wasn't sure.

He didn't think Aphra had done it - was reasonably sure (as far as he was willing to go when it came to this, to *anything*) that she was his. It left a concerning question regarding how secure the knowledge of the pilot's identity actually was, but barring Karbin having stored the information elsewhere, and he would check, it

ought to be a dead end now.

“Be ready to get rid of the ship. Do you have the missile?” Vader snapped into the comlink as he turned around, distracted enough to miss the slight shifting of shadows away from the computers he was now stomping towards, intent on hacking them to pieces before the ship was even destroyed.

“One rebel-tagged missile ready and armed, Lord Vader,” Aphra said brightly. Probably relieved she was not dead after losing Skywalker. And well she ought to be, but considering the boy’s skill with getting away unharmed even when he ought not to, it was probably to be expected. He found the files easily and checked them, but there was nothing here that he didn’t already know.

That, at least, brought a tiny flare of grim pleasure; he had been thorough and had missed nothing of what there was available to find. But now was the time to get rid of this. Teeth bared despite - or rather, maybe because of - the way it pulled at his skin, Darth Vader ignited his lightsaber again and slashed at the terminal.

Behind him, half a corridor down, a door slid open in time with the next slash of the lightsaber; it slid closed amid the noise of the lightsaber’s angry humming and crackling electricity from the broken computer terminals, further masking that anything was out of the ordinary.

On his way out of the ship, Vader paused at the docking ring, sweeping his attention out at the sensation of something prickling against his Force-presence, but all he caught were himself, Aphra and the indistinct presence of droids, impossible to pick up further and only notable because he was close and there were relatively few of them. Nothing unexpected. He still stared down the corridor with narrowed eyes for a moment longer, wishing he could do more damage - wishing he had killed more of the rebels, *anything* to mitigate the screaming bubble of denied success and rage that clawed against his insides.

Unfortunately there was nothing, and he’d have to start over

now that the boy had disappeared with the rest of the rebels again. It rankled. At least the explosion of Karbin's ship was another flicker of pleasure, as was watching the debris fall away like cold stars, starting to burn as they hit the atmosphere of the planet below.

When only tiny fragments were left to fall down into Vrogas Vas' atmosphere, Darth Vader turned away from the viewport.

"We are leaving. I need to be back with the fleet."

And regretfully inform Tagge of Karbin's death.

How *unfortunate*.

The *Ark Angel* jumped to lightspeed, leaving stillness and an empty planet behind. Below, on Vrogas Vas, where one of the falling stars had hurtled towards a mountain, it lifted up from its 'crash site', wobbling a little. The rock scorched and cracked but the small ship, barely more than a cockpit and engines to fit a Human of average height, lifted up looking not much worse for wear and sped back up through the atmosphere, before it, too, entered hyperspace.

Prince Xizor's palace, Coruscant, 18 hours later.

He was eating lunch - something light, forgettable and, of course, delicious - when Guri walked in, impeccable as always but trailing a faint trace of burned ozone. She stepped sideways after barely having crossed the doorway, placing herself by the wall and clearly intending to wait until it was his pleasure to receive her.

As she should.

He might have let business wait; forgettable or not, his cook was a genius and it would be a pity to let today's dish cool, but he'd spotted the corner of the datapad Guri had carried in one hand before hands and datapad disappeared behind her back as she took up her vigil. She had been successful. Of that there'd never been any question, really. Though Guri might not be a spy, she had never failed him in the seven years since he bought her.

She had, for this, for the *chance* he'd had, been the best option. It'd been a gamble, true; he didn't know near enough about the Force, or Darth Vader's use of it except for the obvious, to be sure that Guri would not be noticed.

She was here now, however. She had clearly succeeded. Victory burned down to his fingertips, briefly warmed his colours before he cooled them off again.

Pushing his plate away, he tilted his head.

Guri stepped forward and offered the datapad, then went back to parade rest, staring out the window that showed the sun-drenched and shadowed spires of Coruscant outside. The view so perfectly aligned in this room that, in the distance, one could see the five spires of the Imperial Palace glowing like golden spears in the sunlight.

"This datapad is the only one currently with the information contained within, my prince, aside from the information presumably in Lord Vader's hands," Guri said, voice lacking inflection but nonetheless warm. He allowed himself a tiny smile and powered it up, savouring this moment. He was about to become privy to information only perhaps three - now two, if the late Karbin was to be discounted - people currently knew about.

Information many would kill for; the reason why Lord Vader was currently on the outs with his master (and wasn't that such a pleasant state, though Xizor was aware it would not last), and the pilot who had destroyed the Death Star. With this information, he could, he was sure, make sure Darth Vader's temporary disgrace was made into a *permanent* one.

He skimmed the particulars, not very interested until his eyes landed on the one thing that was.

Landed, and stopped.

Time froze.

Luke Skywalker.

His hands tightened marginally on the datapad, and his colours changed; a slow, rolling wave that would have carried mad, triumphant laughter if he, as a person or as a member of the

Falleen species, was laid towards that.

He was not.

Instead a tiny, tight grin bared his teeth down at the screen as he remembered a snippet of surveillance data that had, miraculously, survived its trip from the Imperial Palace's confines to his own terminals.

'--- truly are the Chosen One, Lord Vader. Chosen to be the one responsible!'

Such a seemingly insignificant statement, innocuous and not at all out of place with what His Imperial Majesty Emperor Palpatine had been talking about - the fact that Darth Vader was the only survivor of the Imperial forces which had been attached to the Death Star. Simple, if he had not remembered something from the Clone Wars.

An article that had proclaimed a particular Jedi General as the Jedi's 'chosen one' for all his successes and brilliant battlefield command. An equally innocuous statement, really. But after certain events he'd done... research on Darth Vader and who was underneath the mask. Nothing conclusive, of course, and the Hero With No Fear had, apparently, perished in the Jedi Temple, presumably in the defense of the younglings there.

Presumably.

Innocent, except for the fact that the Hero With No Fear, the Jedi's 'chosen one', was Anakin Skywalker.

Innocuous, except for the fact that Xizor had found out - the only concrete thing he'd managed to unearth about Darth Vader's physical state, the conspicuousness of the suit notwithstanding - that Darth Vader had lost three limbs, which were prosthetic. Three, but the fourth, his right arm, was a prosthetic as well.

The same went for Anakin Skywalker. Anakin Skywalker, from Tatooine, whose mother was Shmi Skywalker, who'd ended up marrying one Cliegg Lars. Whose son happened to be Luke Skywalker's former guardian and step-uncle.

"Guri," Xizor said slowly, rubbing a thumb down the side of the datapad in front of him, reading through the information

contained within a second time, now more carefully, "I would like to meet Skywalker. Arrange for something."

"As you wish, my prince," Guri said, bowed sharply, and left.

Xizor gently pushed the datapad to the side and pulled his plate back towards him, testing what was left; it wasn't cold, and still tasted delightfully. He savoured the rest of his lunch and grinned sharply down at the distant view of the Imperial palace.

He would *crush* the so-called Dark Lord of the Sith.

Crush him like he had been crushed, all those years ago.

What had he been planning up until now? Disgrace? No, now he had something *far better* with which to bring down Darth Vader. Much, much better, for in the light of this reveal, it was obvious what Vader's zealous attack on the Rebel base on Vrogas Vas had really been about.

Xizor allowed himself another smile, and settled down to wait.

Rebel base on Dantooine, three months later.

Luke still couldn't believe they'd gone back to Dantooine for a larger base. Even using the same *buildings*. He'd laughed when he first heard Leia said it, and sometimes it just struck him *again*; the audaciousness of it all. Sometimes Leia even smiled about it, when she asked what he was thinking about and he told her.

He could tell she was just a *little* proud of it.

But, since this *was* an old base and known to the Empire, they were now in the process of packing up and leaving. Over two months in this place had been long enough to catch their breath and get some footing back, especially after the battle on Vrogas Vas.

He'd spent a few weeks after that being unduly averse to touching Threepio's hands, which was very unfair to the poor protocol droid, and he'd *also* spent those weeks twitching at the sight of every lean, dark-haired young woman wearing a reasonable similarity to a pilot's cap and goggles stuck to it.

He still felt very ridiculous about it.

But that was months ago now, and nothing at all had happened. In fact, things had been what could probably be called “normal”. At least, as close to the situation the few weeks after Yavin but before Cymoon-1 it could be, and while it was hardly relaxing, something like routine had started to settle. Sometimes, he even forgot about his aunt and uncle and Biggs being dead.

Only sometimes, though.

Putting the box he’d been carrying down on the floor, Luke dragged a hand through his hair and bit the inside of his cheek, suddenly struck. The acrid smell of the smoke, Biggs yelling at him---

“---day you said it was fine and we’d get those parts no problem, and *now* you’re gonna go back on it? Doesn’t paint ya in a very good light, Princess!”

Looking up from staring at the floor, Luke bit his lip to avoid grinning as Leia came storming into the hangar, head bent over a datapad, Han following behind her. She glanced up right before she passed him and flashed him a smile, and he waved back.

“Things change, Captain Solo. Ask me again after we’ve left Dantooine. Take a break, Luke!” Leia yelled the last over her shoulder, and Luke, who had a good look at Han’s expression, burst out laughing. Han whirled on him, a finger raised before he huffed and rolled his eyes.

“You heard Her Highnessness, kid, sit down for a bit, willya?” Han shook his head as he looked him over, “I think I’ve seen you running back and forth every time I’ve come ‘round this way.”

“Just keeping busy...” he said with a shrug, and that was true enough. He just felt... antsy for some reason. Had all morning, and Artoo had chased him away from the X-wing when they first were working on maintenance and tuning it, which led to doing what he could to get equipment to the collection locations to be moved to the transports. Luke was pretty sure it was just because they were moving again after more than two months in the same location.

"I'll just go get this thing where it should go and come join you for lunch, okay?" Luke said with a smile and Han's answering smile and the hand on his shoulder made him relax a little.

"We'll wait for you, kid, but you know how Chewie gets if he doesn't get his food, so don't take *too long*."

"More like how *you* get if you don't get to eat," Luke called after him, but Han just waved him off without stopping. Grinning, Luke picked up the crate again and then grimaced. Having stopped and taken a break, the box felt far heavier than it'd felt while he was walking with it. But it wasn't far to where he was supposed to drop it off, and then he could go take a shower before finding Han and Chewie again.

Scrubbing a hand through his hair as he walked, Luke grimaced at the feel - it wasn't at all as bad as when working on the farm, but the sensation of dried sweat was still unpleasant. At least there was no sand mixed in with that as well. Vrogas Vas had left him with a dusting of it, but it'd quickly disappeared, thankfully...

Halfway back to the barracks, Luke paused and looked around, but the only ones in the corridor with him were three women - an Aqualish pilot and two Twi'lek technicians, and two male Human technicians who just passed by him as he looked around, carrying boxes of their own, and...

And...

He shook his head.

Spending the whole morning carrying crates and equipment had just tired him out. Too long since he did manual labour like that. Uncle Owen wouldn't be impressed at *all*... Luke bit his lip and shook his head, trying to chase the thought away. Shower. He would get a shower and then have lunch.

Letting the door to his and Red Squadron's bunk room slide close behind him, Luke grinned. He did feel much better. But he wasn't the only one who'd been working all morning...

"Artoo? You still busy with the X-wing?"

He got a confirming chirp in reply and then what was clearly

the equivalent of being chased off in binary; he *thought* he recognised something about a system synch or something. Luke wasn't sure how good he'd get at interpreting Artoo, but he was slowly picking up more and more bits and pieces, if just from context.

"All right, all right, I'll leave you to work and check up on you after lunch, how's that?"

Artoo twittered again and he grinned as he put the comlink back into his pocket, patting himself down and realising he had neither blaster nor lightsaber on him. Luke paused for a moment, then continued down the corridor; he felt a bit naked without the lightsaber, but it'd have been in the way while he was carrying boxes, and he'd forgotten about it after dressing again.

Anyway, it wasn't like anything was going to happen while walking down to the hangar the *Falcon* was in, and if the attack alarm sounded, he would have time to run back and get it.

"Sorry," a woman said as she brushed past him, hurrying down the corridor and ducking into a supply closet further down; the only thing Luke really noticed of her while muttering it was okay, was the thick bun her rich, blonde hair had been gathered up in.

It reminded him of Le--- The door to the closet swept open as he passed it, the woman's arm whipping out and grabbing him, yanking him inside and sending him flying into an empty rack of shelves.

"Gah---nngh!" The crack of one of the shelves hitting his head was loud, in the closet and in his head, but he caught himself before he landed face-first on the floor, biting down nausea and squinting up at her. She didn't look angry, which was confusing - in fact, she merely looked cool and collected, eyes raking down him and meeting his gaze with nothing but calm assessment.

The only thing Luke could think of, at first, was that at least it wasn't at all like the way Grakkus had looked at him.

His stomach turned a little as he straightened up, flexing a hand and slowly straying it towards the pocket where he had the comlink.

“What was *that for*? If I did something I’ll apologise,” Luke said, frowning. Trying to figure out if and when he’d met her before, he drew up a complete blank - there was nothing aside from her brushing past him in the corridor just now, not even something as normal as a ‘hello’ in the corridors at any time during the last two months.

“My master wishes to meet you, Skywalker,” the woman said, her expression not changing at all, and Luke felt a shiver go down his spine.

This. This was why he’d woken up nervous.

He didn’t know why, he didn’t understand it, but he suddenly just *knew*.

“Give him my apologies, but I’m kinda busy. You should talk to Threepio about setting up a meeting later.” He dashed towards the door - risking passing close to her - and grabbed the comlink just as she threw herself at him, crushing him into the wall by the door and closing her hand around his, digging her fingers into the fist he’d made around the comlink as he tried to make sure she couldn’t grab it.

Breath pressed out of him - how heavy *was she* anyway, it felt like he had durasteel weighing down on him! - Luke still had air left to squawk out wordless incredulity as he felt the comlink crumble in his fist as the woman simply speared it with the two fingers she’d eased into his grip. Shaking his head, he kicked backwards, could picture her knee perfectly in his head and where it was.

He hit it, but it didn’t crumple underneath the assault.

In fact, she barely even swayed, using the time he’d now *wasted* to change her grip on his hand and pull it behind his back. Swearing, Luke tried to throw himself sideways, to get away from under her, but he couldn’t throw her off. Her other hand was---

He buried his elbow in her middle, but again she didn’t so much as *twitch* and *something was wrong*. The awareness burned down through him, distracting, and then Luke wondered if the thick stone walls would be enough soundproofing if he

yelled.

Her free hand closed about his neck, and she pinched in some way that sent what felt like a stab of pure electricity through him and his vision went gray, then to nothing.

Luke woke up, laying, he realised after glancing around as well as he could with a headache and a stiff neck, still in the same closet. The biggest difference was that he was laying on his stomach on the floor and his hands were cuffed behind his back. He heard someone, presumably the woman, shift behind him, but he couldn't turn his head far back enough to actually check.

"Look, what do you *want*? We don't really have to go all the way to your master for whatever he wants. We could go find a holotransceiver or something," Luke said while trying to shift because the floor sure was uncomfortable, but the only response he got was a foot in the small of his back when he tried to sit up, "you don't need to obey whoever your master is, you know. We can hel--*ah*."

He hissed, squirming under the toes she was relentlessly digging into his spine between his shoulder blades and it was an eternity before she let up. All right, no talking about *that*, clearly.

"I'm afraid I have to insist," she said, not sounding very apologetic. At all. In fact, she sounded flat even with her voice being that warm alto, "my master wishes to see you in person."

"*Great*," Luke muttered, frowning at the floor since that was all he could easily look at. They were still in this closet, which meant they were still in the base, so whatever she wanted to do and wherever she wanted to go she'd still need to get them *out*. Which meant there was a chance she wouldn't actually succeed. All he needed was someone spotting them, however the woman was planning on getting them to whatever ship she must have around.

Whenever that was, because the minutes slowly slid by, and it was impossible to tell how long it was before the woman's legs entered the edge of his vision. Luke was almost glad for it, since it meant something would be happening, at least. She bent down

and pulled him upright by his arm, which also made him realise he was missing something. Blinking away the dancing spots in front of his eyes at the change in position, Luke frowned up at her.

“Where’s my jacket?” Inane question, he knew, but he couldn’t help it.

The woman just stared at him for a moment before she pulled him around, linking an arm through one of his then slapped her other hand over his mouth and pinched his nose shut. Reflexively, he took an angry breath and realised it’d be *very* hard to breathe like this; she was strong. Trying to pull his face away didn’t get much results, either.

“It had to take a walk. Your friends were very worried when they were informed it’d been found outside,” she said, and while there *still* didn’t seem to be much inflection, she seemed faintly amused even as that made anger flare up in *him*, “now *you* have to take a walk, Skywalker.”

With that, she pushed him forward.

Not that Luke had any intentions of *cooperating*, but she didn’t really need him to. He first just tried to make himself heavy, but she pulled him along easily. Digging his feet in only left him staggering as she walked on, dragging him. Halfway down the corridor he tried to draw in more air to yell, and she clamped her hand tighter.

She continued to walk while pressing down her hand, and slowly, as he tried to just *breathe*, nevermind yelling, spots started to appear - she let up right when he’d been about to pass out, but right around then she stopped and pulled him aside into another corridor. She pressed him up against the wall, her eyes glinting faintly in the night-time lit corridor, narrow and predatory.

And then she leaned down.

She didn’t kiss him - her hand was in the way - but anyone who passed them would *think* she was.

The approaching footsteps had his heart skipping a beat with

nervous anticipation, and he drew his foot back, not to kick *her*, but to kick the *wall*, anything to make some sort of noise... She wound her leg with his, apparently having read his move. She pulled his leg wide and pressed down, her strangely solid and relentless weight giving him no room at all to move, and then she pressed her hand down more firmly again.

By the time the small group of three passed them, Luke was barely aware of them, couldn't even tell if they were anyone he would have recognised; he was far too busy trying to just *breathe* to have any thought, or breath, to yelling or struggling, even if it'd been possible.

He blinked awareness back when her hand eased up, realising he was staring into her sharp grin. She cocked her head as he scowled at her from underneath her hand, then she pulled on him, yanking him into walking again.

Somehow, and Luke didn't even understand *how*, they got through the whole rebel base like that. Ducking into alcoves with the woman pressed closer than no other people had ever been, into an empty or partially empty closet or two when that was available; and once just up against the wall of the corridor they were in, the woman clearly trusting to people leaving two people seemingly making out in the corridors alone.

When the night air brushed against him, cool and grass-sweet, Luke felt like screaming in frustration. If he could have.

Instead he had to wait against the wall while the woman waited for some sort of cue, glancing up at the building behind them, then set off at a brisk clip in what seemed like a random direction. Half a click away, the old buildings no longer visible behind at least two gently rising hills, there was a speeder bike.

At the sight of it, Luke felt his stomach clench even if he'd expected something like this. He just needed to be ready... The second she leaned down over the bike, dropping the hand over his mouth to rummage for something, Luke took a few, deep breaths, feeling *far too grateful* for them.

When she straightened up, Luke didn't wait for her to do what-

ever she was planning to do - probably toss him over the bike or something - instead he jumped, throwing himself over the bike and breaking her hold on his arm. He tumbled over it but rolled to his feet, throwing himself to the side as she leapt at him - she was *fast* and his heart was already thundering in his ears, but he just needed to---

He didn't react fast enough to avoid her slamming into him, sending them both to the ground in the long, soft grass. Small mercy.

"Get off!" He tried to throw her off, but she just clamped down, shoving him back with a hand to his shoulder and then something bit sharply into his neck. Luke was pretty sure he paled, because it was *obvious* that meant nothing good. Tossing did nothing, neither did trying to roll them around; the woman was too heavy and knew how to stay put and that's exactly what she did until icy slowness crawled through his muscles and his brain stopped cooperating.

Luke was vaguely aware of the woman getting off of him, lifting him up with ease. The grass swayed, mesmerising, and he didn't even notice that she'd moved from the spot on the ground until he was sat down, staring at something angled and dark against the softer green in the moonlight.

What was... oh, right... speeder bike. That was... bad?

Yeah, it was bad, but he couldn't grasp exactly *why* it was bad.

It hummed to life as she settled in behind him, an arm over his chest to keep him steady, and then the individual green stalks turned into an indistinct mass by the bike's speed, and that mass slowly bled into nothing.

Again.

Luke woke up with a dry numbness that tasted of wet sand in his mouth, a headache, and his stomach twisted into an angry knot. It took several moments of just laying where he was, slowly realising he was staring at a bulkhead and laying in a bunk, until he could figure that the dull gnawing in his stomach was hunger. Then, past the headache, as the words 'bunk' and 'bulkhead' reg-

istered, as well as the faint, near-musical thrumming of a hyper-drive through the decks and up through the metal of the bunk and of mattress, Luke realised something worse than hunger.

He was on a ship.

In hyperspace, and the last thing he remembered was... Speeder bike over Dantooine's fields of grass, and the blonde woman who there was something... off with. Trying to think about that made his headache spike and Luke groaned and tried to roll over. He got halfway before his right arm protested.

Turning back, Luke stared at his right arm and the wrist where it was cuffed to the wall beside the bed. Well, at least he hadn't had to wake up with abused arms and back from sleeping with his hands cuffed behind his back. Gritting his teeth, Luke sat up and looked around the room, trying to think past the headache and the throb in his stomach. And the disgusting feel in his mouth.

Frustration and dread pooling low underneath the angry knot of hunger, Luke couldn't see anything in the room that would be useful to escape. There wasn't even a datapad lying around - the bunkroom was stripped of anything loose, and while he could see a storage of some kind, it was clear across the room and he'd never be able to open it, even less reach it.

Or maybe...

Frowning, Luke settled down as comfortably as he could and closed his eyes.

Tried to remember how it'd felt opening the holocrons on Nar Shadda - but all *that* brought was a sudden spike in anger and anxiety and it took several moments of concentrating on breathing until he'd relaxed his balled-up hands and his shoulders dropped.

Think of something else.

The headache thumped in time with his heart between his ears and against his left temple, his stomach flopped uneasily, but he could... *would* do this. He just needed to---

A shudder went through the ship, jarring him and making

the headache spike. Swallowing back nausea, Luke realised he'd missed the ship coming out of hyperspace, and now he couldn't get back even to the vague place where he could *almost* reach the light that was the Force around him. Instead he was far too focused on trying to listen to the noises of the ship and...

Footsteps.

He couldn't get very far from the bunk, not with the way he was cuffed to it, but he *could* get down on the deck and face the woman when she came in, giving him an expressionless once-over. Narrowing his eyes, Luke shifted on his feet; if he could knock her out... He kicked when she was close enough, all the tension that seemed to have been gathering in him uncoiling in a single instant, fast enough he *knew* she couldn't duck or avoid it.

"Gah!" gasping, he swallowed the rest of the pain and stared, "how... how did you *do that*?" Luke swayed and almost fell over onto the bed, but she let go of his foot and he staggered and caught himself. He didn't care what she looked like, she *couldn't* be Human. It just wasn't possible.

She smiled at him then, sharp and predatory, then unlocked the cuff and cuffed his hands together. In front of him, this time.

Wind buffeted them when they walked down the ramp, twilight barely visible for all the lights the buildings emanated, and Luke stared. Almost stumbled when the woman continued walking and didn't slow down to accommodate his distraction as he looked around at the giant skyscrapers, the buildings stretching on *forever*.

She'd taken him to *Imperial Center*?! But the building, Luke thought as they passed through the door that opened to the landing pad, couldn't be the Imperial Palace, he was pretty sure. It looked like any other of the skyscrapers he'd just seen around them. So who *was* this woman's 'master', then, and what did they want?

Ten minutes later, Luke was pretty sure he had part of his answer when she led him into an office that was all dark, rich wood

and plush fabrics, all of which probably cost more than Tatooine's whole star system. The man at the desk was... Luke frowned, unable to come up with a name to the species - the man was tall, his bluish-green skin covered in tiny scales, with ridges along his skull and a topknot of hair - the only hair he seemed to sport.

Luke still couldn't come up with a name for the species.

"Who are you? What do you *want*?" Luke snapped as soon as they walked in, aching, hungry and headachey and not at all caring about his tone. He thought he was pretty entitled to being angry with someone who'd kidnapped him. The being looked him over, dismissive and assessing both, and gave him a tiny, sharp smile.

"Skywalker, my prince," the woman said, pushing him forward another step while she stopped behind him, her presence like a cool weight against his back.

"Thank you, Guri," he said, glance flicking to her and then back to Luke, cocking a hairless eyebrow ridge, "I am Prince Xizor of House Sizhran. And you are Luke Skywalker."

There was something in Xizor's tone that made Luke think of Grakkus, and that didn't do anything for his unsettled stomach. Or his opinion of the man. Not even the fact that this man knew his name felt quite as bad as that comparison. That still didn't explain anything, though, unless he also knew he'd destroyed the Death Star. Why were they *here* if that was the case, though?

"And my business, Skywalker, isn't actually with you," Xizor said calmly as he came around the desk, wandering over to a comm suite and activating it. Guri took him by the arm and pulled him over to the comm suite's holo pad, though not onto it; Xizor stepped up on it himself as the frequency that had been entered went through. "You're merely here because of who you are."

With that incomprehensible proclamation, Xizor turned away from him and towards the holo projector of the comm suite as it lit up, revealing one of the very few people Luke would rather not ever see again, unless he saw him already dead. His heart

still stuttered half a beat at the sight of Darth Vader.

“Prince Xizor. What do you want?”

Not even a comm transmission could reduce the impact of Darth Vader’s voice, and the rumbling voice rolled through the office despite the heavy wood and cloth furnishing it. Xizor bowed, a small, sharply perfunctorily little motion that didn’t convey any respect, even less *politeness* at all, even Luke could tell that.

“Merely to extend my delayed condolences for your abysmal luck on Vrogas Vas and in the three months since,” Xizor said, face impassive except for a glitter in his eyes. Luke shifted on his feet, feeling suddenly very, very uncomfortable - but Guri was right behind him, keeping him in place with her hands on his shoulders.

He should feel angry at the mention of Vrogas Vas and the *massacre* it’d been for the Alliance, especially when it was phrased as a *failure* to Vader - to the Empire - when it had been anything but that, but the tension coiled in his head, pushing against his headache and thoroughly distracting him.

“It’s unfortunate that, despite heavy losses on the Rebel side, you didn’t accomplish your goal,” Xizor continued, and there seemed to briefly be a smile curling the corner of his mouth. It disappeared so fast Luke wasn’t sure it’d been there at all. Didn’t accomplish his goal? Luke scowled, confused. Wouldn’t killing that many rebels in one go *be* the goal?

“The Rebels will be crushed in due time,” Vader paused, his helmet inclining slightly, and if he hadn’t had the mask, Luke would’ve said he was, possibly with a lot of sneering, looking Xizor over, “I imagined you were busy enough not to waste your time on empty platitudes.” The imminent termination of this transmission was coming, Luke could tell. It seemed Xizor could tell too, because he suddenly grinned wide, a brief flash of sharpened white against his face... was he more blue now than he’d been just moments before?

“I assure you, I am. But I’m never too busy for *you*, Lord Vader.

Hence why I've taken the time to invite your son."

Luke looked around when Xizor said that, expecting someone else in the room - or for someone else to enter - but there were only the three of them plus the holo of Darth Vader. A clawed hand closed about his hair, yanking him onto the holopad. He staggered into Xizor but his angry protest died, choked in infancy as the words Xizor had just said echoed in his head and Xizor pulling him onto the pad registered.

Echoed and then died when Xizor pulled his head up by his hair and spoke again.

"I believe he's got his mother's nose, doesn't he? She was an outstanding woman, though he seems to share your proclivity for *destruction*, Lord Vader."

He...

What...

Luke stared, feeling light headed as his thoughts ground to a halt, into the empty mask of Darth Vader.



Chapter 26:

In Which Revenge Is Planned II



Xizor reveals what he intends to do, and suffers the consequences for it. Luke just suffers.

The Star Destroyer Accuser, in orbit over Endor.

Staring, not at Xizor's well-hidden smug expression, but rather at the boy as his colour drained and his eyes slowly widened with the understanding of what the Underlord of the Black Sun was saying set in, Darth Vader felt... nothing. There was an empty void where his body ought to be, though it was shortly filled by the faint, subtle cracks from meter-thick transparisteel.

A brief, dim thought bubbled up as he shifted his gaze from Skywalker's pale face, mouthing a wordless 'no', to Xizor far more composed one.

His master would hear him.

That, if nothing else, made him reign in his rage, and suddenly there was a supernova contained in his chest, throbbing against his skin; a dragon demanding to be let loose. He balled his hands into fists and tightened them until the leather protested and the bare metal structure beneath the gloves dented.

"Your *point*?" he finally snarled, only able to take some comfort in the fact that his prolonged silence had cut Xizor's smugness slowly down into uncomfortable stiffness. He would soon feel far more than *uncomfortable*, for many reasons.

The *least* of which was the hand in the boy's hair.

"I am going to kill him," Xizor said, expression flat, holding a hand out for the blaster that was dropped into it. Luke stiffened at the proclamation, and Vader saw the barrel twitch away just a shade as it was pressed against the boy's jaw. Xizor probably

didn't notice.

"But not yet," Xizor paused, tilting his head and brushing the muzzle down along the boy's jaw, "you're going to be within touching distance, Lord Vader, and you'll be able to do *nothi---*"

The last word disappeared into a choked off gurgle and the blaster dropped out of view, clattering to the floor as Xizor clawed at his throat, pushed Skywalker away from him and staggered off the holopad. It didn't matter. He knew Xizor was there, had a grip and would *not* let go.

He thought he could threaten Darth Vader?

Thought he could threaten his *son*?

A blonde blur briefly flickered across the view, a hand closed over the recorder on the other side of the transmission and then it was crushed. A second later he lost his grip, unable to keep the tenuous awareness of Xizor's location with the loss of the holographic visual. There wasn't even the noise of harsh breathing through the now audio-only transmission to let him guess where Xizor was in the room.

Still. It might not be a complete loss.

"... Luke?"

A sharp, too-shallow breath could be heard drawn before the transmission cut out completely, but in the back of his mind a faint light flickered up.

A now-familiar presence from four more or less close encounters that he otherwise had only been able to sense when the boy was close enough. With Luke aware of their relationship, whether he accepted it or not, the bond had turned into a proper two-way connection, despite the distance between them.

It took willpower he hadn't known he possessed any longer to not lash out, not let the dragon tear up the whole ship; his Master would notice. That was the only thing that held him back; since his Master was only just starting to get bored of punishing him for the loss of the Death Star, he could ill afford Palpatine's attention turning towards him again with his temper having no obvious cause.

Especially as he had to leave.

It was luck, or perhaps the Force granting him some small mercy, that he did have a mission to legitimately leave on, now that he'd 'escorted' his Master to the potential construction site of the new Death Star. Tagge would think he was being favoured, having the Emperor's whole focus on him.

Staring flatly into the offline comm suite, Vader allowed himself a very small smirk.

Tagge was a fool.

With rage and what might have been identified as fear decades ago tearing at his insides, Darth Vader crossed back to the ship's internal comlink and activated the screen. A startled lieutenant scurried away under his gaze and fetched the captain.

"Lord Vader," the man said, straightening up as he entered into view and his pinched expression tightening slightly further, seemingly on reflex. It wasn't reflected in his voice, however, and the man, compared to the bridge crew around him, was far quieter mentally than one might have expected. It was... relaxing, even in his preoccupied state.

"We will be making a brief stop at Imperial Center before continuing on to Dantooine, Captain Piett. Adjust the calculations as necessary and leave as soon as they're done."

"Yes, my lord." Captain Piett bowed, though he turned off the comlink and the attendant screen before Piett had even turned away fully to do as ordered.

Dantooine. Whatever intel they had received, Darth Vader was sure that the rebels would already have left. Would *definitely* be gone before they reached the planet, even if they wouldn't be stopping at Coruscant.

Because it was obvious that was where Xizor was, and since he *wanted* to be found, Vader would not disappoint him.

Not in that, at least.

And while Xizor had some legal operations that had been making overtures towards being gifted at least part of the transport and supply contract that had, in all quietness, been put out

to certain parties, at this point it would be no issue to get rid of the deplorable Falleen.

No one threatened his son.

Coruscant, Xizor's palace.

Trying to breathe - vaguely aware he was probably panicking - Luke pushed away the memory of the way Vader had said his name, the way it'd zipped through him like lightning and that *couldn't be true*.

It was a lie.

It had to be.

Darth Vader was... he'd killed Ben, killed so many rebels, even just only *months* ago and he had *killed his father---*

Except, his brain broke in with a traitorous whisper, he couldn't have killed his father if he *was* his father, now could he? Shaking his head until the wave of dizziness threatened him into almost falling over, Luke backed away a few more steps from the comm suite and where Guri was helping Xizor stand up.

"You're lying," Luke snapped, felt heat rush back in to replace the cold, setting his fingertips on fire, "you're *lying*." Repeating it didn't make it any better though; Luke could hear the *pleading* and snapped his jaw shut with a click as Xizor looked up from straightening his sleeves.

"I would hardly go through all this trouble for a *lie*, Skywalker. It wouldn't be nearly as satisfying."

He needed to throw up. Satisfying?

"You---" Luke bit down on whatever boiling hot thing had settled down in his stomach, felt light-headed again. Didn't notice Guri's glance flickering around the room as wood rattled and Xizor's chair developed several small tears in the thick leather. "*Why?*"

Not that Luke couldn't imagine why; there were probably any number of reasons why Xizor would like to kill Darth Vader, but...

"He will lose what I have lost, Skywalker," Xizor said, his eyes flat and dead, rage tightly leashed in the words.

“Like you’re the only one?!” Luke yelled, taking a step back as Guri started off towards him. He wasn’t even thinking about Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru in that moment - Vader wasn’t personally guilty of *those* deaths - rather about any number of abstract people the man must have taken family from. The very man who was his father, and his stomach nearly rebelled at the thought even as something wished to *understand*; Darth Vader was the Emperor’s right hand man, but would have been a Jedi once. Had killed so *many*... Like he had done, however necessary destroying the Death Star had been.

“I have the means and power to do it, and I’ll savour every second even if I can’t see his face when you die, Skywalker,” Xizor said, a small smile on his face now, malice uncloaked and dripping from every word.

Xizor assumed Vader would care. Xizor assumed that killing *him* would have some sort of personal meaning for Darth Vader and he didn’t understand why Xizor would think that. What was even the *proof*---

Luke froze, thought about Vrogas Vas.

Remembered Xizor calling it a failure to Vader, because he hadn’t attained his goal.

That hot, red thing in his stomach boiled up, burned wet in his eyes. He ducked away from Guri without even thinking, avoided her next grab and tried to get a good view of Xizor - why, he wasn’t sure, all he knew was that---

The snap of Guri’s fist echoed in his head and broke the bubbling anger in two, dragging darkness with it.

Luke woke up surprisingly comfortable.

Not that he had much of a chance to enjoy it; the slight motion sideways sent a blinding spike of pain through his head, and he staggered up more or less blindly, finding the refresher more on chance than actually knowing or seeing where he was going.

Walking out of there feeling *marginally* better but still with a headache and a tingling somewhere in his head, Luke stared at the food (and what was, hopefully, some sort of meds and not

poison) sitting on a table for several minutes before he realised what it was.

He entertained the notion of not eating for a few seconds, but decided to take the risk.

Besides, if he could get away, it'd be better to do it with something in his stomach. Especially as he wasn't even sure when he'd eaten last, or how long it'd been since he'd talked to Artoo back on Dantooine. That being the last point he was utterly sure of what time it'd been. It was a bit unsettling, actually.

There were no windows in this room and there was no chrono, but Luke was pretty sure it was at least several hours (plus the time he napped after finishing the food, though he hadn't planned on doing *that*) before the door opened and Guri came in. They stared at each other and then, after a few moments, she arched an eyebrow.

Luke attempted to reach for the Force - he knew that would give him an edge - but while the painkillers had dulled his headache and the food had helped, he couldn't really concentrate enough to do more than feel its presence. And feel Guri's curiously... *lacking* presence in the Force. He frowned at her as she came up and wrestled his hands into submission. Not that she had to try very hard.

"... you're a droid," he said, finally realising what was *odd* about her presence, and it explained why she was so fast and heavy as well. She glanced down at him and didn't reply, but Luke knew he was right.

Outside, the corridors seemed... odd. Something was just slightly off from the corridors and turbolifts Guri had led him through up to Xizor's office, and he looked around with a frown.

"We're not on Coruscant any longer, are we?" the moment he said it, Luke realised what it was that looked *off*; the corridors vaguely resembled bulkheads, even if the look was well-disguised.

"Skyhook," Guri said as they passed through a door and Luke stared at the... *garden* inside, as well as the transparisteel ceiling

that revealed a slash of glittering sky edging into space, with a slice of Coruscant in the upper right edge.

A garden. On a space station. The idea was utterly ridiculous.

The lush greenery was pretty, but the knowledge of what was going on soured him on the whole thing. There also seemed to be some sort of tension in the back of his mind that had nothing to do with the muted headache; it was like cold fire, slowly growing stronger, and Luke was sure he recognised it. He just couldn't put his finger on why that was at the moment.

It didn't get better when Guri paused them in a clearing where the path opened up into a round area with a fountain, near the edge of the large room that contained the garden. Viewing bay windows looked down on the garden from a level below, and Luke could see what he was pretty sure was Xizor's shadow behind one of them.

"Do you always feed people before you kill them?" Luke said, not bothering to raise his voice much because he was pretty sure that Xizor would be able to hear him anyway, an assumption that was proven right when a short, cool chuckle broke the air, disembodied from its speaker.

"I wouldn't shirk my duties as a good host, Skywalker."

Rolling his eyes, Luke scowled and glanced around, but saw nothing useful. Even if he could've... what, tugged loose a vine or branch with the Force, neither of that would make a good weapon against Guri. And Guri didn't have any blaster or knives strapped visibly to her person that he could try and steal. She didn't really *need any* since she was pretty much a weapon herself.

It reminded him of being electrocuted on Vrogas Vas... Shaking that thought away, Luke shifted on his feet, causing Guri to tighten her grip briefly. Darth Vader was, presumably, (no, *definitely*) coming here.

For him.

Because Xizor had threatened, and intended to, kill him. To get at Vader. Because he was---

Cutting himself off, Luke felt his brain grinding to a halt at the thought.

He didn't even know what to *do* with that knowledge. What did it even matter? Aside from that every single hope and dream regarding his father had been irrevocably crushed... Or had it? Xizor had merely confirmed that Anakin Skywalker was Darth Vader, which... meant what? Was what Ben had said still true? If it was...

He didn't know.

The glittering darkness in the back of his mind flared, and Luke looked up and around; knew with absolute, dread-soaked certainty that Darth Vader was close. The sudden echo of blast doors snapping into place over the doors in the garden only strengthened that impression. They were being locked in... but why?

Absently, he drew a breath in through his nose; it felt kind of stuffed.

Coruscant, Xizor's skyhook; The Falleen's Fist.

Luke's presence in the Force was a blinding nova, like always; it only strengthened the moment he stepped onto the skyhook. The only difference was that, thanks to the mutual connection, instead of being literally blinded and unable to tell more than that Luke was close, he could now pinpoint the boy's location.

The corridors of the skyhook was empty, but he didn't need the emptiness *or* a gaggle of guards to show him the way. He did, however, wish that Xizor *would* throw his forces at him, if only for a chance to get rid of some of the energy burning right beneath his skin.

"Captain. When I have left the skyhook, destroy it."

"... As you wish, my lord," Piett said, voice crackling faintly over the comlink, only hesitating a brief moment - and not long enough to require any reprimand. Vader turned the comlink off and followed the starburst that was his son more than he fol-

lowed the corridors until he walked into a garden. Staring at the greenery, Vader narrowed his eyes at the sight; such an extravagant *uselessness* to keep on a skyhook. The door closed behind him, and then a blast door came down.

Did Xizor really think that would contain him?

The first inkling he had that *containing him* might not be Xizor's intention was when the display at the edge of his vision informed him his system was filtering out a high concentration of potentially damaging compounds. Walking a few more meters down the path, ducking under a flowering Dathomirian dragon-thorn, and he had the exact compounds of the gas being pumped in to join the air in the garden.

Odourless, colourless, and...

He lengthened his steps, teeth gritted as he realised what Xizor intended to do.

Had already done.

He stopped as the path widened into a fountain courtyard, where an unarmed woman - the same, he was sure, who'd crushed the recorder back in Xizor's office - stood beside Luke. She was not Human, but he quickly dismissed it; the boy was pale, and seemed somewhat unsteady on his feet.

He was already running out of time.

"A touching reunion," Xizor said, his voice carried into the closed-off garden by microphones as Vader stared at the boy, and the young one, after a few moments, reluctantly looked up at him. Vader snorted, quickly glancing around for the source of the offending voice, but he couldn't... Luke shifted, tilted his head up...

Ah.

There.

He smiled grimly, ignoring the way it pulled at his skin.

"It's a pity it will only be a short one."

"Longer than you wish it to be, Xizor," Vader growled, glancing to the boy when he stuck his tongue out, catching something dark dripping from his nose. His stomach twisted and then froze

as Luke blinked, realisation of what he'd just tasted slowly dawning.

No time.

"You're *already* out of time, Lord Vader," Xizor said, his quiet, mocking laughter echoing through the garden over the tinkling sound of the fountain.

Luke grimaced, his expression slowly falling into something like dim acceptance.

Vader would not have it.

He sent the droid flying into the greenery - how far, he didn't know and didn't care - and tossed his lightsaber in the same movement, taking the distance between him and Luke in a single leap. He caught his lightsaber as it came down again, having seared a deep cut into one of the transparisteel windows that belonged to the viewing bays a level up.

Luke swayed back when he reached for him - so Vader used that moment to wave a hand behind him, sending the droid flying again, the noise as she crashed through bushes and trees loud.

"I do not believe this is the time, young one," he snapped and Luke jerked, glared up at him sluggishly but with surprising heat, but then gagged on something and looked utterly disgusted when he swallowed it. He was paler now, and his eyes were glassy, and it took all of Vader's self control to wait even a second longer, but he was rewarded when Luke sighed (there was red at the corner of his lips) and stepped close.

Ice freezing his insides at the easy surrender, he picked up the boy carefully, threw his lightsaber again and jumped, slamming the Force in a wave in front of him, shattering the window. He caught the edge, ignoring the shards of transparisteel cutting through the leather of his glove - he didn't really feel it, and the damage could easily be fixed - and pulled himself up.

Xizor stared, eyes wide, mouth slack.

Vader whirled around and kicked, his foot connecting solidly with the droid's midsection and sending her flying. He called

his lightsaber to himself again, ignited it before he caught it and whirled around to deflect the first shot just in time. Xizor continued to fire while he edged towards the door, eyeing the huge hole in the window into the gas-flooded garden behind Vader with pale-edged panic.

He needn't have worried; Vader didn't plan on keeping him alive long enough to suffer the consequences of the gas.

Slashing when he was close enough, Xizor's hand and the blaster tumbled to the floor. He grabbed the Falleen by the neck, opened the door with the Force and stormed through, letting it close behind them. Luke's breathing in the silence was loud, and wet. There was, further, a spot on the cloak on his shoulder that was wet as well.

Xizor laughed.

"You're *too late*. You've *lost*." Xizor bared his teeth in something that could only generously be called a smile and something inside Darth Vader *snapped*.

He dropped the Falleen and *stomped* as he passed him, the resistance minimal and the crunch not at all satisfying enough, but it would have to do. He would have liked to have killed Xizor as he deserved, but they needed to get off the skyhook, and Luke needed a medic.

The way the boy slumped down, heaving against him, had Vader lengthen his steps, and the ice squeezing his insides turned into a glacier.

Later

Luke woke up vaguely remembering a dark shape keeping vigil outside the distorted glass of the tank. For how long had it been there? He didn't know. He also didn't know how long he'd been out, and he was getting *really tired* of being knocked unconscious and having to wake up from that somewhere else.

At least he didn't hurt.

The light was low, making sure the stark whiteness and pol-

ished gray of the metal around him didn't stab into his eyes; something he was grateful for, because his head felt really heavy and he could barely move.

Leia and Han would be worried... Artoo, Threepio and Chewie too. He needed to...

Moving still refused to happen, and Luke was sure he grunted in frustration. Or maybe not, he couldn't tell. Whatever he'd done had *exhausted* him anyway, but he didn't want to sleep yet. His eyes still slid closed, but that was partly because he heard a door open and felt the wall of icy fire that followed Darth Vader inside.

That fire was familiar. More than just from a few near-death experiences; like the vigil, he remembered that fire... wrapped around him.

He didn't want to think about it.

Luke would've jerked at the leather-padded touch just barely brushing his shoulder, but he was too tired to move. Couldn't even crack an eye open to glare... or maybe just stare. He wasn't sure, really.

Sleep, son.

I don't... want to--- You... What was he even saying? How was he saying it? Was that what he'd intended?

Maybe. He thought so.

He *didn't* want to sleep, he wanted to know what time and day it was, how long ago it'd been since he left Dantooine, wanted to make sure Leia and Han and the droids and Chewie knew he was all right, wanted...

Father...

Luke had no idea whether he'd actually said that in a way that could be heard or not, because sleep dragged him down moments later and turned his awareness of the brief brush of a hand through his fringe, cautious and light, muddled. Easier that way, perhaps. He'd deal with it later.

Luke slept, and the dark shadow stayed beside the bed for longer than it had planned to.



Chapter 27:

In Which a Cult Attempts a Sacrifice



Early christmas present, I guess? I'd hoped to do something more related to that but I'm not sure I'll be able to.

So here we are; the dark side, cultists, and one son who has to ask his father for help.

Waking up with a headache was never high on Luke's list of 'things to do repeatedly', and it was currently happening with a *vengeance*. Blinking and wincing into the bright light, it took him several moments (minutes?) to resolve the blinding fuzziness into what appeared to be a spotlight aimed down at him from above.

... Great.

Frowning, Luke closed his eyes and listened to the rush of the blood in his ears for a moment, managing to run through one of the exercises Yoda had showed him, which let him ignore the tense burning of the muscles in his upper back and arms long enough that when he opened his eyes again, he didn't wince at the brightness of the light.

It'd made something else clear, however; something which shifted uneasily in his stomach, and Luke quickly glanced up while he flexed his hands - or tried to, anyway.

His left hand was exactly as and where it was, trapped in a cuff for the moment, the chain from it helping to keep him suspended.

Fantastic.

His right, however... The flickering unease turned into a strange sensation of black, unsettled *offense*, because there *was no right hand*. The cuff keeping his right arm aloft and trapped

like the left actually sat above his elbow, and it was, if anything, even less comfortable than the left cuff and chain.

Someone... had removed the right artificial hand.

It took a moment of stunned staring before he scowled and his heart sped up, tugging on his right arm and trying to pull out of the cuff. It was clearly made to sit where it was, however, because his arm didn't budge. He'd only *just* gotten used to thinking of the hand as *his*, getting used to its quirks and the differences (plus advantages) to having a regular flesh hand and *they'd removed it*.

Whoever *they* were.

That thought made him look around, squinting past the bright light, the *only* strong light in the room, into an otherwise dimly lit chamber which seemed strangely angled and organic at once. Straight beneath him was a pool of liquid, though if it was water, Luke wasn't sure. Decided he didn't want to know, because it was murky and seemed suspiciously viscous from the light playing off the surface.

The rest of the chamber was otherwise empty, with the center of the floor lowered and a small set of stairs running along the entire edge of the chamber. It was hard to see, but there seemed to be at least one level of galleries a level up from the floor, slightly above his current eye-level.

There didn't seem to be anyone here.

Closing his eyes again, Luke let his breath out slowly, managed to grab the chain attached to the left cuff and pulled himself up a little, tried to get momentum to swing himself up---

"Nngh---!" The second his right leg wrapped around the chain pain shot through him and he collapsed back down, jerking like a caught pofrogg on its rope and making the muscles in his back and arms scream.

Right.

He'd forgotten about the debris that had gone through his thigh when the base exploded.

Looking down, Luke grimaced. The bandage wrapped around his thigh was already filthy with dark, dried blood, and fresh red

was starting to spot it - someone had taken the time to wrap the bandage there, but not much else. Probably just to keep him from bleeding out, really. Swallowing past the headache and threatening nausea, Luke considered the merits of yelling to see if anyone would come check on him.

His nose itched.

Trying to resist the urge to twist around to find some way to scratch it when he knew he wouldn't be able to, the sound of footsteps was at least a distraction. Trying to squint past the light, again, Luke stared down at a Bith in a black robe.

Of course it'd be a black robe.

"I suggest you relax and meditate until it's time," the Bith said, voice surprisingly melodic and echoing in the large room.

"Until it's time for *what*, exactly? Where am I, anyway? And why did you remove my hand?" Luke asked, frowning, and didn't even notice he'd used 'my hand'; the past few weeks he'd only been calling it 'the hand'.

"Blowing out the candle to strengthen the dark," the Bith said, sounding, Luke thought, all too blithe for what that sort of statement *implied*. But he was hardly new to threats on his life.

"I'm pretty sure the dark doesn't need to be strengthened a lot more, you know. The Emperor's a Sith Lord after all." Cocking his head, Luke frowned when he didn't get much of a reaction from the Bith - or any reaction at all.

"The Sith have their ways, we have ours. And the artificial matter would interfere with the flow of the energies, so that was why the artificial hand was removed. Relax and let your light burn as bright as it can," the Bith said, even *bowed* a little, and turned around.

That was *it*?

"*Wait!*"

The Bith didn't stop, and for the first time since he woke up, real, actual panic crawled down Luke's throat and stuck thorns in his stomach.

"Wait-- you," flailing, mentally and verbally more than physi-

cally, considering he was hanging from his arms by chains, Luke closed his eyes, took a few sharp breaths and reached through his jumbled thoughts, both for calm and... “*Stop.*”

The retreating steps ceased.

Luke knew he hadn't had to say that for this to have worked, whatever *this* was that he was doing, because it wasn't something Yoda had showed him or told him about. But whatever it was, it kept the Bith immobilised, Luke saw when he opened his eyes again.

“You don't want to do this,” he said slowly, but he didn't attempt a Mind Trick, merely tried to be *reasonable* and hoped the Bith would be willing to listen.

“Please desist before we have to take measures. And we do. It has not gotten *easier* to get ahold of a proper Force-sensitive after the Emperor's rise to power, you see.”

“Listen to me, you *really* don't want to---”

The spotlight flickered as the stun blast rippled through it, though where it'd come from he hadn't had the chance to see, and Luke could, for a brief moment, feel every muscle tense and lock up.

It was a little hard to figure out how long it took until he got proper awareness and control back - his sense of time had been utterly demolished. But the room was empty again except for him, and while he could sense other living beings nearby, quite a few of them which registered clearly (if darkly) enough in the Force to make it clear they were Force-sensitive, that was all.

“Great,” he muttered, closed his eyes and frowned into the darkness behind his eyelids. He needed...

Luke sighed.

He needed a rescue.

Han... Wincing at that reflexive thought, Luke let the wave of guilt rush over him and then recede. It wasn't like he could do anything about the fact that Vader... that his... no, he wasn't going to think about that part. Not unless he had to. So after a moment, Luke reverted to his original thought; that Vader had used

his friends as bait. Not at the moment, anyway. They would fix that situation as soon as they could. It was just that it shouldn't have happened at all, regardless of *why* it'd been done.

Shaking his head slowly, he pushed that thought away.

"Leia..."

Something tickled in the back of his head, and he latched onto it, familiar since three years back now and brighter than ever since Bespin. Thinking about that nearly shattered his concentration, but he drew close to that blue little light and tried to reach again.

Leia!

It echoed hollowly inside of him, sliding away into darkness. Not *quite* making proper connection. Maybe he wasn't strong enough, maybe the connection was too new, maybe it was too far away.

Whatever it was, even after several minutes of trying to get the same sense of connection that had happened while he'd been hanging under Cloud City, it didn't work. It *almost* did, and he could feel her sudden spike of *awareness* and *worry*, but he couldn't reach her clearly enough to exchange anything useful.

Defeat ashen in his mouth, Luke blinked into the sharply bright light again.

That was it, it wasn't like he had... anyone else...

"No!" Shaking his head enough to set him swinging gently, Luke grit his teeth. He was *not* going to ask *Darth Vader* for help.

He...

He remembered all too well what he'd said, lying in the bunk on the *Falcon*, the word ripped out of him through confusion and pain.

He didn't *want* to remember it, or acknowledge it, but it was even harder to forget the truth that had screamed at him as soon as he'd even listened a *little* to the Force, searching for a confirmation that Vader was lying.

He hadn't been.

Closing his eyes again, Luke tipped his head back, swallowed

against the dryness in his mouth.

Leia couldn't hear him, or couldn't hear him well enough to be of assistance, and.

And even if he didn't feel ready, even if he didn't want to, who better to ask, who *might* actually hear him and who would definitely be interested in his well-being (at least insofar as it came to other people threatening harm, Luke thought cynically) than the man who was his father?

Still.

With a frown, Luke reached out to the Force again, but not towards that darkly burning connection he knew was somewhere in the back of his head, rather he reached along the chains above him.

Tried to follow them with his senses and the Force both, but the shadows up near the ceiling made him lose both sight of and grip on the chains and he couldn't find where they ended. Yanking on them lower down sent the chains jangling and his arms and back protesting, flakes of rust and pebbles from the ceiling above falling past his feet.

Fell past his feet and into the liquid, which *hissed*.

Eyes widening, Luke stopped what he was doing.

"Blast it! *Fine*. I see how it is," Luke muttered. Tried to pretend he hadn't had any number of dream-nightmares since Cloud City about Vader succeeding, about himself not letting go. Tried to ignore the guilt churning in his gut over the fact that he still *wanted---*

Well. There was no choice at the moment. He didn't know how long he had, or if he'd be able to convince anyone here to help him.

There was a churning ocean of feelings, but that wouldn't help him at the moment, but he knew ignoring it wouldn't be useful either, so he stopped *ignoring* what he was feeling, simply let himself feel it, and then dove past it.

It was still there, of course, but the focus right now was the black nova in the back of his head, the dark power that beckoned

with far more allure than Luke might want to admit. Shaking his head to clear the thoughts out, he reached again, and this time...

Father...

The (nearly) restful red-black haze of near-sleep quivered. Lightened at the edges and started to take on shapes. A shattered window, an endless, wind-buffed drop to the bottom of a city floating in clouds, the *Millennium Falcon* hovering *just* out of reach outside the *Executor*.

With a snarl, Darth Vader woke up, having gotten not nearly as much rest as would've been beneficial, but he wasn't going to let his brain play up *that* reel of events again.

He felt the failure, the *loss*, keenly enough as it was.

He just needed more time, another--

*Father, could you **please** listen to me?*

Darth Vader froze, halfway out of the chair, and in his... surprise, dug his fingers into and through the thick leather. The last dredges of the mix of sleep deprivation and sleep-haze disappeared in the sudden thunder of his son's mental voice. A voice edged with reluctance and not a little desperation, and immediately something dark boiled up, coiling around his limbs.

What is it, my son? Despite the anxiety that clogged up the connection and still clung around the suddenly sharper awareness of Luke, Vader smiled faintly, pleased at not just being able to say it, but that Luke seemed to have accepted the truth.

On the other hand, as soon as he'd said it the silence stretched and the connection cooled, while obstinacy took the place of the anxiety, even when Luke had addressed him as 'Father' just earlier. That he could still feel that, however, assured him that Luke hadn't withdrawn into and behind the stony silence that had, until now, kept the bond between them hard and unyielding.

The only thing that had, through the last few months, been giving him some small reassurance that *all* was not lost, that he might still have a chance, was that the bond was there at all.

Of course, it'd exist whether Luke fully accepted it or not, now that he knew the truth, but the strength of it seemed to point to something more than just quiet awareness.

I... A pause, long and swollen and Vader relaxed back into his chair and exercised use of the patience he'd learned since he'd left his foolish younger self behind. I... need your help.

Triumph flared up, then mingled with the souring note of far too many scenarios that would cause Luke, the boy who'd rejected him and rather fallen to nearly certain death into Bespin's atmosphere rather than join him, to ask him for help.

What has happened? Are the Rebels causing you trouble, son? Or---

What? No! Luke's mental sputtering interrupted Vader's building anger, pierced it with incredulous offense and then reluctant... panic again. Frowning, Vader leaned forward in his seat a little, even with his son being far away and he couldn't make use of such a movement to either intimidate or draw the child in.

Unfortunately.

*Then what **is** it, young one? You seemed quite... determined to refuse me, and I would know if you were in an Imperial cell somewhere.* He'd made sure of *that*, at least, regardless of what further manipulations his Master might have put in place after he'd found out about Luke as well. He would not have his Master get to his son without him being aware of it.

And I still don't want to join you! I just--- I need. Help. I might have... um, gotten kidnapped. By dark side cultists, I think?

Silence.

Vader stared at the white and greys of the inside of his hyperbaric chamber, and tried to turn that sentence around until it made sense.

Young one...

I woke up here! It's not my fault. I think they must've been the ones to attack the base I was on, since they weren't Imperial forces, Luke trailed off, sounding annoyed, and then paused for a moment before he continued, tone something between reluctant

and resigned, *I wouldn't have done it this way if I had more time, but the Bith that came in here loudly implied they're going to sacrifice me. There's a pool of something acidic below me.*

Luke's nearly *cavalier* tone was what broke Vader out of the stunned silence that gripped his mind for the second time in short order. He was going to need to get a new chair, or have the armrests repaired.

Where are you? Incredulous rage and that very same black, angry thing from earlier, that had appeared shortly after he found out about his son, the one that had wanted Luke with him simply because then he'd be *safe*, reared up and reached out. All he saw through his son's eyes before he was thrust back was the glitter of a very bright light directly around Luke and some badly lit space beyond.

Get out of there! Luke hissed, and Vader would have been proud of how the boy tossed him out if he didn't *need* to know where the child was. *And I don't know where I am. Father, can you...* Luke trailed off, his mental voice quiet compared to the slightly uncontrolled volume at the beginning, and Vader straightened up.

Aimless rage would not serve him, or Luke, here.

Calm down, Luke. Concentrate on our connection and open up to me.

It wouldn't necessarily work.

Darth Vader, however, decided that it *had to*, that it *would* work, and he would accept nothing else as he turned on a small-scale projection of the galaxy, fingers resting on the controls as he closed his eyes.

Luke was a distant, bright light, like Tatooine's binary suns or the instance of a star going nova, and slowly, hesitantly, it reached for him, more than just their telepathy required. He clamped down tight on his memories when the first flicker of sand, then the green rush of a jungle rose up between them. Luke noticed what was happening when the memory of harsh wind started to tug at remembered clothes and his own baritone

rumbled between them, and suddenly the connection broke and he was blinking into the bright light of his meditation chamber.

Heart tight with something he couldn't name, Vader quickly looked at the projection of the galaxy; it was now zoomed in on a single planet, and slowly working backwards through the stages he'd unconsciously zoomed the projection through, Darth Vader slowly smiled through the pain.

Hours later (Luke didn't know how many), his ears aching from a rising chant and still trying to come to terms with the fact that he'd called Vader 'Father' and how (right) it'd felt, plus his intrigued confusion over Vader's mental voice, now that he wasn't in pain and shock and clear-headed enough to actually make note of it, Luke wondered how much more time he had.

If Vader would get here in time, if the deeper connection of their bond Vader had wanted at the end had even *helped*...

Luke was starting to doubt it, eyeing the black-robed crowd below him with that same quiet panic from earlier slowly building. He couldn't hold them all still, he was sure - or if he could, it'd require only one of them that he couldn't see or didn't know where they were to drop him into the definitely lethal pool below him.

The realisation that he might actually die here was far more unpleasant than the other realisations he'd had for similar reasons; something about the slightly swaying bodies in the muffled darkness and the buzzing chanting and the growing cold from the dark side was just---

Head snapping up as the quiet unease of impending death and creeping cold suddenly flared with frozen warmth and the black sun in the back of his head went nova, Luke's breath caught.

"Vader..."

Father.

Glancing down at the... cultists?, no one seemed to have heard

his murmur, not even the closest ones. Or if they had, they didn't care.

Luke, Vader thundered, and in this connection it was both softer, richer and, somehow, far more *demanding* than Vader could make it out loud. Something twisted quietly in the pit of his stomach, but Luke pushed it down with a grimace.

I'm fine. They seem pretty busy, what with the chanting.

A pulse of tightly leashed rage and acknowledgement was his answer, but Luke didn't need much else, since he could feel his father come closer with every passing minute. Hopefully, he thought as he eyed the fifty-some strong crowd below, it'd be fast enough. Death had been easy in the moment of Vader's offer-ultimatum. It'd been easy any other number of times before, as a seemingly unavoidable and necessary action that would give his friends or the Alliance a worthwhile result.

And while dying here would definitely deprive his father of any chance of turning him, Luke... thought there must be some *other* way. He also, really, didn't want to die.

When the doors slammed open, not a single cultist twitched.

Luke swallowed, licked his dry lips and felt murder hang in the air.

"Vader--- Father, leave them..." he trailed off as the black mask was raised to meet his gaze, somehow he just *knew* that, even with the low lighting in the room that hadn't really been helped by the doors being opened.

"They have undoubtedly been killing Jedi or untrained Force-sensitives for a very long time," Vader rumbled and ignited his lightsaber, "you would leave them to continue this behaviour?"

Staring at his father across the room, Luke grimaced and tried not to wiggle where he hung, because... all right, no, they shouldn't be left to continue that.

"Well, I---!"

The chains dropped. His gasp stuck in the roof of his mouth, but Luke soon found himself flying *across* the room instead of

down. The trailing ends of the chains where they'd been ripped out of wherever they'd been attached caught in the liquid of the pool and hissed, then spat drops of acid as the chains flew behind him, on the floor, onto cloth and *still* no one moved.

Staggering as he was set down on the floor, Luke grit his teeth and *tried* to sit down without collapsing on his injured leg and turned his head away from the floor below the stairs he sat at the top of.

Rage, death and freezing cold held the room in a choke-hold while his father tore through the cultists, still trapped in whatever trance their dark side ritual had induced, and while it might be justice on some level, it was also *slaughter*. Luke was faintly relieved he hadn't eaten anything in a while.

It felt like an indeterminable time later when Vader stood in front of him, frowning down at him, Luke was sure. The room smelled of charred flesh and cloth.

"Can you stand?"

"Can you get rid of *these*?" Luke said, ignoring his father's question in favour of thrusting his awkwardly chained-together arms up at Vader. He almost regretted asking when the lightsaber was ignited again.

"Stay still," Vader rumbled, and Luke very carefully didn't wince when that blade came down. It was, however, wielded with a surprisingly delicate care and finesse - enough so that Luke ended up staring, rather fascinated, and *almost* didn't feel an uneasy twist in his stomach at the sight of the blade so close to his limbs.

The chains fell off with a clatter, and Vader offered a hand - to then just grab his right arm and pull it close, clearly glowering.

"Where is the prosthetic? You *have* received one, have you not? It has been over three months!"

"I *had* one," Luke said with a frown, weirdly touched but also exasperated. And in pain. "The cultists... or whatever they are, removed it. Apparently it interfered with the ritual or something." Shrugging, Luke grimaced and knew he wouldn't be able to just

jump up and start to run away now. Not with how his leg was. So with a sigh, he held out his left hand.

“Can we... I just want to get out of here,” he said with a sigh, and after a tense, silent moment, Vader, while he took the left hand, knelt down, let go of his arms and trailed his hands down his body. It took a stunned moment before Luke’s brain connected this behaviour to any number of instances Han and Leia (and, when he was younger, Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen) had done the same.

Checking for injuries.

“It’s just my leg,” Luke said, shaking his head, “and some bruises, I guess. Maybe a concussion, I don’t know.” Better to offer that up and have this... Luke wasn’t sure what he thought about it, but it made the hope of solving the issue of his father in some other way than what either his father or Ben and Yoda wanted seem more... possible.

“Can you walk, son?” Vader asked, and there was something dry in that voice that said his father didn’t believe he could, and if Luke was honest, he knew he couldn’t. But he wasn’t about to just let Vader do whatever he thought he had - and he also didn’t want to think about the shiver in his stomach that came when his father had said ‘son’ - so he just shrugged and held his hands out.

Or rather, his hand and his arm and he was really missing his right hand now.

Vader stared at him silently and then helped him stand up, but they’d barely walked a few meters when it became obvious that it wasn’t really working - his father was much too tall to effectively help him walk like this, and his right leg was refusing to work with him the longer he attempted to stand on it.

Vader stopped, and Luke closed his eyes.

“You’re not carrying me.”

Silence answered him, and Luke got the distinct image in his head of a raised eyebrow. He didn’t like it much. Luke also wasn’t sure he believed his father would actually pick him up like he

was five and carry him. Surely Darth Vader, the second in command of the Empire, wouldn't stoop to *carrying* his twenty two year old s---

“Father! Put me *down*!”

Apparently Darth Vader would, and Luke didn't even notice he'd now said 'Father' out loud, twice.

Chapter 28:

In Which Dad Finds His Son In a Cantina I

A tumblr prompt requesting Vader finding Luke in a cantina, so here we are with two different variations. This first one being AU.

Very, very AU.

The light was dim, dust and grime floating in the pale globes of lighting that lit up the tables, the bar and, barely, the ceiling. The light turned the scratches on the table into buttery shards, and caught violently pink particles floating in the dull-green liquid in the tall glass as music hummed somewhere below direct hearing, vibrating through the floor and furniture.

The drink in front of him Luke hadn't even touched in the two hours he'd been sitting in here, pressed into a corner with his feet up on the table and projecting 'I'm not here' very, very hard. Mostly because he'd almost gotten tossed into a table right when he walked in and he hadn't even done anything.

Eyes half-closed, Luke listened to the quiet rumble of voices bent to their conversations, the shift of bodies, and just as aware of the bright swirl of life in the Force that thrummed through the cantina.

A swirl of life that suddenly got doused in ice.

Luke didn't twitch. Instead he crossed his arms over his chest and determinedly kept his eyes closed while the chatter slowly died like a retreating wave and the creeping, clammy sensation of fear clogged the air.

The glass shattered, loud in the silence, and fell into a little heap of shards into the spreading pool of green-and-pink that had been the drink. The fiery ice that had been advancing like an

angry glacier stopped, just beyond the table, and the dim lighting from the rest of the room cut out as a shadow fell over Luke.

"I only bought that 'cause it'd have been rude not to get anything, you know," Luke said, frowning, and finally opened his eyes. Stubbornly remaining in place, he looked up into the hooded face of his father. There was a very flat, dark expression there, barely visible thanks to the shadows, but Luke didn't need to *see it* to know it was there.

"Are you *quite* done?" his father growled, eyes flashing in the gleam from a stray shard of light, hands planted on his hips.

Luke bit his lip.

"I guess so, yeah," he said with a sigh and pulled his feet off the table, creating a small river of pink-dotted green liquid that dripped off the table's edge in a miniature waterfall as he stood up, glancing around, "you didn't send Commander Tano."

His father gestured sharply at him to hurry up and shifted aside to let him pass, cloak swaying around his heels. As soon as Luke had inched past the table and his father, the older man clamped a gloved hand down on Luke's shoulder and pushed. By the way the leather-covered metal fingers dug in, Luke knew better than to duck out of the grip to assert his right to simply walk alongside his father.

"She is briefing Sergeant Kreel in the particulars of handling you, as it seems a bigger team might be necessary," his father said, voice dry as a desert and trailing dark fire while he herded Luke forward, out of the cantina.

Luke couldn't quite contain another sigh, head and shoulders drooping but putting up no fight as he was pushed into the speeder and obligingly moved over to let his father take the controls.

"I just wanted a few minutes and a chance to take in the atmosphere! I didn't drink anything at all." Turning in his seat, Luke didn't catch anything of his father's expression - he kept his eyes pointed forward and the hood, despite the wind, shielded his face from view.

Nonetheless, there was a flicker in the cold sun that was his father, and it slid along his own Force presence with far more care than Luke would have expected at this point in time given his father's mood.

"You had three and a half hours," his father said and Luke had to admit he was surprised it'd taken this long for anyone to come for him... even less his father. He *had* wandered around Coruscant's Underground for quite a while, trying to find just the *right* cantina before he chose one to actually sit down in. He only got so far as to open his mouth to say something, he wasn't sure what, before his father spoke again, the words now bringing with them a frozen solar flare that wrapped tight around him.

"There were reports of Jedi in the nearest systems---"

"Leia—!" Cold squeezed his heart and even as he reached out to Leia, he whipped around to stare at the covered profile of his father. He got a sleepy and very annoyed acknowledgement of his 'tap' on his twin's mind, which reassured him Leia was currently in no danger. His father's response further helped to alleviate the worry.

"Is fine. She is on her way back," his father growled, but despite the reassurance the fire wrapped around Luke's shoulders tightened - he almost felt as if he was about to tip over, closer to his father, "why did you choose today to go hide in a seedy cantina, Luke?"

He opened his mouth, mostly annoyed because while there'd been warnings and reports, none of them had said anything about Jedi in the systems closest to Coruscant, so why should he have been so very careful about choosing *today* to sneak out, but then he snapped his mouth closed.

Tilted his head with a frown and saw but didn't register the glittering flow of traffic they were flying past.

"I... don't know."

The fire turned into molten lava, and he couldn't have moved if he wanted to while the speeder suddenly shot up to its max speed.

“You’ll get *nothing*, Obi-Wan.”

Luke pretended he hadn’t heard the quiet snarl, nor that he was curious of what it meant. Tried instead to focus on the surprisingly very real regret that he hadn’t so much as sipped that drink his father had destroyed.

The vague particulars of this AU being something like Vader/Anakin lost his limbs on Mustafar, but didn’t burn (or not as badly), Padmé didn’t die and is basically our Dark Empress, Palpatine was killed as soon as Vader could do it, Luke and Leia’s parents are raising them and the Jedi aren’t all gone. :v something something.



Chapter 29:

In Which Dad Finds His Son In a Cantina II



Second variation on the prompt, because I couldn't decide and thus did two. This one's of course AU as the rest, but not as AU as the previous one, and is intended basically to be an AU situation (on Luke's end) of that "bounty hunter on Ord Mantell" that Han mentions in ESB.

A faint smell of iron, alcohol and dust coloured the air, complimenting the rusty walls and floors, and *almost* distracting from the red trail of... something that was creeping down the seams where the old metal plates fit together. Pinkish light fell in from the narrow skylights high above, rust-red dust motes floating in and out of view.

The air was still and, despite being inside, cool, almost cold. Partly because the doors at each end of the old warehouse were open to the chill mountain air, probably in an attempt at creating some airflow to keep the smog from smothering them all.

Whatever planetary authority Ord Mantell had, they hadn't invested in air scrubbers, and it was easily noticeable. Not just in the heavy, grayish-pink fog that seemed to float just above the heads of everybody, inside or outside, but also because his nose felt stuffed and a headache was threatening.

Breathing in the sharp bite of alcohol wafting from the drink he'd gotten on a whim, Luke grimaced. He'd burn off his nose at this rate, but at least he wouldn't have to worry about either smelling or breathing through it.

Rubbing his temple and squinting through the dirty air which had very little to do with the cigarras a number of the patrons were smoking and absolutely everything to do with the smog,

Luke wondered where Han and Leia had disappeared to. They were supposed to have met him here half an hour ago...

Muffling a sigh, Luke reluctantly stood up. Maybe he'd have a chance to find them if he went looking now instead of waiting around... And if he was lucky, maybe he'd be able to single out their presences (or at least Leia's, he was getting the hang of picking out hers, at least) and follow that to where they were.

Noticing two women steering their way towards his table through the small crowd that lingered out on the floor between the tables, he figured it was just as well he was about to leave. They'd make better use of the booth than he had so far.

"Sorry," he said, stepping away from the table and out of the way as the two Falleen came up to the table, "it's free no-oof!" The worn-out back of the bench in the booth slammed into his back, and one of the women took a step forward. She put one of her hands on the table, the other against the wall while the other Falleen slid in beside him, smiling almost sweetly.

It only took a quick glance to see that they'd neatly trapped him in the booth, and Luke narrowed his eyes as he looked between them, wondering who they were.

Imperial agents? Rebel contacts Leia hadn't told him about and since Leia wasn't here they were improvising? Just two thugs who'd singled him out as an easy tar---

"Y'don't really pay attention to ladies tryin' to get your attention, do you?" the Falleen standing above him said, her breath smelling - *stinking* of alcohol mingled with something tangy and almost glittering, and the woman beside him had a similar sharp, glittery smell about her.

Great.

Drunk *and* spiced horny women.

Trying not to breathe too deeply, because the odours wasn't really doing anything for his headache, Luke shook his head. Really hoped he wasn't blushing from the hand that was now high up on his thigh and creeping nearer to the join between his thigh and pelvis, and smiled tightly.

“Hard to see anything in here, sorry,” he said slowly, balling one hand into a fist to keep from reaching for either his lightsaber or his--- blaster, which the woman sitting beside him had just removed.

All right then.

Frowning, Luke glanced from her to the one standing above him. In the pink, dusty light, the Falleen looked more red-shaded than they had when they pushed him down, but that must just be the light. They’d been green when they’d walked across the cantina floor, and he was pretty sure Falleen were *supposed* to be green, too.

“You’ll probably have better luck talking to someone else, you know. I need to find my friends.”

It felt colder in here than it had before, but maybe that was just the sharp, warning tingle that ran down his spine - he was familiar enough with how it felt, and this was definitely it. Said sensation didn’t get any better when those bright, amber eyes above and to the right of him narrowed and, as he glanced between them and considered what to do next, noticed the red flush covering them spreading and darken.

... So it wasn’t really the light, but all that told him was that they could, like some lizards were capable of doing, change colour. Not *why* they were doing it.

“Your friends can wait, can’t they? Surely they wouldn’t begrudge you a bit o’fun, hm?” the Falleen to his right hummed, right into his ear, while the one standing shifted one of her hands to his left knee and Luke was caught between grimacing at the feeling of hot, tangy breath tickling his ear and hair, and tilting his head into it without quite knowing why.

The air no longer smelled of rust, alcohol and spice, but rather something drier, warmer. It settled low in his belly, almost obvious and he should...

The two women gasped and jerked as one, their colours instantly washing out into sickly-looking greenish-grey as they jerked, breath gurgling and eyes bulging out. Luke suddenly

had a very heavy Falleen falling on top of him as she clawed for breath, and the other one fell against the wall, pulling at a collar that shouldn't really be constricting her breathing.

It still took a dumbfounded, thought-empty moment where he stared at the Falleen that had fallen onto him, seeing mostly the small ridge along her spine and feeling like he was burning up and uncertain as to why. The air was biting cold and the only noise...

"Vader," Luke snapped, felt himself blush and wasn't sure why - only that he felt utterly embarrassed at having the Imperial Navy's supreme commander on the other side of the table, arms crossed over his chest and helm tilted, staring down at him. He was, Luke realised as he carefully pushed the Falleen out of the way, fingers straying to her pulse (non-existent) nearly without a thought, at a distinct disadvantage. He barely had any room to maneuver even *without* an extra body in the booth and on the floor in front of it, and with them... well, he'd probably be lucky if he got out before Vader cut him down.

"Skywalker. Did Captain Solo choose this rendezvous for you?" the unimpressed, quietly furious snarl was startling, and Luke shot to his feet, almost tripping on the various arms and legs in the way and pulled out his lightsaber. Like he'd let his friends be threatened even if he was still trapped behind the table.

"Leave them alone---!"

"As they have done to you? Allowing your ignorance for *Falleen particularities* almost lead to something I doubt you would wish to happen?"

His anger at Darth Vader in general, as his father's and Ben's killer in particular and the implied threat to Han tangled with a sudden burst of incredulous, furious embarrassment. He *couldn't believe* he was hearing this, even less from *Darth Vader*. There was just something *off* with the armoured giant's reaction to all this, but Luke couldn't quite put his finger on it.

Trying to focus on the issue at hand instead of his confused embarrassment wasn't really working either, since they were un-

fortunately connected.

"They'd been using spice, I doubt they knew what they were doing," he snapped, pushing away from the booth and stepping over the Falleen on the ground, noting that the cantina wasn't emptier than before - rather, it was more crowded. More due to the stormtroopers that had come in with Darth Vader than that there'd been an influx in patrons, however.

"No," Vader said, low, cold and deadlier than the lightsaber at his hip, flexing his right hand and suddenly... suddenly it was hard to walk. Scowling, Luke took another step, which was slow as if his muscles just weren't working, and then he couldn't move at all, "they knew *exactly* what they were doing, young one. Which is why they are dead."

If he could just... but even moving his fingers were hard, and it seemed to be kilometers to the activation button for the lightsaber as Vader stepped closer, the smoggy air turning the huge, black frame into something unreal. Luke would've frozen, except he already was, and pushing against Vader's will was impossible.

There must be *some* way to get free, but he couldn't figure it out.

"They hadn't done anything yet---" he cut himself off, because aside from that that was a stupid defense he was also surprised he could speak at all since the rest of him was frozen. He was also flustered again. For some reason it just felt *wrong* to be talking about this with Darth Vader - beyond the obvious reasons. Why did he even *care*?

"They *would have*."

A death sentence, curiously softly said, something towering and deep underneath those words as Darth Vader reached out, brushing his fingers lightly against Luke's forehead. The shock that went through him was entirely internal, an unstoppable wave that ripped his consciousness with it.

All Luke was left with, right before he lost the last glimmers of thought and felt his limbs give away, was *why do you even care*?

And strangely, he felt like he already knew the answer to that question, but if Vader answered (not that he could've heard him), Luke wasn't really conscious to hear it.

Chapter 30:
In Which a Hostage is Exchanged

A bit delayed, AU of #4 of Vader Down; Vader doesn't let Leia run away and decides on another course of action instead.

"... Master Luke is safe!"

The tinny quality of the faint voice rising from the princess' comlink, wherever she had it tucked away, didn't disguise the familiarity of the voice. Or what Threepio was saying. It gave him a few options, as annoying as it was that the boy had slipped away, *again*.

“Hmm.”

They stared at each other, the silence stretching. The princess' dark eyes were huge, her mouth slack in shocked surprise for the moment, and it... *almost* reminded him of something. The same went for the curve of her cheek as her expression slowly hardened, though she was having trouble completely burying the fear, and her crown of dark brown hair...

The princess herself spared him from having to think further.

“You’ll pay for everything you’ve done. If not today, one day---” Her voice rang out sharply, rage, determination and that stubborn sliver of fear edging it, and he said nothing. He could let her go, here, and she’d be his bait, leading the boy to herself and him to the boy. On the other hand, that might take longer than was advisable, even if it would shield his intentions more adequately. The other possibility was to cut out some of middle stages inherent in letting Princess Organa run away and lead the boy to him.

Something tingled, bright and cold through the Force, and his decision was cemented.

“You can kill me, but you can’t kill what I stand for... and you won’t stop justice!” the princess snapped, straightening up, her glare hot enough to melt durasteel. It slid right off him.

“You will find, Your Highness, that justice is a useless and weak ideal to hold on to,” he said as he raised a hand and pulled her weapon to himself, crossing the distance between them while she jerked and watched the the weapon fly through the air after he tossed it away. She tried to break away, of course, but got nowhere, which was equally expected.

Now, all he had to do---

He caught the movement of her in the absolute lower edge of his vision and the Force sung out a warning as her head disappeared. He took a sharp step back and wrenched her arm up behind her - her cry was sharp and breathy as she staggered, losing her footing. If he hadn’t moved, she would have slammed her head into the control panel on his chest.

Clever.

But it wouldn’t help her.

It took very little work to liberate her comlink and cuff her, then, hesitating a moment, he turned towards the boy’s approximate location (the lingering power of the temple as well as the brightness of the boy made him nearly impossible to locate without some sort of mutual connection). It would probably not take long before the boy found his way here.

“You’re not getting away with this, Vader! Executing me will get you and the Emperor *nothing!*”

He tuned out the princess’ angry voice and waited.

After leaving the downed *Falcon* and Han and Chewie to face that Wookiee alone, Luke walked towards what he was rather sure was Leia’s last known... *approximate* location that they’d gotten from Threepio. He needed to hurry, both for Leia’s sake as she was apparently trying to take on Darth Vader alone, and for Han and Chewie’s.

He felt bad for having left them, but Han had told him to *go*, so he'd gone.

"Threepio? Have you heard anything from Leia?"

"No, Master Luke, I haven't! This is *most worrying*, Princess Leia hasn't responded for well over twenty minutes, *please* find her, Master Luke!"

His gut twisting around itself, Luke gritted his teeth and blinked away a brief waver in his vision. Today had been long already, and even if he took out all times he'd been knocked out or tossed around today, there was still the crash earlier.

"Don't worry, Threepio, I'm on my way."

Hopefully it just wouldn't be too late, though...

"Ah!" Flailing, Luke managed to straighten himself up and get his balance back, looking down to see if it was a hidden rock that he'd managed to stumble over... But no, what laid half-buried in the sand was a blaster. And a very familiar type of blaster, too; the sort that was standard in the Alliance.

Bending down to pick it up, Luke looked around and winced. Half hidden by the lengthening shadows, the veils of dust stirred by the wind lazily trailing across the ground and the same low, unpleasant fog that been nearly everywhere, lay several Alliance soldiers. Vader had been here. Standing up and dropping the blaster, Luke frowned and closed his eyes.

Didn't need to do much more than that and actually *concentrate* to realise that Vader was close.

Where was Leia?

The question didn't really need to be asked, because even as it formed in its head, Luke turned around. Unhooking his lightsaber and trying not to think about the failure on the factory moon, trying to shore up his chances with the knowledge he'd held himself against some of Grakkus' magna guards, he slowly walked down the incline that led away from the dead rebels and down into a shallow valley with twisted rock formations.

Slowing down even more, Luke could admit to being nervous as he lit his lightsaber, keeping the point low to the ground and

his grip light, ready to change---

Whirling around, he faced nothing more than a rock formation over two meters tall and the whisper of wind brushing sand past it.

Right...

"Skywalker."

A gasp - and it was *not* anything else - slid out of him as he whirled around, Darth Vader's name like an accusation and a yell all at once on his lips, but he stumbled on the syllables and what came out was something else entirely.

"Leia!"

The princess fumed in Vader's grip, looking somewhat red in the face - though why, Luke couldn't figure out, and it was honestly strange to see her look that *furios* outside of yelling at Han.

"What did you do to her?" Luke snapped, glaring up at the Dark Lord and raising his lightsaber, pointed slightly to the side to not have Leia right in its path, "let her go!"

Luke was a bit distracted from his one-sided staring contest with Vader when Leia started wriggling and shaking her head, but he couldn't figure out what she wanted, aside from that it was something which didn't have to do with his lightsaber. He looked back up to Darth Vader when the Dark Lord finally shifted, pushing Leia forward just a shade but not letting go of her arm.

"That was my intention, Skywalker," Darth Vader said, voice rumbling through the air and sending an unpleasant echo trailing around them, twining around the last of Luke's earlier cry.

"... what?" Luke blinked, dropping his lightsaber towards the ground slightly, but quickly tightened his grip and raised it again when he saw Vader flex his right hand and felt a light, nearly experimental tug on the lightsaber.

"You, for the princess."

Luke froze.

Leia froze as well, ceasing her increasingly exasperated at-

tempts at trying to tell Luke what it was she wanted him to do, brown eyes flicking between the wide-eyed Luke to the sliver of Vader's chest and the bottom of the mask and back. Luke let his breath out slowly and tried not to wince. Somehow, the Empire must've figured out he was the pilot that had destroyed the Death Star - that must be what today had been about.

Not much to do about it, he supposed. He couldn't very well attack Vader with Leia right there, no matter how much he wanted to.

"All right," he said slowly, the words out before he'd considered them, but it wasn't like he'd have said anything *else*. Leia looked absolutely livid, shaking her head sharply, moving her mouth--- huh, why *couldn't* she speak? Luke frowned, squinting, but he couldn't see any gag or anything. There was simply no noise coming out of Leia's mouth.

No wonder she was angry.

Shaking his head, he stepped forward, and then stopped when Vader held up his free hand. He didn't need to say anything at all, but Luke shifted on his feet and it took several moments before he finally turned the lightsaber off and made to drop it on the ground. Before it'd fallen from his hand, it flew out of it and into the Dark's Lord's outstretched one.

"That is not how you treat a lightsaber, Skywalker."

Scowling, Luke grimaced and had to silently agree. He probably *shouldn't* just have dropped it on the ground, and he hadn't really wanted to, but he hadn't been sure what sort of handover Vader would've agreed to.

"Let's just get this over with," Luke muttered, though whether that was to Vader or himself he didn't know... and really, did it matter?

Slowly walking closer, Leia's expression darkened with each of his steps and she was practically *snarling* when he came within an arm's length. Vader reached for him at the same time as he pushed Leia away, and Luke took that moment to dive for Vader's belt - the Dark Lord's own lightsaber was closer, but he didn't

care, he just needed *one* of them---

"Oof--!" His flightsuit's collar catching around his throat when Vader yanked him back and sideways, away from his belt, had Luke sputtering and gasping for breath. A quiet click was heard, nearly drowned by Leia furiously calling his name, and Luke saw something silver fly through the air, glinting off the slanted sunlight and slapping into Darth Vader's hand.

A second later and the binders Leia had been cuffed with were around *his* wrists, and there was a hand tight on his shoulder.

"You may want to leave, Princess, before I change my mind."

The idea that Leia might be killed *with* him made Luke start, anger and dismay bubbling up, which also tightened the grip around his shoulder even more. He grimaced and looked to her; she was fairly trembling with rage.

"Leia, go! Get to Han and Chewie!"

"Luke..."

Their eyes met, briefly, forever, and it felt like that moment he'd met her eyes through the lenses of the stormtrooper helmet. Then she whirled around and ran.

"How're you even going to get *off the planet*? Your TIE crashed," Luke said with a pleased smirk as he was yanked around and pushed forward. A wordless, heavy noise - an actual *snort* - reverberated above him in response, and they hadn't walked more than a few hundred meters before a blue-and-white ship of some kind descended.

Luke's feeling of pleased smugness evaporated as he stared at the ship while it landed.

"We need to leave *now*, Lord Vader! A whole *bunch* of Imperial ships just arrived! It's gonna be a hornet's nest out here right soon," the woman from earlier, still covered in greenish, sticky-looking juices, cried as she came down the ramp.

Luke didn't understand it - why would it be bad for *Darth Vader* if *Imperial forces* arrived? - but he also didn't care. He needed to---

"Ack--- Put me *down*!" Anger billowed up as he was sudden-

ly hauled up and over Vader's shoulder. Loose pebbles clattered around them and sand billowed up without a wind for a brief moment and then something that felt like a mental *pinch* stabbed through his brain and Luke swore, dimly and angrily, through the headache that finally broke out.

"Guard him. I will take care of our unwanted guests," Vader said as he preceded the woman into the ship, and Luke got a look at her grinning at him, eyebrows raised, "he thinks he can ambush a Dark Lord of the Sith." Vader's voice promised murder - or rather, even more murder than what had already happened today - to whoever it was. Was the Empire split into factions, or something?

"This way, Lord Vader! Have I redeemed myself from... well, all this?" she ventured as she skipped past Luke where he hung, silently steaming, over Vader's shoulder and Darth Vader himself. The Dark Lord was quiet for a very long moment.

"If you can keep the boy here, Aphra."

There was both promise and threat in those words, but Luke didn't get much chance to ponder his escape or wonder what his escape would put this Aphra woman in for sort of quandary, because a moment later they swept into a bunkroom, he was deposited on a bed and a leather-clad finger was pressed to his forehead.

The voice that commanded him to *sleep* only sounded like Darth Vader vaguely, from something in the cadence and authoritative command. Otherwise it wasn't quite as deep, not exactly as dark---

Luke fought it for half a second before he lost.

Chapter 31: In Which a Jailbreak Happens

Preemptive AU of the next arc of the Marvel Star Wars comic (the Rebel Jail one), as I had an idea that works with this setting, but I didn't feel like waiting to see if there'd be a chance to veer off from comic events. So have an AU loosely inspired by the future comic arc, which means that this bases itself off of Vader Down, in which our heroes got away (and Vader murdered a thousand rebels and didn't get his son), and got away with Aphra.

So now they're in a rebel base that doubles as a jail with this apparent agent of Vader's.

And she wants to talk to Luke. Alone.

"She wants to talk to you. Alone," Leia said, a deep, disapproving frown on her face as she walked into the office, the door swooping closed behind her. Luke blinked and turned away from the projection of the prison displayed against the wall, facing Leia.

"Me? Why?"

"She didn't *say*," Leia's frown turned into a scowl, and she walked over to him, laying a hand on his arm, "you don't need to go in there and talk to her if you don't want to. We'll deal with it."

Luke crossed his arms and looked away, frowning. What Leia *wasn't* saying was 'since she made a good show of kidnapping you' and 'even if her ultimatum for speaking is talking with you'. The former he knew Leia meant because she'd been furious when he and Han and told her what happened, the second was layered underneath the 'we'll deal with it'.

He wasn't particularly eager to go talk to the woman who, ap-

parently, set the droid after him, but on the other hand, he rather wanted to know *why* she'd done it. It wasn't like anyone knew who he was.

... Right?

Did Vader know? She *had* said she worked for Vader... Frown deepening, Luke straightened up and untangled his arms, rested his hands on Leia's shoulders and squeezed.

"I'll do it. It'll be *fine*," he said, giving her a smile, "I mean, what's she gonna do, cuffed and in a *prison*?"

Luke resolutely ignored something that felt like foreboding at that, while Leia snorted and shook her head.

"Fine. I'll walk you over," she said, lips pursed for a moment as she stared at him, searching for... something. Luke wasn't sure if she found it or not, but she sighed and turned on her heel. "I have a bad feeling about this..." It was a mumble, and Luke could tell she didn't want it to be remarked upon, so he said nothing and just followed her out of the office.

They walked down the corridor, no doors aside from the office ones behind them, and then down a small flight of stairs, where there was a one-way window running along the right hand side of the corridor, down into the center hold of the base and the cells. To the left were a few doors set evenly along the corridor, and Leia stopped at the third one.

"All right. You can still change your mind, and remember, you can walk out of there at any moment, all right? We don't *need you* to do this, Luke." Leia's lips fell into a thin line and her eyes were dark and fierce, and for a brief moment Luke thought she wouldn't step away from the door at all, regardless that he'd said he would do it and it was fine.

And, weirdly enough, despite the lingering sense of foreboding weighing on his shoulders, it also felt like it was fine. The woman was in the middle of a rebel base outfitted as a prison, having been searched and found with nothing, binders on her wrists and sitting in a nearly empty room. He'd go in armed - both with the blaster on his right hip and the lightsaber on his left - so real-

ly.

It'd be fine.

"I'll check what she wants and if we're not finished before Han comes back, comm me or come in and get me, could you? He said he was taking me up in the *Falcon* after he and Chewie checked if everything's fine after what happened to her," Luke said, brightening a little at the thought of not just flying in the *Falcon*, but Han letting him *help*; Chewie would be staying with Leia, so he'd be the co-pilot.

"That rustbucket's *never* going to be *fine*," Leia said with a snort and an eyeroll, but the tense set of her shoulders relaxed a little. "I can do that. I'll come check with you in fifteen either way." With that, the door was unlocked and Leia stepped away, letting Luke walk past her and into the interrogation room.

He could feel the look she levelled at his back, and then the *glare* she must have given Aphra, right before the door closed, by the way the woman twitched and smiled, just slightly. Then that smile fell away as she turned her head to look at him, and Luke stopped, several steps away from the table and the chair opposite the one Aphra was sitting in.

"Luke Skywalker," she said after several moments of silent staring, sounding oddly cheerful despite the serious look on her face. "I've got to admit, I wasn't expecting someone like you at all."

She knew his name.

Luke stared, and realised that that was probably very bad, because if *she* knew, then *Vader* must know - she'd said she worked for him, after all - and that... Well. Nothing to do about it, he supposed. Leia lived with a bounty of ten million on her head; if he got anything close to that, he'd survive. Leia had, after all.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Luke straightened up and crossed his arms over his chest, figuring he could ask his own questions after finding out why she was so insistent on talking to him before she might give up anything useful. Mostly he wanted to know how she'd found out about his name. Maybe

also what, exactly, she had expected - but that one wasn't *really* that important. A lot of people expressed surprise when they met him, after all. Unless they were old enough to know something about the Clone Wars and knew about his father, that was.

Those people weren't surprised at all that he'd destroyed the Death Star. It made Luke feel both proud, and awkward, because how was he going to live up to something like *that*?

"Oh, I think you'll be interested in this," Aphra said brightly, straightening up her slightly slouched pose and laying her cuffed hands down on the table in front of her, fingers tapping against the scratched tabletop, "you see, Vrogas Vas? All because of you, kid."

She did him the favour of not sounding flippant when she said that, but it didn't really *help*. He'd have stepped back if he wasn't rooted to the floor and pale enough his blood seemed to have vacated his body.

"What?"

"All those rebels? They were just in the way. Lord Vader was only after *you*, Skywalker." Aphra cocked her head, cap still on it but the goggles having been removed, and angled her hands to rest only her fingertips on the tabletop, gaze still locked with his. Swallowing, Luke closed his eyes. He should probably have expected something like that. Darth Vader had been on the Death Star (though he must have left before it was destroyed), and Luke couldn't imagine he was pleased that it had been destroyed.

But *still*.

He was just a single pilot---

Static crackled sharply in his ears and Luke snapped his eyes back open to Aphra vaulting over the table, the cuffs, somehow short-circuited, hanging open from one of her hands. He twisted away when she landed, simply aiming to keep space between them considering *he* was still the one armed and she was distinctly *not*. A second later Luke realised his mistake.

Because while *he* didn't go for either of his weapons as a first reaction... *Aphra* certainly did.

In fact, she reached past him as she lunged, snapping one half of the cuff closed over right wrist and then continued to his holster in one move, yanking the blaster free and then slid behind him, throwing that arm over his shoulder.

The door opened at the same time, letting the commander and two guards spill inside, but by that point the barrel of his own blaster was lodged under his chin and she'd snagged his left wrist, proving the cuffs had only been temporarily broken; the electric lock snapped closed with a very loud finality.

"Gentlebeings," Aphra said, and Luke could *hear* the grin in her voice even if he couldn't see it at this angle, though a few strands of her dark hair was brushing his cheek. "I suggest you back up. We wouldn't want to have any *accidents*, right?"

The Togruta commander and her two Falleen guards exchanged glances and lowered their weapons, but didn't move. The commander looked rather relieved, however, when Leia's voice cut through the air, and if the situation had been different, Luke would've smiled, because Leia sounded *pissed*.

"What do you want?" she snapped and then looked to Luke, her furiously narrowed eyes softening a little, "are you all right?"

He shrugged and rolled his eyes, because yeah, *technically* there was nothing wrong with him. Unfortunately, with his hands cuffed behind his back he couldn't try to snag his lightsaber. It'd have been clumsy to hold it, but a far better chance than anything else.

"Yeah, *fine*," he huffed and would've glared sideways if he was actually capable of seeing at the required angle to give the woman behind him the glare he wanted to. Aphra just patted his shoulder, which really didn't do anything for Luke's mood.

"See? He's unharmed and will stay so, if you just give me a clear path out of here."

Something tingled in the back of his head, leaving Luke the impression that, for whatever reason, that statement wasn't exactly what it sounded like.

Leia's frown deepened, then, after a moment, her shoulders

relaxed a little and she gave them a very tiny, tight smile. She was, obviously, not about to give Aphra exactly what she wanted, but while Luke opened his mouth to say... *something* about it, Leia nodded.

"Of course. All right, back up," Leia said, looking at the commander and the two guards, gesturing at them to follow her while she pulled out a comlink, her voice too quiet to hear as they backed out into the corridor. Luke wondered what she'd come up with, in that instance between being furious and relaxing a little.

Luke wondered if it would even *work*...

"Okay, listen up, Skywalker," Aphra whispered in his ear, quietly enough it was doubtful the surveillance in the room would pick it up. Which was probably the reason for why she was so close and quiet. "You're going to cooperate and *walk*, because while I wouldn't like having to give you a few non-lethal holes, I can do that. Or shoot at the rebels or your princess. I could do that too."

She meant it. That was easy to tell, and Luke gritted his teeth. Wasn't particularly worried about himself since, for whatever reason, she apparently had to leave him alive. But that didn't mean anything when it came to Leia or the others, obviously. A hand at his hip yanked Luke out of his thoughts.

"Hey! Leave that *alone*!" He drove back into her, but they were close enough all they did were sway back - Aphra had good balance, and just chuckled dryly as she unhooked the lightsaber from his belt and, presumably, hooked it on her own instead.

"Did you really think I'd let you keep that, even if you can't use it at the moment? Don't worry, I'll keep it safe!" For a moment, there was that cheerful, if not irreverent tone, before her voice flattened out again, "Now *walk*, kid. We don't got all day."

"You're not gonna get out of here, you know," he muttered, scowling, but finally started to move when she tapped the barrel of the blaster against his jaw.

Surprisingly - or maybe not, Leia might be planning some-

thing else - there were only Leia and the base commander and the two guards, still, out in the corridor. Leia met his eyes and he raised his eyebrows at her, and while he couldn't make her smile, at least she gave him a nod. Until Aphra started to walk backwards and Luke had to stumble along, muttering a few curses in Huttese. Leia's eyes widened a little at that, making her look amusingly shocked, before her expression shuttered again.

"Tut, tut. Such *language*, kid," Aphra said, laughter in her voice, and the only reason Luke didn't raise his voice and aim a few at her specifically was because she was surprisingly patient when they had to navigate the short flight of stairs. Luke wondered how far they'd get before either Leia's plan kicked in, or *Aphra's* did - it couldn't be any easier for her to walk backwards, after all.

A door opening to the left a few meters of awkward shuffling later answered Luke's question, and he blinked, surprised, when the door closed and they were in the same office he and Leia had talked in earlier. One shot from the blaster to the door and one each to the two cameras later, and it'd take more than a slicer to get in... and the room was a blind spot to anyone checking the surveillance tapes.

"... What're we doing in *here*?" Arching an eyebrow at Aphra when she stepped back around him, he cautiously backed up when she waved his blaster at him, ending up sitting - a bit awkwardly - in the chair behind the desk. If that was supposed to be an attempt at being *nice*, Luke had to say she had a lot to learn about niceness.

But then, considering the last time they were in a nearly comparative situation, she'd used some sort of disguised *torture droid* to electrocute him... maybe this *was* nice, for her.

"Waiting for our ride, of course," Aphra said, that careless grin from earlier on her face as she perched on the edge of the desk, seated sideways to avoid having her back either to the door or to him. Not that *he* could, currently, do anything. Lunge at her, maybe? But she'd set the blaster to stun when she sat down, so

the most he would accomplish was probably to slump over the desk when she stunned him.

Something he'd rather avoid, thank you very much, if only so he could be sure of what she did, or didn't do, while he couldn't defend himself.

"Our *what?*" The foreboding from earlier, cold and sharp, scratched down his spine, and Luke flexed his hands and tried to pull them out of the binders without thinking. This was bad.

"You were right, of course," she nodded, smile falling off for something more thoughtful, "I can't get out of here alone, not without my *tools*, anyway. That princess would've come up with something. So *I'm* not going to get us out of here. All *I* have to do is wait here with you."

"*Who?*" Luke snapped, pulled between a rising, unsettled anger and unwanted anxiety. He almost kicked his legs, just to have something to do, and scowled at Aphra, who just winked at him.

Then a light on the desk, near the keyboard set into the plastic of the tabletop, started to flash. Additionally, the holographic display of the base on the wall flashed as well a few times before an angrily red dot appeared on it. Glancing from Aphra, who looked very pleased indeed, to the display, something in Luke's stomach sank and settled heavily on the bottom.

Cold seemed to creep at the edges of his senses. Not his *normal* senses, just... senses. It was almost familiar, but Luke pushed that away and glared at Aphra.

"... you planned this, didn't you? That was why you tossed around Vader's name and said you could *tell us things*," Luke said, frowning. A frown which deepened into another scowl when Aphra grinned at him.

"You're not as dumb as you look, kid. Cute, but still rather dumb. With a bit of experience, you might get pretty sharp," she said, then cocked her head, "though how much time you'll have to amass that experience, I don't know." Tellingly - far too tellingly, for Luke's comfort - Aphra glanced to the display, where the dot had progressed to a few levels above them.

And then it disappeared.

Contrary to reasonable assumptions, Luke didn't feel relieved.

In fact, his stomach twisted and he sunk down in the chair a little, shifting nervously and considering the merits of trying to lunge at Aphra despite the probable results or such an action, because that sense of deadly intent and *cold* hadn't disappeared with the dot.

It was, instead, slowly getting worse, and Luke stared at the display, wishing that the indicator for the intruder would pop back up again. Wishing that the flashing warning light would stop and take the sense of cold with it, because *that* would tell him the intruder was gone.

Aphra was frowning at the display, tapping her left hand against her thigh while she kept the blaster aimed at him. But while she was slightly more tense than she'd been a moment earlier (which didn't say much, she hadn't relaxed for a second, hadn't been relaxed even when he walked into the interrogation room), she didn't really seem worried.

She knew exactly who this was, and didn't think - perhaps *knew* - that surveillance knowing where the intruder was didn't actually indicate whether said intruder was alive or not. And Luke knew the intruder wasn't dead. Glancing at his lightsaber where it hung from Aphra's belt, Luke bit his lip and scowled.

It wasn't *fair*. If he could just get out of these binders he could maybe wrest the gun and then the lightsaber away from Aphra and be ready, but how he was supposed to do *that*?

The obvious answer, of course, was 'the Force', but Luke knew he wasn't good enough with it to unlock the binders. It was just not *possible*---

A faint, hotly hissing sound had both Aphra and Luke look up towards the ceiling. If both of them hadn't been silent and the room hadn't been quiet, they'd have missed it and probably been startled when a large chunk of the ceiling fell down on the floor. But they caught the noise and ended up staring as a thin, red line of molten metal appeared and slowly made a circle in the ceiling.

Now there was *no way* for Luke to pretend he didn't know who it was.

Blast, blast, *blast it*.

Luke stared, grit his teeth and screwed his eyes shut, tried to calm his breathing and his heart, because he had to get out of these binders and out of the room, *now*.

But the noise from the lightsaber carving through the metal was loud in his ears, Aphra was a distracting, bright slash of life every time he managed to gain a sliver of a hold on the Force, the sense of overbearing, looming cold pressed against the brightness of the Force and he just... couldn't...

The chunk of ceiling fell with a loud, reverberating clang, startling Luke out of his probably pathetic attempt at even so much as properly touching the Force and his jerk made the chair squeak.

He didn't notice. Aphra didn't take any notice either, both of them staring at that hole as over two meters of black armour, leather and cloth fell down, landing with a rather disconcertingly solid thump on top of the still-sizzling chunk of ceiling.

"Lord Vader! Welcome," Aphra said brightly, waving her (*his*) blaster at him, "one pilot, wrapped and ready to go! I mean, *if* you're taking him with you and not just executing him right here." The latter she added almost as an afterthought, nonchalant and cold. Despite that he thought he'd be used to tones like that, it still made Luke shiver, just a little.

He didn't look away from the Dark Lord as he straightened up, however, because now Aphra wasn't the most dangerous thing in the room anymore. It was Darth Vader, who was staring. Right at him. Or he assumed so, anyway, since the mask was aimed right at him.

Luke scowled and glared, drawing himself up as much as he could in his seat and then, with a quick, narrow stare at Aphra got himself standing. He was *not* going to be sitting down for this.

"*Vader*," he snapped, glowering, but couldn't figure out what

more to *say*. Especially when Vader merely stared for several more moments before his helm twitched slightly sideways, presumably to glance at Aphra.

"If he dies at any point during this extraction, your life is forfeit, Aphra," Vader growled, the room feeling too small for Darth Vader, his presence in the Force (a darkly glowing storm, tightly leashed) and the deep rumble of his voice. Luke shifted sideways a little, eyes drawn to the door even when he knew Aphra had blasted the lock.

"As you say, Lord Vader," Aphra said and there was a little sigh there, something between resignation and acceptance. Aphra holstered the blaster and then unhooked Luke's lightsaber, holding it out, "you might want this."

Vader looked away from Luke - he'd been *staring* again, Luke could *tell*, which was doubly unsettling because it seemed to have come with that coldness that clung to Darth Vader reaching towards him, slowly closing in like a claw. Then he took two strides over to the desk and took the lightsaber, and Luke was torn between flinging himself around the desk and between Vader and Aphra to keep Vader from touching the lightsaber again, or remaining where he was (or crossing to the other side of the room).

"Don't *touch it*!" Luke yelled, suddenly just *angry* all over again and not worried or anxious at all, "you don't have any *right* to touch that!"

Vader's helmet snapped up from staring at the lightsaber, and Luke was caught underneath the expressionless, dead stare of the mask as the lightsaber was clipped, with nearly mocking care, alongside Darth Vader's own lightsaber.

"You know nothing of my right, Skywalker. To *anything*."

And then the Dark Lord walked around the desk. Luke was frozen for one, startled second before he scrambled back. He stumbled into the chair, staggered back past it and leapt back when Vader reached for him.

When the wall slammed against his back, leaving him to stag-

ger, breathless, away from it and then stumbling to the ground, and Aphra's surprised shout echoed in the room, Luke realised he'd jumped farther than he should've been able to.

Or rather, farther than he *usually* was able to. Not that that had gotten him anywhere at all. The light from the ceiling cut out as Vader stepped in front of him and knelt down.

All Luke could think to do was kick with an angry shout, wincing when a black-gloved hand caught his foot in a steel grip.

"This is unbecoming of you, young one," Vader rumbled, his tone strangely... rebuking. It left Luke staring for an incredulous moment, unable to quite comprehend what had sounded very similar to Aunt Beru telling him he was better than yelling insults at the kids who'd teased him. It left him distracted enough to allow Vader let go of his foot and pick him up, depositing him over one shoulder.

Blinking rapidly at the floor he was now facing (and the seemingly endless flow of cloth from the cloak), Luke stared in stunned silence for the three steps it took them to get over to the the chunk of ceiling on the floor and the hole above it.

"Put me do---!"

For a (seemingly literally) breathless moment, Luke was sure he was being *strangled*. What other reason was there, for suddenly being unable to *speak* and feeling something weighing on the inside of his throat?

"What'd you do?" Aphra asked, peering at him as she walked up to stand beside Vader. Luke glowered at her, angry enough he'd have resorted to Huttese if he'd actually been able to speak - and that was it, wasn't it? He could *breathe* just fine, he realised, but some part of his throat (presumably the vocal cords or whatever) were being kept in an iron grip.

The control it must take would be impressive if it hadn't been used on *him*.

"Making sure the attention we draw come when and where we want it to," Vader said and then jumped. Luke reflexively kicked as barely-cooling metal rushed past his face for a brief moment,

but despite his assumptions of the consequences of such an action, there was no actual retaliation. All Vader did was shift his grip, then turn around and kneel down.

“Come.”

Presumably he was talking to Aphra, but it wasn't as if Luke could *see that*.

All *he* was looking at was the cloak spilling over the Dark Lord's leg and the floor, and, if he twisted around, mostly-empty shelves. A dark storage of some kind. Exciting. Then Vader stood up again while Aphra made some quiet noises of 'hot, hot, hot' as she clambered up through the hole - presumably after Vader had hauled her up close enough for her to reach to be able to climb up.

Luke was already starting to get *really tired* of not being able to see much of anything from this position. And a little lightheaded. There was also hard durasteel armour pressing into his stomach, which wasn't comfortable *at all*.

“You okay there, kid?” Aphra asked, grinning at him as she peered around Vader's side and then immediately disappeared before he had the chance to do more than grimace at her, and then they were out in the corridor.

Glancing around despite the strain it put on his back, Luke stared. Emergency lighting flickered fitfully, and whole sections of floor and ceiling panels had been ripped out - it looked like Vader had torn half the corridor apart going through here, presumably turning the corridor, and however wide an area he'd gone through before this, dark to surveillance.

It made for a pretty unsettling walk - or rather, Vader strode, and Aphra half-jogged beside him to keep up. The only noise was their ringing steps and the intermittent static from live wires. Luke found he far preferred that, however, to suddenly staring down into an empty, dark turbolift shaft, and he couldn't even *hold on to anything*.

“I am not going to drop you, Skywalker,” Vader said, his voice echoing oddly in the dark, draughty shaft, and Luke blinked. Re-

alised, embarrassed, that he'd been hunching up and tensing as much as possible.

Was *Darth Vader* reassuring him?

Why?

"That would, after all, be a waste."

Luke huffed silently at the dry, nearly amused, darkness in that voice, but noticed that under it there was some sort of tension... And, aside from that, the dark, cold flare of power that was, presumably, Vader, had drawn in close. Seemed to be weighing him down as much as it was---

The sensation abruptly lightened a little when Luke came to the conclusion of 'cradling', and he was, frankly, both relieved and unsettled. But well, maybe it made sense. If he fell down here, Vader would either have to leave the body for lost at the bottom of the shaft and have nothing to present to the Emperor, or go *fetch it*---

His thought froze when he could swear he heard a *growl* from the Dark Lord.

Shaking his head and watching coloured spots dance in his vision, Luke grimaced. This was not how he'd pictured today to go. Especially after he actually got off Vrogas Vas instead of dying there... or being hauled off by the Imps. Or Aphra. Though, there shouldn't be any difference there, right? Aphra worked for *Darth Vader*, and the Imperials that had attacked was at least on Vader's *side*...

"Wait." They stopped, hanging to the side of the shaft like so much vermin, and Luke could hear, maybe a meter or so above them, beyond the doors that led into the turbolift on the floor they were just underneath, steps fading in and then out again.

"How much longer? I can't say I like hanging around like this without some sort of *harness*," Aphra said, and despite taking some vicious little pleasure in the way she didn't sound quite as breezy as she was clearly trying for, he still agreed to the sentiment. Vader didn't reply immediately, and the silence stretched.

"Be ready," Vader finally rumbled, as quietly as his vocoder

was probably capable of, and Luke had the distinct sensation of that frozen sun closing in about him again as Vader started climbing. The doors were forced open with a shuddering screech of metal and Vader *leapt* the last meter, landing perfectly on the edge.

All Luke could pick up of his surroundings and what was going on were sudden startled shouts and blaster fire. And watching Aphra climb up the last stretch and fire her (his) blaster almost before she'd even pulled herself up to sit on the floor.

Standing with his back to an open turbolift shaft wasn't the most secure or defensible location for a shoot-out, *especially not* when he was also carrying the boy. Putting Skywalker down, however, wasn't possible - he could already see the boy attempting to run off down the corridor, cuffed or not.

So it came down to getting rid of this patrol as fast as possible so they could *move*.

He threw the three closest back into their compatriots, two of which fell to friendly fire, another few to deflected fire... the last three would've run, but Vader threw them into the walls and then leapt, drawing his lightsaber and cutting them down before they could've regained their senses or organisation - though one of them wouldn't have moved at all, given how he'd had his spine broken from the impact against the wall.

He felt more than heard the stiff flare of *alarm* from his son, and ignored it. More would die - they would *all* die if they persisted in coming between him and his exit now that he had what he was here for. Aphra came running up to them as soon as the last of the blasterfire died down, and there was a sharp, angry gasp from behind him.

"You can't just---!"

He - carefully, *exactly* - silenced the boy again, privately relieved that the child hadn't figured out he'd stopped doing that the moment he'd opened the turbolift doors, to be able to con-

centrate on the fight. He really didn't need childish self-righteous yells of anger being added to the situation. It was a rather delicate application of the Force, and if he wasn't careful, he might---

No.

That wouldn't happen.

Not now, not ever. Having Aphra being captured by the rebels had given him the thread he needed to follow, and now that he *had* his son, he wouldn't be losing him. In any way, or to *anyone*. Storming down the corridors, they would soon be out of the area he'd darkened to the security the rebels had set up, but that didn't matter.

A second patrol found them in time for Aphra to hack into a closed office, and they used that for cover - mostly because that meant he could put the child down and not have to worry about him being fired on, even accidentally, *and* Luke also not being able to run off. They did, however, need something better...

A soft crackle pierced the near-silence as they walked down the corridor after having dispatched the patrol, muffled by cloth but coming from the boy's hip.

"Luke? Or--- *Aphra*, I suppose," a woman's clear, frosty voice, still muffled, snapped accusingly from wherever the comlink the boy had was hidden.

"Do we answer that?" Aphra said, head cocked as she looked up at him. Vader didn't stop, but he shifted the boy around until he could find the comlink - which earned him a few silent, outraged squawks and what was very clearly an angry, protective flare in the Force from his son. He obviously cared for the princess.

Unfortunate.

"Princess Organa," he said, and listened to the stabbing silence that followed, "you may wish to withdraw your forces."

"... you can't threaten me with a *hostage*, Vader," she snapped at him, and Vader tilted his head slightly. Was pretty sure he *could*. At least this one. Not that he would actually touch the boy

to make a point to the princess, but she didn't know that.

"You can waste your forces as you did on Vrogas Vas, or not. It's your choice, Your Highness. I am leaving, though if you wish your friend's life to be forfeit, you may continue as you have."

Luke made a noise where he hung, and Vader lightened his grip - it was unlikely that was the *only* reason the boy had let out the muffled protest, but he *had* tightened his grip as well.

"We'll start to kill prisoners," the princess said, her voice like ice.

He almost snorted. No, he didn't *think so*.

His son, clearly, didn't know his friend was bluffing and had stiffened, surprise and some alarm flaring from him in nearly smothering waves. The boy was *abysmal* at shielding. On the other hand, that, instead of his son's overwhelming brightness in the Force, was what had allowed him, when he was close enough, to pinpoint Luke and Aphra's location.

"You will find, Your Highness, that I am not moved by threats of hostage loss of life, either." Then he crushed the comlink in his hand and took a left instead of a right at the next junction. Princess Organa would find that reminding him of the fact that this was a *prison* base had been an ill-advised choice.

"So, what're we doing?" Aphra asked, tugging her cap to settle it more properly before she hefted her blaster again.

"Finding a corridor that overlooks the central room with the cells," he growled as the idea took shape. The amount of rebels in this place was nearly negligent compared to Vrogas Vas, but carrying his son... Well, he would rather kill them all himself, but giving the rebels something else to focus on in *addition* to his and Aphra leaving might reduce the risk to the boy.

The corridors they ran through were a mess of noise, and while Luke didn't have a headache, the fact that he'd been hanging upside down for... what, almost an hour by now? didn't help *at all*. Alarms, shouts and a lot of running feet echoed down the

corridors. He hadn't been able to see it, when they'd found one of those corridors that faced the central prison cell space with a one-way window, but Vader had, somehow, opened up almost all the cells.

It meant the number of patrols they met had dwindled down as the guards attempted to deal with the sudden prisoner outbreak, and Luke was honestly relieved. Even if it meant less chance that anyone would rescue him. Better they *didn't*, in fact. He didn't want any more people to die.

"There he is!"

Luke winced at the shout; this was the fifth patrol since the cell doors had been opened. And he couldn't do *anything*--- Frowning as blasters spat out their plasma, turning the corridor into a flickering display of red and smoke, Luke closed his eyes and tried to *listen*...

Now.

He couldn't concentrate enough to, hopefully, yank Vader's lightsaber off course with the Force, but he *could* knee the Dark Lord in the stomach. Vader, unprepared, twisted sideways.

"Lord Vader!" Aphra, still firing, Luke could see out of the corner of his eye, stiffened, her eyes wide. A flash of red followed, spattering into Vader's helmet, Luke thought. It caused Vader to stagger sideways---

Luke swallowed most of the cry by accidentally biting his own tongue when another shot burned right past his hip, heat searing into cloth and skin and, he thought, that'd be unpleasant to get clean. The angry, black sun that had been simmering ever since Vader had gotten close enough for Luke to pick up his presence suddenly flared with cold rage.

"No! *Wait*---!"

The fact that he could yell at all wasn't what startled Luke quiet.

It was the noise of bone cracking; sickly wet and loud as the blasters cut out.

"If you wish to spare their lives, Skywalker, I suggest you

show more thought in when to *act*.” The quiet rage reverberated around him, but Luke only felt sick. That was his fault. Sure, they’d have died *anyway* unless they’d have managed to get away, but---

“Ah! Don’t--- *touch that*,” Luke hissed, trying to squirm away from the surprisingly careful fingers probing the melted mess of cloth and burned flesh that currently was Luke’s left hip. He wondered how deep it was...

“You are *foolish*,” Darth Vader snarled, sounding, for some reason, even *more* angry than he’d been just a second ago, “this is taking too long.”

“What about yo---” Aphra called as she trotted after Vader when he stormed down the corridor, past the broken-doll corpses of the patrol, nearly all of them with their necks broken... and a few other bones as well, judging by the *wrongness* of the direction of the limbs. Luke swallowed down bile.

“It is nothing,” Vader growled, followed by the hum of his lightsaber, and then a few moments later, the deep splintering of transparisteel shattering. “We will leave from here.”

Luke twisted around, saw nothing over Vader’s shoulder other than a shard of darkening twilight sky. Which meant they were quite far above the ground, especially since the base’s upper levels consisted of an old fortress or something, sitting on top of a small hill.

“I hate to say this, Lord Vader, but I don’t think I can climb down *this*. I’d need tools,” Aphra said as she came up beside them, being careful where she put her hands so she could lean out the broken window. Vader said nothing. Instead he tightened his grip on Luke - his arm, though, nowhere near to brush against the injured hip, and then jumped.

Luke didn’t yell.

He *refused* to do anything like that, but his heart was stuck in his throat so maybe he wouldn’t have been able to anyway. The wind bit cold against his skin, stabbed into the burn on his hip, and Luke grit his teeth as the base’s outer wall flashed past in ex-

pectation of---

The impact drove Vader's shoulder armour into his stomach and Luke groaned, the noise swallowed by the thunderous crack as Darth Vader landed, without even *staggering*. How by all the stars he could remain standing, even less *not stagger* after *that*, Luke didn't know. Was Darth Vader not actually human..? But not many (any) other species would've been able to take that jump and survive either.

"Jump." That was a command, and Luke, staring down at the crater their landing had created and the tops of scraggly trees further below them on the hill, wondered if Aphra would listen. *He* wouldn't have. But then, it wasn't him working for Vader...

"Oh, *stars*," came from above, faint enough it hadn't been a cry but louder than a mutter. Luke tried to twist around and froze, wincing, as the movement caught in his hip.

"Keep still," Vader snapped, and Luke slumped back, but not because Vader had told him to. His hip hurt, that was all. But he'd caught sight of Aphra actually *jumping* and now it was just...

"Oh, *wow!*"

Not a crack of boots (armoured or not) against rock there. There hadn't even been so much as a *whisper* of a landing, but clearly Aphra *had* landed, and in one piece as well.

Luke didn't pay much attention to the climb down. There was a roaring in his ears, he was pretty sure his hands and arms were numb, and his hip was a dull, angry throb, drawing his attention constantly if distantly. He'd rather this just be *over* now, one way or another. Was it *really* that important that he was alive for this?

... Not that he wanted to die, at all or now, but he was tired and angry and *ached*.

"*Finally!*"

Aphra's voice cut through the haze and Luke jerked, and the hands tightening around his knees and side made him realise he was no longer tossed over Vader's shoulder. Instead, and Luke wasn't sure that was any better, he was being carried in the Dark Lord's arms.

“Put me *down*,” Luke hissed even as he stared at the ship they were approaching; sleek and silver, she glinted in the last flickers of dying sunlight that reached into the glade and something *throbbed* within at the sight of her---

No, that wasn’t from *him*---

“I doubt you can walk, young one, even less *run* at this stage. Stay still.” The rumbling voice carried a shade of that reprimanding tone from earlier, but Vader was clearly distracted.

The ramp lowered at a gesture from the Dark Lord, and when they came inside to the bright interior lights, Luke caught sight of the half-melted mess that covered the right front side of Vader’s helmet. It wasn’t *nothing*, but at the same time the blaster shot had clearly not done enough damage to damage the integrity of the helmet.

“Clean the wound and do what you can with it, Aphra. Supplies are in the storage to the right,” Vader said as they walked into a bunk room, and Luke was seriously wondering what *Darth Vader* was doing with a ship like this. There were gentle curves, bright lights and soft colours *everywhere*.

“Ngh---” Luke swallowed the tail-end of the hiss from the rushing pins-and-needles sensation that went through his arms when the binders were unlocked, but he didn’t have much chance to do anything - a moment later and he was cuffed to the bunk by his right wrist. Grimacing first at this new position, pulling at his wrist a little, and then glowering up at Vader, who simply stood there for an overbearingly silent moment, presumably *staring*, before he suddenly turned on his heels and left.

“All right, let’s see what we can do about that, shall we?” Aphra said brightly, sweeping into the space Vader had left. Luke scowled and tried to shuffle back, considering kicking her before she caught his gaze and patted the blaster she had at her hip. “I don’t need you *awake* to do this, you know.”

“You don’t have to do this *at all*, you know,” Luke muttered, biting his lip angrily when she bent over his side.

“You heard the boss, kid. So sure I do. Just sit tight and this’ll

be over before you know it!"

Why did she have to sound so *cheerful*? Especially since that was one of the biggest lies he'd ever heard - things were just starting. Of course, since he was probably on his way to being *executed*, maybe she was right in a way. Though, why Vader would want him healed if he was going to be executed, Luke didn't know.

The ship shuddered around them and there was a brief moment of vertigo before the stabilisers kicked in when the yacht lifted off the ground. Luke closed his eyes and listened to the hum of the engines, focusing on that rather than the now-numb area where his left hip was, rather than Aphra bent over said hip, rather than on the the cold, fiery sun that was Vader, so very, very close...

Something brushed, light and hesitant, against his mind. Like Aunt Beru brushing his hair out of his eyes when wishing him goodnight, or Uncle Owen, in one of his rare appearances at bedtime, pulling the covers up close around his chin.

Luke didn't notice when the sky around the yacht lit up with plasma, or when, ten minutes later, the yacht shook off its last, insistent pursuer (the *Millennium Falcon*) and shot into hyperspace. Luke Skywalker was, at that point, asleep.



Chapter 32: In Which There Is a Castle I



... and, arguably, a princess.

(This is not a two-parter, just a chapter with a thematic companion. It's also a prompt response.)

ESB AU where Luke doesn't escape the freezing pit.

The hum of machinery vibrated along with his own prosthetics, but they didn't hide the scrape and slap of cloth and flesh against metal, and Vader looked up to watch Skywalker hold fast to the cables and machinery above the freezing pit.

"Impressive," he said, the rumble of his voice echoing oddly. And it *was* impressive, but it was also an annoying complication he didn't need, "most impressive."

Ducking away from the spray of gas Luke aimed at him by yanking up one of the severed cables just in time to avoid it slamming into his mask and down the intake, he met Luke's thrust with a block and carefully stepped sideways. He could abandon the freezing pit part of the plan, drag the fight out longer and tire the boy out. But...

No.

That was a supremely bad idea, something whispered to him - not quite a complete warning from the Force, not quite just normal intuition. Instead he lunged, locking their lightsabers together again and twisting. Sent the boy's hilt flying and called it to himself at the same time as he yanked the boy's blaster out of the holster and sent it clattering away over the grating. Immediately after that he swept a hand out towards his son before the boy had a chance to react.

Skywalker stumbled backwards, staggered on the edge of the

freezing pit, and then went down into it again. With some of the cables severed, it'd have taken longer for it to reset, but it was, barely, serviceable. He flipped the switch with the Force, and this time the boy didn't jump out of it at the last moment.

Turning off his lightsaber and clipping both of them to his belt, Darth Vader closed his eyes and gently swayed back, just a little.

He wouldn't admit that he was feeling relief - triumph was the only acceptable emotion here - but that was certainly what flavoured his success, regardless of the *suitability* of the emotion.

He had him.

Vader would also not admit to not letting the slab crash to the floor like Solo's had been allowed to do, and would *further* not admit to the dark, twitching bubbling in the pit of his stomach as he checked the readings.

Alive.

He *had* him.

Bast Castle, Vjun.

It wasn't exactly like waking up, but he hadn't been sleeping either. It was more like he'd been stalled in the middle of a single thought, in-between two breaths and one blink and the next.

Luke Skywalker woke up with the singular need to *move* on his brain, and half shot, half rolled out of the cold, firm metal that hugged him, flopping with a thump down on the floor when his legs couldn't quite finish the imperative to *jump*. Particularly as it'd been intended to be a Force-powered jump, and in that moment between *doing* and being put on hold, he'd lost his connection to the Force.

It was back now, of course, but slightly too late to let Luke jump out of the... the... carbonite frame? he'd been in. Rolling away from it, heart thundering in his ears, Luke got to his feet and looked wildly around.

"You look cold."

“*Gah!*” Staggering away from the man standing on the other side of the carbonite frame on the floor, Luke patted his hips with shaking hands and swore. Remembered Vader had yanked his lightsaber out of his hands and, apparently, his blaster too, even if he didn’t remember losing it. Looked back up at the man, who, despite the closely-cropped (nearly shaved) completely snow white hair with shaved-out jagged lines over his skull, the lines on his face, and the slight stoop to his shoulders was also clearly in peak condition.

“Who’re you?” Scowling, Luke resisted the urge to wrap his arms around himself, because he actually *was* cold, and his damp clothes didn’t help at all. The blanket the stranger held in his hands looked tempting, but considering he *also* very definitely was in an Imp uniform of some kind didn’t make Luke very inclined to get closer or take the offered blanket.

“And how long was I in that... that thing?” Nodding reluctantly down at the frame, Luke glanced around the room, but it contained nothing but an empty desk, a couch and two wing chairs. No Vader.

So where *was* Darth Vader?

“Two days, by my estimation. And I’m your medic for today. The name’s Kix.”

Frowning at that strange introduction - no rank, no last name, nothing - Luke shifted on his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, which was as close to wrapping them around himself he would allow himself. Keeping his eyes on... Kix, he slowed his breathing and his heart and managed to touch the Force again.

Almost let it go, as if burned, because while what he’d touched was the light side, he had to *fight* for it. Around him - which probably accounted for at least a little of the cold he was feeling - the Force was a seething wall of cold darkness. The dark side. It thrummed around him, at a strange distance... and beyond, above that general sense of deathly, if nearly calm, ill-will was...

Luke swallowed.

So Vader *was* here.

Not just in this room here.

"Where am I?"

Kix sighed.

"Look, kid. I can answer that question too, but if I don't get you checked out, Lord Vader's going to be cross with me," Kix said, quietly and strangely informal in tone, particularly considering he was talking about *Darth Vader*. Maybe it was his age, though Luke doubted that. "And aside from Lord Vader wanting to make sure you weren't harmed by your stay in that thing, I'm a medic and I don't like the possibility of leaving potential injury untreated either. So what d'you say?"

Kix hadn't moved during all this, remaining on the other side of what was left of the carbonite frame, still holding that blanket. Frowning, Luke didn't particularly feel like being obliging, but... he was cold, confused, and felt unsteady on his feet in a way that was unsettling and certainly hadn't been there before waking up here, so...

"... all right," he said slowly, but still couldn't help the half a step he took backwards when Kix stepped around the carbonite on the floor, then didn't move - though Kix stopped two steps away and held out the blanket in clear offering, a snow-white eyebrow arched. Luke snorted but took it, and after wrapping it around himself (a bit surprised at how *soft* it was), it was easy to ignore the man stepping close and bringing up a scanner he'd had dangling from his hip.

"You're on Vjun. Bast Castle," Kix said as he ran the scanner over Luke slowly, eyes focused on the reading, "Lord Vader's private fortress, and while I'm sure you'd like to leave, just make it easier on yourself *and* us and don't. Some of us aren't quite as spry as we were twenty years ago."

Eyeing the man and wondering if he was joking or not - though considering *his* age, maybe not - Luke shifted on his feet, unable to stay still, and then didn't duck away in time when a light was shined in his eyes.

"Hey!"

“Just covering all bases, kid. Take a walk around the room for me,” Kix said, smiling faintly, and surprisingly warmly at him. It was that more than anything else that made Luke actually do as asked, walking past the empty desk and then the door, tensing briefly but deciding to wait, then coming to a stop in front of the only window.

The dim lighting in the room didn’t do anything for the atmosphere of the inside *or* the outside; heavy, swollen-looking clouds roiled in the sky above, keeping things in a sour twilight that rendered the... ocean? far down below a barely visible and oily-looking darkness.

“Well? Anything wrong?” Luke asked as he frowned out of the window, blinking when a few fat drops of liquid didn’t *quite* fall against the window but rather hissed off a blue shimmer. A shield. The building was shielded, and so closely too. Why?

“Nothing. Looks like that short freeze didn’t have any lingering effects aside from a bit of misfired impulses when it comes to your muscles. It’ll probably disappear in a few hours on its own, shorter if you walk it off.”

“Walk it off? In *here*?” Luke asked, turning away from the window and leaning against it, an eyebrow arched as he looked to Kix. The man in question smiled, dark eyes glittering in the dim light.

“Didn’t say that. You’ve got the whole floor, knock yourself out, kid. Just don’t try to go *down*. We’d have to stop you, and I’d really rather not,” Kix said, saluted, and left the room. There was no tell-tale click of a lock as the door closed behind him. Luke had to admit to being surprised, despite the fact that this room alone wasn’t really suitable to keep a prisoner in.

Still far better than any given standard cell on a Star Destroyer or in a detention facility, of course.

Turning around to look out the window again, Luke leaned over, close to the transparisteel windowpane and peered down the side of the building as far as he was able. Floodlights far down, somewhere close(er) to the ground below revealed the

lowest part of the fortress to be curiously curved forwards, while the greater part consisted of an out-of-proportion spire, of which Luke was somewhere in the upper parts of. Presumably, anyway.

Turning back to the room, Luke eyed the door dubiously, then glanced up at the ceiling. Somewhere above, he could feel the cold, faintly pulsing presence of Vader, and if he was going to confront him, he'd need a weapon. Luke didn't have much hope of finding one, he knew, but looking around for one couldn't hurt either.

More than half an hour later, and Luke knew two things; there wasn't a single thing in any of the rooms that could really be used as a weapon (there were some smaller, heavy sculptures, but what was he going to do with *those*, toss them?), and Kix hadn't been joking. He really had free access to a whole floor, which wasn't just a handful of rooms, but nine of them, and none of them particularly small either.

This single floor of the fortress could've housed several squadrons and their ground crew alone.

What was the *point* of all this?

Pacing in front of a wide set of windows that nearly reached wall to wall and clutching the blanket around him, Luke frowned. He'd have expected to wake up on Imperial Center, and if not to the sunken, lined face of the Emperor, then in a cell. But this place was definitely not Imperial Center, and while the floor of rooms was effectively still a prison, it wasn't the sort of prison he'd have expected.

The cold Force-presence above him twisted with something Luke would've called impatience, rippling out through the heavy sense of the dark side in this place, but remained in place. Scowling, Luke looked up at the ceiling again, then down and across the room - some sort of living room? maybe, there were so many rooms in here he frankly didn't know what they were for except for the really obvious ones like the bedroom and two 'freshers - to the door.

How far would he get if he tried to get out? He'd found one

part at the end of the floor that was locked to him, and that was presumably the way to the turbolifts. If he waited over there, could he, maybe... Luke froze when a sensation of heavy attention weighed down on him, as if the room itself was suddenly *staring* at him, and shivered.

If he could, it wouldn't be right now.

Not with Darth Vader as close as he was.

And that thought, too, rankled, and Luke felt both frustrated and ashamed. He'd gone to confront him for his friends, for his father and for Ben, and then... that. A complete failure.

Dragging a hand through his hair, Luke groaned. Felt like three years of anger had waited for that moment on Bespin - even if he had better control and wasn't *as angry* anymore - and had just been... yanked out from under him. Again.

Scowling, Luke made a second circuit of the rooms, but again found nothing even remotely useful. Though when he passed by what he'd thought was a closet the first time, this time he stopped and pressed the button to open it and... it was a turbolift.

Staring at it, he couldn't quite believe he was *that* lucky. Had they actually forgotten to lock this one down or something? Peering into the car, it looked like any other turbolift. Luke paused in the doorway for a moment longer and carefully reached out and up - the concentrated frozen sun was distracted, but even his bare brush almost had it swinging its entire weight and focus towards him. Luke yanked his tendril of awareness back and stepped into the turbolift.

And quickly realised that, no, no one had forgot *anything*, because this turbolift only went *up*.

Staring at the keypad for a long moment, Luke, in pure frustration, mashed a button without looking and almost threw himself against the wall, arms crossed. Why couldn't he have just a *little* luck, here? A few moments later and the doors opened with a cheerful sound, and Luke realised what he'd done. Or the Force had tugged him to do; he could feel Vader's presence right next

up against his own now, like whenever he hadn't been shielding on Bespin.

This was the floor Darth Vader was on.

He could go back down... The thought died as Luke stomped out of the turbolift car. He wanted to know what had happened to his friends, and he wouldn't get any answers by hiding down on the floor that was, marginally 'his'. His *prison*, more like, even if he apparently had access to more than just that floor going by this turbolift.

The corridors here were dark and bare, though one room without a door had a truly humongous holo on display of a planet, the blue cast unable to hide the delicate greens and blues of the continents and the oceans, veiled in white clouds. He almost paused to examine it closer, but now that he was here Luke found he couldn't stop.

Another room was a small library, though a surprising number of the items in it weren't datachips but old (very old) datapads and even actual paper or flimsiplast books, strangely enough. It smelled strange, old and dark and *dry*.

He quickly stepped out of there and continued, ending up in the doorway to a huge room which had nothing but several fountains of different sizes, stained-glass windows of blue and yellow along the walls lit from behind, and, on the opposite side from the entrance, an open gallery towards a balcony.

Rain of some sort was hissing off the shields, causing the air right beyond the edge of the balcony to flicker and twist in shimmering blue, and in front of this display, blue and yellow light slithering off black cloth and armour, stood Darth Vader.

"What did you do to my friends?" Luke snapped and crossed his arms over his chest, feeling unpleasantly *bare* without either lightsaber or blaster, but refusing to not ask. The Dark Lord of the Sith didn't so much as twitch, his hands remaining clasped behind him, bunching his cloak up.

"The Princess managed to escape custody," Vader said at length, his voice as dangerous as it'd seemed in the badly lit

freezing chamber in Cloud City, “and chased after Captain Solo. She may even catch up to the bounty hunter. You may be at ease, Skywalker.”

“*Bounty hunter?* What did you do to Han?” Luke sputtered, tensing up.

‘At ease’?

As if he could relax hearing something like that, even if he *was* relieved Leia had gotten away. Vader was silent for nearly a minute, and Luke narrowed his eyes, about to demand an answer again when there was a slight shift in Vader’s stance.

“I would not have risked the freezing chamber on you, young one, unless it had proven to be adequately safe. Captain Solo was put in before you and handed over to a bounty hunter.”

Jabba. Han might be alive, but that wouldn’t help him if Jabba got him. Tension flushed through him and then ran out, before he straightened again stiff and tense. Still couldn’t believe Han and Leia had been used as *bait*, and that Han then had--- Had. That.

“But you’d risk *Han*,” he hissed, angry. Felt the dark side flare and bend towards him, which startled Luke enough he shook his head and took a harsh breath. Focus, Skywalker. “What am I doing *here*? Shouldn’t we be on Imperial Center or something?”

Luke could see Vader’s hands suddenly tighten where they grasped each other, and despite the noise of the Dark Lord’s respirator filling the air, Luke imagined he could hear the leather in the gloves creaking with the strain.

“The Emperor need not be involved, yet,” Vader said, and his voice was curiously, *surprisingly* soft, despite, or maybe *in spite* of the vocoder. It didn’t make the dark baritone any less threatening, however. “It would leave a far greater impression upon him if you should be presented to him fully trained.”

Luke reared back, felt his back hit the door - and it didn’t open. When had it closed and locked behind him? Luke swore silently and then shook his head, refusing to be threatened or cowed, even if Vader hadn’t turned to face him yet.

Seemed, in fact, to be stubbornly *not* facing him.

"You're not going to train me! I'm not using the dark side," Luke snarled, straightening up before he continued, "*and* you actually think I'd listen to the man who killed my father?!" He glanced around, but this room - hall, gallery, whatever - had even less in the way of useful (or *any*) weapons than his rooms had had. Vader had stiffened at his cry and suddenly whirled around, the tightly controlled presence of freezing, black sun flaring out.

Luke remained where he was out of pure, stubborn spite.

"That, young Skywalker, is something we need to discuss."

Lightning suddenly flared across the sky outside, and thunder followed a second later, rippling through the stone and metal of the fortress, thudding through Luke's bones. Staring up at the blank, yet somehow *furios*, mask of Darth Vader, Luke felt like he was about to be told something he didn't want to know, and it was too late to turn back.

The door behind him, even when he tried to push with the Force, remained locked.

"Nothing you can say will change my mind," he snapped, rallying.

Another forked, kilometers-long tongue of lightning lit up the sky.

"We shall see, young one," Vader said slowly, his voice a softer echo of the thunder outside.

Somewhere, Luke already knew what would be said, and his mind quailed away from the knowledge. He remained rooted to the spot, however, as Darth Vader tilted his helmet.

"You have been lied to, Skywalker."

The next few words sundered Luke Skywalker's life as thoroughly as the lightning was tearing up the sky of Vjun.



Chapter 33: In Which There Is a Castle II



... and arguably a princess (again).

Luke is the knight this time, however, and the dragon... is in another castle.

(This was in response to a prompt as well.)

Jumping down from the cockpit, Luke shielded his eyes, tilted his head back, and squinted up at the fortress in front of him.

Light poured down from a large, dimly red sun, flushing everything in a ghastly but somehow delicate bleeding coral colour. The greenery around the base of the fortress was less ‘greenery’ and more ‘blackery’; they were so dark green (or blue, in a few cases), the leaves and vines looked nearly black. A faint wind stirred, creating a soft rustle in the small but lush trees.

The fortress itself was a meld between squat, domed circular buildings and wedge-shaped, kilometers-high spires, clawing against the violet-tinted and rusty sky.

Artoo beeped, and Luke jerked.

“No, stay here, Artoo. You’ll have better reach here to contact Han and Leia if we need to,” he said as he turned around, aiming a smile at the little astromech. Of course, Luke didn’t have a clue if Artoo had said ‘come on, let’s go’, or if it’d been a question of *if* they were going, but either way he wanted Artoo to stay exactly where he was.

Artoo twittered sharply and rocked in the astromech socket of the X-wing, then let out a stream of noise. Luke was pretty sure it was a litany of all the things that had happened in the year since he’d met the astromech, and really, he couldn’t refute any of it.

“I know, I *know*. I’d rather have you with me too, but I’m sure

it's nothing, and I'll have my comlink with me. What if neither of us could contact the others if we need to, when we're in there? That's gonna help me even *less*." He didn't like it, *Artoo* didn't like it, but the fact was, he was here now and waiting for Han and Leia to catch up would take too much time.

To be honest, Luke wasn't sure what he was doing here.

He'd just... there'd been something, a dream, vision maybe, during the second scatter protocol jump for the Sluis Van mission. Somebody *needed his help*. He hadn't even thought about it when he disrupted the scatter protocol and changed the coordinates for the third jump, and instead of ending up at Sullust for the last jump to the base, he was now closer to Wild Space and the Unknown Regions than he'd ever been so far.

And thus in the opposite direction from the current Alliance base. He'd sent Leia a message of course, telling her he was okay and that he or *Artoo* would send her another message in a few hours to either say they were on their way to base and debriefing... or that he needed help.

Now, standing here by his X-wing on a flat, vine-and-moss covered expanse of cracked flagstones in front of the stairs that led up to the entrance to this very clearly abandoned fortress, Luke was both determined and uneasy.

Something felt wrong.

It clung, cold and sharp, to his mind, slithered like frozen poison down his back. It was like facing Darth Vader on Cymoon-1, feeling the deaths of Alliance soldiers on Vrogas Vas... and yet not. Still there was that need to move - the need for help sang clearly through the Force. A connection, fragile and bright and... not quite as unfamiliar as it should have been. It trailed away from him to... elsewhere.

Luke had no idea what it meant, because he also couldn't follow it to its end. Not even here, because trying it was like he suddenly fell off the edge of the Galaxy. He wasn't sure whether that was because he didn't know enough about the Force, wasn't strong enough, or if it was due to the sense of cold wrongness.

Artoo whistled sharply, a question even Luke could understand, and he shook his head.

"No, I'm fine. Keep your sensors peeled, okay? I'm going in there." Taking a deep breath, he waved to Artoo and started up the stairs, having to jog a few steps between each cut-out step, long and wide to cover the hill in a surprisingly subtle incline. Luke was actually surprised to find himself at the top, and turned around.

A few hundred meters below his X-wing sat, burnished into rose-red by the light. Distantly, he could hear a whistle from Artoo, and he gave another wave before he turned around to face the entrance. The huge doors looked rusted, but it took only a closer look to reveal it was just the light, not actual corrosion. Passing warily between the opening as the doors had apparently gotten stuck half-way open, Luke looked around the hall inside.

Dust, dead leaves, creeping blue vines and some small, tiny animals that scurried away into the shadows were what met him... along with blackened slashes in the stone and metal. Lightsaber scouring. Hesitating, Luke squatted by one of them and realised they looked far too new to be proof of some old battle.

Swaying on the balls of his feet, Luke knew he was suddenly out of his depth here, but waiting for Han, Leia and Chewie *still* wasn't an option. The second he even tried to reach for it, the Force was a bright, twitching hum around him, urging him on even if the sudden cold *drop* somewhere above him was even more pronounced now. An emptiness that didn't make sense at all; he hadn't ever felt the Force just... disappear like that.

Maybe that should be a hint, but Luke just squared his shoulders and got to his feet again. Someone needed help, and if it had to do with the Force... maybe it was a Jedi? Maybe there were more left, hidden away, like Ben had been and this one had, maybe, been found out but managed to hide again?

He didn't know, but if there was *any* chance that he could learn more about the Force and help somebody, Luke wasn't just

going to do *nothing*.

First, though, he actually had to find whoever it was, and *where* they were.

Which turned out to be easier said than done; the fortress was huge, and corridors that seemed fine at first had collapsed further in and doors malfunctioned into refusing to open, or frozen with a gap too small for Luke to squeeze through. Or there were stairs crumbled to the point he couldn't scale them, or jump over the collapsed parts; it was like trying to walk one of the more labyrinthine canyons on Tatooine.

Following the evidence of a lightsaber battle didn't really work either, Luke found out after he backtracked to do just that. The fight had apparently ended in a huge courtyard where the ceiling had once been made out of a transparisteel dome, allowing light down into a now-overgrown garden. A part of it had been viciously cut through, and a spot on the wall behind a broken and dry fountain had turned into a crater. The darkening coral light turned bloody in the corners and cracks of the crater, and the sense of vicious death in the Force was heavier here.

But there was no proof of a body *anywhere*, and Luke kicked some grass in frustration.

How was he supposed to help if he couldn't even *find* the person?

Taking a breath, Luke closed his eyes and reached for the Force. It was easier than it'd been a year ago, but not simple either... It was heavy with life here, in the middle of this wild garden, despite the knot of the dark that lay in the middle and trailed out towards edges that were stained with some sort of malevolence Luke drew away from. Remembered feeling some dim shade of that when he'd almost attacked the Tusken outside Ben's hut, before they'd run away.

He wasn't very good at reaching far, yet, but... he *tried*. Followed the brightness while he held the thrumming *need to help* firmly in his mind. He trailed along corridors that flickered past him, up stairs---

Slammed against emptiness.

The curse died in his mouth and Luke snapped his eyes wide, feeling far too pleased with his realisation to feel annoyed that he should've realised it from the start; follow that emptiness. It was the only conspicuous thing that was obviously *wrong*, here, aside from the oppressive sliver of the dark side that lurked at the edges.

Leaving the trashed garden courtyard behind, it suddenly became much easier to find his way, now that he knew what he was doing and what he was looking for. He jumped half-collapsed stairs without thinking about it, ran past rooms with trashed furniture or completely empty, the lack of dust anywhere but close to the entrance hall or in places that were bared to the outside making it impossible to know if someone had passed by.

He didn't need to know, however. The pale, rose-veined stone thrummed beneath him, warmth close to him, ice at the edges, and the emptiness came closer, but was still above him. The red light that fell in through dirty transparisteel windows turned the veins in the marble into bleeding lightning, and the air smelled of ozone and dried flowers.

He knew the latter because Aunt Beru used to have some hanging in... in her and Uncle Owen's bedroom---

Luke came to a halt, breathing hard and whirled to face the wall, gently thumping his forehead against the cool stone. Grief suddenly slammed through him like an out-of-control speeder. It was all he could do to not think about the other person he'd lost and just stay there, unthinking, as the faded, dead smell of dried flowers settled around him.

It took several moments before he realised his cheeks were wet and his jaws ached from gritting his teeth together. Straightening up, Luke scrubbed his face and took a deep, determined breath. Let the smell wash over him, and squeezed his eyes shut until nothing came out.

He didn't feel better, not really, but there was a tension that had unwound, somewhere.

Which let Luke realise he was basically only steps away from the gaping emptiness in the Force. Blinking, Luke stared down the corridor. It was only a short stretch left, the walls angled as the room at the end was at the narrow end of one of the wedge-shaped towers and the door to it probably broken, as the doorway was open.

Creeping slowly up to the door after a moment of silent waiting, just to make sure nothing would be bursting out at him, Luke peered into the room. And froze, breath catching, then stumbled into the room, blaster drawn and rage filling every pore of him, drawing the icy tendrils of the dark side that had been lingering on the edges of his perception since he landed.

"Vader."

The man didn't stir, and Luke told himself it didn't matter. It was obvious what he was here for, now, even if Luke wasn't sure why he hadn't sensed Vader's presence. He would---

Would.

Squeezing the grip, finger well away from the trigger, Luke actually took in the scene he was looking at.

Darth Vader's iconic death's-head mask lay broken on the floor, cracks in the curved top of it and a large, melted gash diagonally across the front of it, the red light from the windows catching in the red-tinted visors in the eyeholes.

Darth Vader himself wore only a flimsy-looking and cheap plastic rebreather that covered the lower part of his face to replace what had, apparently, been a necessary respirator integrated into the helmet. Angry, ugly wounds wound over his scalp and away over his left cheekbone. They didn't look new, but they were obviously unhealed. He looked like he hadn't seen sun in *decades*.

Luke stared, and felt... not pity. No, pity, at least, would've left him feeling less unsettled. All he felt was a quiet, stunned 'oh', as his rage wavered into uncertainty and the realisation that it wouldn't be right to kill him.

Not like this.

Not when Vader was also chained to the floor, and huge, blackened gashes could be seen scoured down his lower legs through the boots, revealing (broken) prosthetics. No. Luke *wanted to*, but shooting a man pinned down like this... it wasn't right. Sour frustration and an empty sense of confusion settled in place of the dimming anger - he had no idea what he was supposed to do *now*.

A year since Ben's death, since Biggs', since he'd found out Darth Vader had killed his father and Cymoon-1 had just showed how much he *couldn't* take Darth Vader in a fair fight and now, here was the most glaring opportunity he or anyone ever would be given to rid the Galaxy of the Emperor's right hand and...

It wouldn't be right.

It wasn't *fair*, because Darth Vader didn't really deserve *anything* in the way of fair or just treatment and behaviour, but seeing the man (for some reason Luke wasn't at all surprised Darth Vader was, apparently, a Human man, which should've been surprising on its own) like this, it was just... wrong. But what was he doing here then? If it wasn't to help whoever Vader had been fighting, what then?

Grimacing, Luke slowly holstered his blaster, casting a look around the room and realised with a deepening sense of confusion that Vader's lightsaber lay on the floor not three steps away from either him or Vader.

Why was it just *laying* there?

Glancing from Vader - still slumped over slightly, eyes closed, breathing slow and he had no idea if he was conscious or not - to the lightsaber on the ground, Luke hesitated for another moment before he strode over to it, and then froze as he bent down to pick it up.

"You would rather use the lightsaber?" Without the presence of what must've been a vocoder in the mask as well, Darth Vader's voice was thin and raspy - and yet somehow managed to sound menacing. Though maybe that was due to the inflection in the voice, however weak it was. Gritting his teeth, Luke rolled

his shoulders, resisting the urge to turn around so he could face Vader again, and snagged the lightsaber off the ground.

"I already *have one*, you know, so no---" Turning around, Luke froze for a second time in short order, his hand tightening around the Dark Lord's lightsaber until his knuckles ached.

His eyes were blue.

Vader had straightened up as much as he was apparently capable, looking straight at Luke now and his eyes were brightly, sharply blue. Luke shifted on his feet as the silence stretched and scowled. He didn't like this. It made him think of Tatooine's sky, of Aunt Beru telling him his eyes were the same colour and that they were the same as his father's.

Gaze locked with Darth Vader, Luke felt like that blue, those eyes, were *familiar* and that was just *ridiculous*. He really didn't like the idea that anything concerning Vader should be 'familiar' or that they might share something.

The silence turned from long into *awful* as Vader said nothing. Luke's stomach clenched and turned over, he felt like he was pinned in place and despite that it was Vader who was chained down, mask and helmet ripped off and helpless, it felt like it was he who was bare. Again, Luke wondered what *he* was even *doing* here.

He'd followed the Force, but all he'd found was *Darth Vader* and he couldn't believe...

"Why can't I... I mean, why---"

"Why is there an emptiness in the Force, and why can you suddenly not sense me in it?" Vader's voice was dry, which turned it into a hard-to-hear, thready whisper as he spoke. Luke stiffened but nodded and caught a faint quirk to the corner of Vader's mouth, not quite hidden behind the mask of the breather. For all that it was barely a smile, it was a wryly cruel one.

But not, strangely enough, threatening. It also wasn't aimed at *him*, Luke realised with some confusion.

"Kill the creatures behind me, Skywalker. That should answer your questions," Darth Vader said slowly, dark intent and heavy

will lacing every single word and despite the lack of the Force around Vader, it was like it was still there... Or perhaps it was ‘just’ simple, undeniable *presence*, something which couldn’t be removed even with there being a hole in the Force.

“Creatures? What’re you talking about, there’s nothing...” Luke shook his head sharply and grimaced as he looked behind Vader, and then stared. He hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a narrow lattice of greenery perhaps a meter behind Vader, out of easy reach with his arms chained down and his legs clearly disabled, and on it were two squat, lizard-like creatures curled.

They looked like herbivores, if Luke was any judge, the rusty light making it look like the yellowish scales were edged in dried blood.

“They haven’t done anything,” Luke said, turning his glare back on Vader and felt his heart skip half a beat at the sudden furious expression that twisted the man’s face before it was smoothed out into a pale, frustrated blankness, “I’m not killing them for just *being* there. Couldn’t we just... move you?” Not that he was sure it was a good idea to let Vader have his access to the Force back, but he wasn’t going to be leaving him here either way. In fact, he should contact Artoo and tell him to call Leia.

“And you would cut off these?” Vader asked, dry as a desert, while he tensed his arms, straining the chains, and Luke bit his lip and turned away, face warming a little. No, he didn’t want to do *that* unless he really had to. Fiddled instead with the wrist comlink, frowning at the static it was spitting out at him.

“Artoo? I need you to... Oh, come *on!*” Definitely no contact. What could even be interfering with the comlink? There was literally nothing here, he was sure, and the interference wasn’t jamming. At least not standard jamming.

“Did whoever attack you do this, too?” Luke asked as he reluctantly turned back around to Vader, gesturing at his comlink. Vader stared for a moment, then barely tilted his head.

“The rock of many of the planets in this system exhibit qualities that disrupts comlinks and holonet connection, though

not to this degree. It is possible the fortress itself was built to enhance the effect, though engineers have been unable to figure out how.”

Luke blinked and crossed his arms over his chest. That had been an answer, and far more of one than he'd expected considering how this had gone so far. Though, it wasn't actually an answer to what he'd asked... not *really*. Groaning, he untangled his arms to run a hand through his hair.

“Well, I guess it doesn't matter. Artoo's gonna contact my friends *anyway* soon, so all I have to do is wait...” trailing off, Luke, reluctantly, involuntarily, met those piercing blue eyes and his stomach clenched.

Wasn't sure he wanted to wait here, because while the anger had drained off into a low, background hum of frustration, it didn't have anywhere to go. His stomach flipped, brought a sense of vertigo along with it, and Luke started to pace.

Anything that wouldn't leave him staring at Vader and thinking about the odd sense of familiarity of those blue eyes, or the tint of not just an Outer Rim accent to Vader's voice, but a slant to it that was far more familiar...

“You believe I killed your father, and yet you aren't taking this opportunity.” There was a question there, several in fact, and Luke stiffened, feeling the stare on his back and briefly, undeniably, the anger was back like poison and he whirled around, stomping the few steps that separated them with no thought before he was already standing in front of Vader.

The man was tall enough he did not need to tilt his head back far as Luke came close. Luke almost retreated, but more because he suddenly could feel *nothing* of the Force - it was unsettling and uncomfortable, despite that he hadn't been able to sense the Force for very long.

He didn't move, however.

“And Ben too,” he hissed, hand tight around the hilt of his lightsaber but not unhooking it. Wished he could with certainty lay Biggs' death at Vader's feet too, but he didn't actually know.

“Why?”

He'd barely known Ben, Luke knew that. The old man had barely had the chance to start to teach him, but he'd felt old and been familiar, for all that Luke hadn't really met the man much at all before being rescued from the Tusken. He'd been something familiar to follow after he'd found the farm gutted, someone who'd known his father - someone who actually told him more than he'd ever been given, no matter how little it'd turned out to be.

“That is the way of Jedi and Sith, young one,” Vader said, his face strangely... mild, before it suddenly hardened and his voice, no matter how thin, turned into a flat blade of rage, “Obi-Wan and I, further, have history.”

Luke stared, felt the anger turn in his stomach and radiate outwards, though it was strangely stale now that he couldn't feel the Force. Didn't matter (maybe it was better that way), it wasn't like that changed anything! But as soon as he actually envisioned unhooking his lightsaber, igniting it, and then burying the blade in Vader's chest, the anger crumpled in on itself in disgust.

Not like *this*.

Even taking off the chains wouldn't make anything better, because Vader was still incapacitated. It just wouldn't be right. Swaying back, unconsciously retreating until he felt the Force flood back in brilliant light, Luke dug his hands into his scalp for a moment and just breathed. Somewhere at the edges, cold death whispered, but it was too distant, and even when the image of killing Vader appeared again, Luke felt nothing but confused frustration and, again, disgust.

“... and my father?” Luke asked, straightening up and staring at Darth Vader with a scowl. Vader met his gaze for a moment. Then that moment lengthened and he finally glanced aside, lips thin and with a tension around his eyes that looked like it couldn't be doing anything pleasant to the wounds on his head or the thin skin.

“I have killed many fathers, young Skywalker. But not yours.”

The Force twitched, heavy and close, at Vader's words. The flat, tight expression on Vader's face said louder than anything that there was *more* here, that Vader was *holding back* - but it also meant Ben had lied. Luke wavered between a fierce sort of hope and frustration. He couldn't believe that. Why would Ben *lie*?

"That's not what you said on that factory moon," Luke snapped, eyes narrowing. He must be trying to deflect, though why, Luke didn't understand. It wasn't like he was going to kill him either way. Not like this. (Somewhere in the back of his head, Luke could practically *hear* Leia scoff, and while he felt, briefly, guilty for not doing that for her, he wouldn't. Couldn't.)

Vader didn't react to the accusation, however - not in any way Luke would've expected from being caught out in a lie. There was only a minuscule twitch at the corner of his right eye, and the blue flattened.

"Your presence is singular, Skywalker, but that does not mean I knew who you were then."

If only he could tell if he was telling the *truth*, Luke thought, frustrated. The Force swirled again, heavy and close and while Luke couldn't quite understand it, he did get the sense that, if nothing else, Vader wasn't lying about this *particular* thing. Which didn't really tell him much.

"So what *about* my father? Did you just leave him to die instead of killing him directly?"

Vader's expression suddenly went flat.

The creatures behind the Dark Lord shifted, rustling the leaves on the framework they clung to, and Luke backed up, swallowing heavily. Because despite the fact that Vader had all but stated he had no access to the Force and Luke had felt the effect himself when he got close enough to Vader and the creatures, he could *swear* there was suddenly the faintest, sharpest coldness scraping down his skin, biting into the brightness of the Force.

Vader, meanwhile, had gone ramrod straight and tense, which looked uncomfortable enough Luke would've winced in sympathy if he wasn't otherwise occupied. When the man opened his

eyes again, there was an abyss of rage (... and pain?) there.

"I would suggest, young one, that you ask Obi-Wan that question."

Panic, confusion, and anger bubbled up.

"He's *dead*!" Luke cried, trying not to think of the times he'd heard Ben's voice - or apparently had, anyway. "He *wouldn't*! How *dare* you---" Luke's anger fizzled underneath the flat, uncomfortably frank stare Vader was levelling at him.

Anger was etched in every line of Vader's frame, but the strange thing was, despite that Luke had asked the question, it didn't really feel like it was... aimed at him. Scowling still, Luke carefully slid forwards again, picking at his belt and plucking out the small multitool he carried that Han had given him after the whole Nar Shaddaa mess, before he went to Vrogas Vas.

Unable to say something else for several minutes and *knowing* he wouldn't get any other answers to questions about his father right now, Luke flicked the various tools out of the main handle of the multitool and folded them back in, staring hard at it. Ben couldn't have lied. He *wouldn't*!

And yet there was Vader's reaction... Luke didn't know what to think.

"... do you want help with your legs?" Luke blinked down at his hands and the multitool in it, hardly believing he'd just heard those words come out of his own stupid mouth. He didn't owe Vader an apology - which was what he'd *meant* with what he'd said - and yet he'd... said that. Even if he had accused him of leaving his father to die, which in some ways could be just as bad or worse as outright killing him.

"You are waiting for your rebel friends to come here and perform the execution you cannot, and you wish to attempt repairs?" Sarcasm, or perhaps dry amusement laced every word, which was utterly *bizarre* to hear out of Darth Vader's mouth. Luke wondered for a stunned moment if this was what the mask's vocoder hid, or if Vader was, for some reason, just allowing himself to be more expressive at the moment.

Then, after that stunned moment was over, shame flushed through him, despite the fact that Darth Vader *still* did not deserve a drop of mercy or consideration.

"I'm--- They wouldn't---"

"Since you are unlikely to cut off the chains so I can do it myself, I accept," Vader said suddenly, interrupting Luke's stuttering ramble. Luke blinked, snapping his mouth closed. "And I did not say your refusal to enact said execution yourself was wrong, Skywalker. It is foolish and you are far too idealistic where others would be pragmatic and give what was deserved." The thin voice had softened unaccountably, and Luke looked away, unable to decide whether he wanted to snap that he didn't do it for *Vader* or if he was just uncomfortable at being given something like... praise from Darth Vader of all people.

Disapproving praise, but it was there nonetheless.

Luke took a breath, more to steel himself for the vertigo-inducing sensation of the Force disappearing rather than getting close to Vader he told himself, but he still had to take a moment either way. Slowly he crossed the room and got close, avoiding Vader's stare as he sat down and pulled one leg out from under the man. It was heavier than he'd thought it'd be, and the damage was a mess of charred wires and half-melted metal, but...

"Not sure if you'll get a lot of motion back, but this is---"

"Sloppy."

Luke twitched and looked up in spite of himself, frowning.

"What?"

"She was sloppy and barely scoured her lightsaber to my legs."

He froze in the middle of cleaning up some wires that might actually still be serviceable, felt sour... betrayal? wash thought him. Had he just forgotten who this *was* and was now helping Darth Vader with damage he had gotten while fighting a Jedi that somehow had survived..?

What was he *thinking*?

"She and her brother were not Jedi, young one," Vader said, and if Luke couldn't feel the lack of the Force - so to speak - en-

sureing they *both* currently had no access to it, he would've sworn Vader had been reading his mind, "they were one of the Emperor's projects."

"Oh," Luke said slowly, frowning down at the leg and working around the melted edges of the durasteel armour strapped to the boot. Actually, most of the melted metal was from the armour, not the prosthetic itself, so what he had to do was scrape out and bend away pieces of slag that had dripped into the workings of the leg. "Is that what happened here? Some sort of... um... rivalry?"

"No. The children would fancy themselves rivals, undoubtedly, but they never were," Vader said, his voice pale and strained, but carrying threads of familiar power, "the Emperor used them as his hands to carry out a punishment."

Nodding distractedly as he worked, Luke frowned. Remembered the wrecked garden and wondered if it wasn't these siblings he was meant to help, not sitting here patching up Darth Vader's legs. On the other hand, something about this whole thing still felt utterly wrong, even when he couldn't feel the Force at the moment.

Who did something like this and then just left the victim there, even if it *was* Vader?

Finishing both legs as quickly as he could because sitting that close to Vader and feeling the silent, heavy stare on him left Luke feeling... he wasn't sure. It should probably be 'disgusted', but all he could manage was 'unsettled' because he couldn't tell *why* Vader was staring. Finally, he could jump up to his feet and back off, breathing a sigh of relief when the Force thundered back in, leaving him slightly lightheaded for a moment.

"How does that feel?" he asked after a moment of hesitation, and had to admit to being proud when each leg was moved in turn, if with noticeable jerkiness.

"Serviceable."

Snorting, Luke shook his head and walked over to the window, looking out over the frozen and slowly crumbling fortress. It was

painted nearly livid red by the lengthening afternoon sunlight, the shadows purpling where they fell. From here, he couldn't see the front of the fortress or the stairs he'd put the X-wing down at the bottom of, as the tower was facing the other way... and, he thought, clear on the other end of the fortress. Artoo would probably have contacted the others by now, but it'd take them *hours* to get here...

Luke stiffened as the Force suddenly whispered *cold* down his spine, apparently imminent danger sharply making him remember the dream/vision he'd had.

Somebody needing his help.

"What is it, Skywalker?" Vader's voice was thin and strained, but somehow it still hummed with authority and Luke frowned. It *couldn't* be Darth Vader he was supposed to help, could it? But the only other people that had apparently been here had been those siblings, and they were the Emperor's as well...

"Someone's coming," Luke found himself saying, turning around to the rest of the room, staring at the doorway and definitely *not* looking to Vader.

"Cut off the chains," Vader hissed - it would, maybe, have been a snarl, but his voice was too weak for that, and even the hiss failed partway through, collapsing into breathless nonexistence. Luke almost winced in sympathy. *Almost*.

"No. I can handle this," Luke said, and hoped it was true - at least he knew more about handling a lightsaber now thanks to... his stomach turned, acid sharp against his insides, at the thought of Grakkus and the Gamemaster, but he pushed past it. The Magnaguards had given him some rudimentary skill, so hopefully that would be enough.

"Skywalker, your ability with a lightsaber is abysmal---"

"All the better for *me*, then," a young woman said as she stepped into the doorway, green lightsaber lit and the red light from the window darkening her strawberry blonde to something more rusty.

"Who're *you*?" Luke knew part of it, of course, given what

Vader had said, but he wanted to know what *she* would say. She snorted, head cocked.

“Aiolin Astarte. And your death, unless you step away. Though I don’t see why you wouldn’t. You’re a rebel, you *want* that relic dead,” she said, frowning at him and waving her free hand.

He should do what she wanted. Or could, anyway.

But that would be the same as killing Vader himself, and even if the rebels would’ve executed Vader as well, some part of Luke hoped it would not be with the man disabled and chained down like that.

The Force swirled, humming with danger and *need*. Luke shook his head and unhooked his lightsaber, igniting it.

“You first, then,” Aiolin said with a careless shrug and lunged.

The walls seemed to bleed from the light falling in the window as Luke pulled his lightsaber up without thinking, the blue and green blades meeting with angry, hissing static. There wasn’t a lot of space to move in here, and Luke knew he needed to keep away from the creatures behind Vader.

He kicked, and she leapt back, nimble and faster than anything he’d seen. She rushed back and thrust at him, and he barely blocked, didn’t have any chance to get an attack in himself as she swayed back and swung her lightsaber at him again.

Twisting away, Luke felt the flare of warning, but saw her raise her free hand towards Vader, not him.

Fire filled his vision, and Luke leapt, feeling the nothingness of the Force-empty bubble the creatures created nip at his back as fire *actually* erupted out of, or from, Aiolin’s hand somehow.

Luke!

The fire billowed out and away and then sputtered out, and Luke crashed into the wall next to the creatures, gasping as the hit rattled through him and at the loss of the Force. The voice that he was sure he’d heard was... familiar, but it hadn’t been Ben’s. He had other things to think of, though, even if he’d love to know how he’d kept the fire away from himself and Vader.

Couldn’t quite believe he’d actually *saved Darth Vader*.

But burning to death seemed like a terrible way to die.

"*Why!?* You *hate him!*" Aiolin yelled and jumped at him. Luke barely rolled out of the way in time, her lightsaber leaving deep, blackened cuts in the stone beside the rack the creatures clung to while Luke ran between them and Vader, feeling her lightsaber almost cut into his flightsuit.

Out of the bubble Luke staggered as the Force swirled back, immediately screaming a warning.

He turned around in time, down on a knee and lightsaber above him to block the slash Aiolin had aimed at his head, and he *couldn't* handle this. His haphazard connection with the Force wasn't enough - she was too skilled, and quick and knew what she was doing, even if she wasn't using the Force. Somehow he knew she wasn't. Technology of some kind, then?

"That doesn't. mean I think he... should die *this* way," Luke ground out and rolled away, hissing as her lightsaber just barely touched his shoulder before he got out of the way and steeled himself, running back into the bubble and carefully, but as quickly as he could manage, cut off first one and then the other chain.

Vader reared up, then staggered forward, falling like a clubbed bantha. His legs clearly unable to hold up his weight, and Luke grimaced, feeling his heart drop.

Maybe the fix hadn't been good enough, even if Vader had clearly been able to move his legs while sitting down. Jumping over the slumped form of the Dark Lord, Luke barely blocked another swing from Aiolin, which could've cut into Vader *or* him. Aiolin's lightsaber slid off his blade and almost seared the back of his hand and arm, making Luke stagger back.

And fell as he stepped wrong, his whole being lurching by being too close to the Force-empty bubble but not quite inside of it. Aiolin smiled wide and raised her lightsaber as well as her free hand, and she'd kill him now, while clearly intending to douse Vader in the fire again---

Aiolin was suddenly jerked up into the air and flung into the

wall. Something crunched as she hit it, and she fell to the floor with her body soft and head slumped down towards her chest, the lightsaber clattering to the floor.

“... did you just...” swallowing down a few heavy breaths and sudden nausea, Luke stared at Aiolin, but she didn’t move. Blood, glinting in light almost as red as the liquid, was starting to trickle out from under her.

“You object?” Vader said, though it was a breathless hiss that carried no weight - enough so that Luke couldn’t tell if there’d been sarcasm, a challenge, or anything at all in it.

He shrugged, clutching his lightsaber hard in one hand as he watched the Dark Lord slowly get up on his feet with the help of the wall, opened his mouth and then stiffened at the sound of booted feet out in the corridor.

Reflexively, though whether it was for solidarity, to keep himself between Vader and the doorway, or make sure he had both Vader and whoever would be coming into the room in view, Luke stepped back and sideways. Tried to ignore the corpse close behind him and felt his faint hope that it was Leia (he’d known it wasn’t) and some Alliance soldiers die when he saw a short, pinched-looking Imperial officer step into the room.

Behind him were at least five stormtroopers.

“Lord Vader,” the man murmured, bowing sharply and gaining control back over his brief, stunned expression at seeing the Dark Lord as he was. Both the officer and the stormtroopers radiated different amounts of confused alarm, though the Stormtroopers at least had their expressions hidded... Though, maybe amusingly, the officer *still* had the most subdued reaction of the whole group, despite the disadvantage of not having a helmet or mask to hide his facial expression. “The young woman made a brief rendezvous with the *Executor* and informed us she would assist you on some matter the Emperor had given you before going back planet-side, but I decided to bring reinforcements.” There was probably more reasoning behind that, but the officer didn’t defend himself or offer them up despite the worry

Luke could feel emanating from him in the Force, the only thing lingering after the initial shock. All he did was glance at Luke and then looked to Vader, who was, slowly, straightening up to his full height.

“Captain Piett. A wise, if unnecessary, precaution,” Vader said slowly, tilting his head slightly. Then he looked to Luke, and Luke lifted his lightsaber up in response, but didn’t ignite it.

Suddenly, he felt *bare* again, like he’d felt briefly after he’d first come in here as those blue eyes bore into him. “Your assistance was timely, Skywalker. If you wish to know more about your father, you will come quietly.”

Luke stared. Actually felt his mouth drop open a little before he managed to catch it and snap it shut, then straightened up and ignored the noise of blasters being cocked.

“I... I’m not going *anywhere* but back to my X-wing! You can’t just--- I have a right to know!” Luke wasn’t sure what angered him the most - that Vader was basically holding what he knew hostage against Luke coming with him, or that he hadn’t thought this would happen.

That, for some reason, since he’d *helped*, Vader wouldn’t... do what? Kill him? Capture him for the Emperor as a way to get back into his good graces or something?

“The Emperor, young one, will not be laying a single finger on you,” Vader hissed, and despite the threadiness of his voice, there was a black hole’s worth of threatening weight contained in those words. Words he had no idea how Vader knew to say at all, since he hadn’t voiced his thoughts. “And you are coming with me regardless. Walk, and you will find out that much sooner.”

A most childish, frustrated urge burned through him and almost had Luke yell that it *wasn’t fair!* at the Dark Lord of the Sith before he turned around and, glaring at Captain Piett’s waiting palm, slapped both lightsabers onto it.

It wasn’t like he could’ve fought his way out of the room anyway - not with Vader having the Force back, little space to maneuver, and all the Imps.

The hand on his shoulder almost made him jump out of his skin, but Luke managed to turn it into shaking it off - then it was back, firm and heavy and Luke scowled at the floor. Imagined speeding up too much for Vader to be unable to keep up in his state, but that seemed... petty. Luke muttered a curse under his breath and ignored the way the hand on his shoulder tightened.

Hopefully Leia and Han and the Alliance wouldn't come now - with the *Executor* in orbit, it'd be a death sentence. Should be for him too, but...

It didn't seem that way, somehow.

Not that Luke was sure that was any better, really.

If you're wondering, since it didn't come up; Aiolin's brother was killed during the fight, right before the ysalamiri (the lizard creatures) were brought into play. Aiolin and her brother Morit are from the Darth Vader comic!



Chapter 34:

In Which a Bounty Is Important



AU for the next issue of the SW comic, but based on a single line of Luke's in the current (#16) issue. Welcome to Bad Ideas Central, employees; Luke Skywalker.

Chapter features Han and Luke running away, hairdye and a bounty.

*'Then maybe you should **sell me** to the nearest bounty hunter.'*

Pacing the main hold, from the forward corridor to the clutter around the cargo transfer hatches to the back corridor, past the circuitry bay access and then around again, Luke ran a hand through his hair. Maybe he shouldn't have said that. Not because *Han* had latched onto it, thankfully, but because *he* had.

It'd been supposed to be a *joke*, an attempt at loudly calling back to Nar Shaddaa and spitting that whole chain of events in the face. At least that was what Luke had intended when he said it. Maybe. He wasn't sure why he'd said it, now.

The thing was, what if they *did* do that?

Luke stopped, rubbed his neck and grimaced. Not that he would *actually* sell himself to a bounty hunter, then sort of needing the credits or not. No, what if they just... Frowning, Luke swayed, weighing back on his heels and tilted his head back to stare up at the ceiling. They needed credits, because Han had gambled all of it away, the *idiot*.

(How Han had gotten the funds free from the locked chip storage to even be *able* to gamble them away, Luke didn't know, but apparently both he and the rest of the Alliance had underestimated the smuggler.)

So. They were in need of credits, and Han's suggestion, of

course, was to find something to smuggle. Luke, though, was starting to wonder if that would even *work*; Han had a bounty on him himself, both from the Empire and Jabba (neither of which, even together, amounted to his own, even less Leia's), so would he be able to pick up any job without getting someone on his tail?

Luke... doubted it.

Making another circuit of the main hold, Luke finally threw himself sideways onto the gravity couch. Frowning at the dejarik table, he gently kicked the column that held the tabletop up. Sixty thousand credits, if they could just get them *without* him actually getting *stuck* in Imperial custody.

They just needed to...

"*Still* sulking, kid? I told you we'll have this fixed in a few days, at the *most*," Han said, slumping down into the chair by the engineering station, sounding somewhere between exasperated and annoyed. Luke huffed and looked up from the dejarik table after a few moments, tilting his head as he looked Han over, slowly turning over the beginnings of a plan.

It'd worked on the Death Star, hadn't it, so why not now?

"What if we *did* pick up my bounty, Han?" Luke said instead of answering Han's jab about him sulking, because that was *not* true. Han blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, and then his expression turned downright *thunderous*. Luke wasn't sure why.

"We're not *selling you*, damn it, Luke! Drop it. Just give me a few hours on---"

"I didn't mean that we'd sell me out, Han," Luke waved a hand in the air between them, interrupting the oncoming huffy defense of his own idea, which Luke was pretty sure would just end up in even more complications or lost credits or *something*, given what had happened when Han decided to 'double the funds'. "I mean, what if we just... disguise you as a bounty hunter and you pick up the bounty and *then* get me out of there after maybe waiting a day or two so they relax, but before they ship me off to Imperial Center or wherever."

Han was staring again, and Luke was having trouble not shifting nervously in his seat.

“We’ll choose some out of the way, real small Imperial outpost or something, with as little resources as possible,” he added after a moment, tilting his head. Han snorted, an eyebrow climbing up on his forehead.

“I see you’ve *thought* about this at least, kid,” he said slowly, still frowning but not looking quite as forbidding, “I don’t like it.”

“Oh, come on Han. It’ll be easier than the Death Star!” Luke shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. They’d gotten down *fine* to the cell block - arguably the points that would be the hardest would be springing the prisoner (that was, him) out, not getting *in*, but that was why they should choose some small, out of the way outpost. The smaller it was, the less resources and people and *guards* around, which meant it’d be easier to get out!

And he was sure it was better than Han’s idea of smuggling. Which, okay. Didn’t really say much because Luke knew it wasn’t a *stellar* idea or anything. It was downright dangerous, but what had the last few months been *but* dangerous, anyway?

“We’re trying my idea first, kid. If I can’t find us anything, *then* we’ll see ‘bout yours. How’s that sound?” Han said with a frown and an arched eyebrow. Luke shrugged, silently agreeing. He’d rather they start with his, because maybe he’d lose his nerve if they waited too long, but at the same time... some not-so-tiny part of Luke *would* prefer it if Han found them something easy to do.

Not that smuggling was on top of his list of activities to engage in, Luke thought, nose scrunching.

Falleen. Falleen Throne, the Eclipse Cantina.

“Han...” Luke muttered, scowling, as they settled into a booth near the entrance of the cantina. It looked a lot like the one he’d been into in Mos Eisley - flavour and atmosphere, mostly, be-

cause the layout was different and it was a little cleaner than he'd have expected of a place like this from Chalmun's. There was, unsurprisingly, a not insignificant number of Falleen in the cantina as well.

"*Relax*, Luke. We'll be out of here before you know it, but ya gotta give it a little time. No one's gonna approach us when we've hardly passed the doorstep," Han said, waving him off and getting a waitress to come over in the same movement. Luke just shook his head when she looked to him after taking Han's order. He did *not* feel like drinking at the moment, even if he might have been curious.

"Han, we passed *six patrols* on the way here. Did you just want to skip the 'pretend to be a bounty hunter' part and have them take us in immediately?" Luke hissed and reflexively ducked when the waitress came back with Han's drink. The older man snorted, snagged up his drink in one hand and pulled Luke straighter with his other.

"Sit up, kid, you look suspicious like that. None of those Imps are interested in *us*; they're all here for the *natives*," Han said quietly, getting comfortable and putting a foot up on the table, drink still in one hand, "as long as you don't yell your name in the streets or break any laws where they can see it, they're all going to keep their eyes peeled on the *Falleen*."

Resisting the urge to slouch back down again, Luke tried to be inconspicuous as he glanced around the cantina, unsure why he felt so twitchy - maybe he was just imagining it, that they seemed to be eyed a lot...

"Why? I mean, I know they don't like non-Humans but you make it sound *specific*," Luke said as he glanced around again, catching one Theelin look away just as he caught her looking. She had a Magna Guard's staff strapped to her back.

"They've been a right pain in the Imperial behind for *years*. Something went down, no idea what, the Empire cleaned out a whole city or something, and since then..." Han shrugged, waved the hand holding the glass around to indicate the general

stormtrooper presence outside and the Star Destroyers in orbit.

“Okay. Great,” Luke muttered, then stiffened, watching a Falleen walk over to a couple of Rodians and lean close. There was nothing *odd* about it, but something just set Luke on edge. “Han... I think we better go.” Those three were now shifting off their stools and out of the boots, and Luke was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

“Go? Look, I told ya, kid, you gotta be *patient* about this---”

“I don’t think they’re coming over to offer you a *job*, Han!” Luke hissed, jerking his head towards the approaching group, all of which had their hands on their weapons. Han stilled, threw back the rest of his drink in one go and grabbed Luke’s arm.

“Let’s go.”

Cato Neimoidia. A landing pad in Tarko-Se.

Luke was stuck sitting in the co-pilot’s seat on the *Falcon*, slowly turning his lightsaber over in his hands, while waiting for Han to come back. Han had decided, after they’d had to take their leave of Falleen, that, on the off-chance that it’d been *Luke* they’d recognised and been after, Luke was to remain behind.

Which frankly was a bit annoying, because he’d seen the cities on the way in, and he would have loved a chance to actually walk around on one of these giant bridges. But Luke had to reluctantly admit that what Han said made sense... and on the additional off-chance that they’d need *another* quick escape, Luke would be able to run the pre-flight checks and start-up sequence, having the *Falcon* ready the second Han came back.

Hopefully, though, it wouldn’t be needed.

Luke was starting to have some doubts about his own plan. Not that it wouldn’t necessarily work; it’d worked on the Death Star, so why *wouldn’t* it work when used on some Imps in some rundown nowhere of an outpost? It was just...

*Step away from the cages, unless you’d like to be in one.
... and now you belong to me.*

Shifting in his seat as those words rang through his head, Luke grimaced. Why had he even made the joke about *selling* himself off? Which wasn't at all the same as the idea he'd pitched to Han, more like several shades *worse* and---

"Luke!" the comlink crackled with Han's bellow, and Luke could hear the thundering echo of footsteps, "run the pre-flight checks, I want the *Falcon* ready to lift *before* I get back!"

Staring at the comlink as it fell silent, Luke made a noise in the back of his throat, shook his head and reached over to flip the right switches and toggles. So apparently it *hadn't* been him that was the problem. Unless it had been and Han was just unlucky enough to be spotted *this* time.

Han came barrelling into the cockpit ten minutes later, and Luke didn't even get a chance to open his mouth and ask what happened before the *Falcon* was taking off, sharply enough Luke had to grip the dashboard.

"What happened?" Glancing to Han as the sky went from deepening blue to black, Luke raised an eyebrow as he watched Han shift a little in his seat and then scowl.

"Got chased out. I'm thinking this is some petty revenge Sana cooked up," he muttered, expression darkening as he spoke.

"Wouldn't she want your bounty for *herself*, if she'd actually be aiming for that? And why're you assuming it's *Sana* anyway, and not people aiming to cash in on either Jabba or the Empire's bounties?" shaking his head, Luke kept his eyes on the controls and pitching in where needed.

Han made a loud, huffy noise of disgust, shaking his head sharply.

"Kid, those jokers back on Falleen and Cato Neimoidia both wouldn't have caught us, they were basically there to inconvenience me to hell, nothing more. And *she* is one of the few people who knows all of my favourite places to go to for jobs," Han said, yanking on the controls more than what was strictly necessary, "so, it's *obvious*, and she's having a petty little laugh over the fact that I won't be able to pick up independent work for a few

months.”

Han slumped back with a groan as they temporarily hid the *Falcon* in one of the craters of one of Cato Neimoidia’s moons, staring silently up at the ceiling for a few moments before he turned his head to Luke.

“All right then, kid. We do this your way, then. What’s the plan?”

Stirring himself, Luke grinned, pushed away all his misgivings, and leaned over to the galaxy display. He found what he’d been looking for earlier quickly, as while Han had been gone, he’d been going through options.

“What about Utapau? They’re supposed to only have a real small Imperial presence. And as for *you*...” Luke looked up from the display and met Han’s slightly suspicious expression with a grin, “ever wanted to dye your hair?”

Utapau. Pau City.

“Luke...” Han didn’t sound very pleased. It might have had something to do with his now nearly blood-red hair, standing up at an angle thanks to some carefully applied product, and the accompanying red markings scattered over his cheekbones and down his throat. It might also be the baggy pants that slumped over the tops of his boots or the fact that he’d been forced out of his shirt and vest for a ridiculous-looking tunic and chest-armour ensemble. “Where did you even get this *idea*?”

Luke shrugged, tossing Han a pair of goggles and surveying his and Han’s combined (if reluctant) efforts. Luke wasn’t sure what supposedly made a bounty hunter look like one, but hopefully they’d come close. If nothing else, Han certainly didn’t look like his usual self, which was the most important part.

“There was a Theelin in the cantina back on Falleen, and since Theelin often almost look like Humans, it seemed like the easiest way to make a believable and quick disguise,” Luke said, picking up the binders laying on the dejarik table and turning them over

in his hands.

This was probably not a very good idea, Luke admitted. He'd had two days since he first suggested it to think it over, and while he was still sure it could work, he didn't like the idea of wandering into an Imperial outpost cuffed and proclaiming that he was the pilot that destroyed the Death Star.

But with Han's idea of smuggling no longer being an *easy* way of getting the credits Han had lost back, this seemed to be the only way to do it.

"Kid." A hand landed on his shoulder and Luke looked up into frowning hazel eyes, "we don't have to do this. We'll get the credits back some other way."

"No. It's fine," Luke said, straightening up, "I'm sure it'll work, I just don't look forward to the bits until we're out of there, *with* those credits." He smiled and handed Han the binders, pushing away his misgivings.

This would be *easy*.

Hyperspace, en route to Utapau. The *Amidala*.

This was taking too long.

Unfortunately, there really was no way of going faster than he already was; the yacht was equipped with a first-class and tuned hyperdrive, and while there might be faster ships in the Galaxy, there wouldn't be *many* of them.

Half an hour until it was time to drop out of lightspeed.

Half an hour in which things could still slip away from him. They could *already* have done so, and he'd have no way of knowing until he arrived at Utapau.

Darth Vader could still not quite believe it, when the alert had popped up, waiting for his confirmation. Given the amount of credits involved and the fact that the individual it concerned didn't have any reliable markers for identification included in the bounty, someone needed to confirm the identification of the pilot.

Someone, meaning Darth Vader, because *he* was the only one the alert went to, and it had only very little to do with the fact that he was, currently, the only person that could with certainty identify the pilot who destroyed the Death Star. Mostly it had everything to do with keeping the information and identity of said pilot as contained as possible, in spite of the late Karbin's attempts.

Sitting in the pilot's seat and resisting a most undignified urge to pace, Vader considered that if he felt more gracious, he would be sending a mental thank you to Tulon for her very... timely... death. Cylo and the twins had left Shu-Torun yesterday with Tulon's remains and leaving him and the remaining forces to finish up the operation.

Thus it had been very simple to leave the moment he got the alert, since, for once, the officers were reasonably competent, and Queen Trios was as well. The latter was good for *her* and her alone, Vader really didn't care.

This was taking---

The chime for the first warning for hyperspace reversion sang through the cockpit, and his hand had *not* jerked before he reached out and pulled the lever back, watching the mottled swirl turn into starlines and then pinpricks of light. Utapau hung nearly dead ahead, and there was only minimal adjustment of the course necessary to angle the yacht towards an entry-angle that would lead to Pau City.

Soon.

He was so very close, and he couldn't help but wonder *how* that bounty had trapped the boy. It was not what he'd expected, honestly, considering Skywalker had gotten off Vrogas Vas *despite* the multiple attempts by *several* different groups of people to get him. All of which had failed, though he'd let the boy go without making a last attempt himself in a calculated gamble.

Briefly, as he strode down the ramp and towards the officer and three stormtroopers waiting, Vader spared a thought to Aphra, who'd been part of said calculated gamble. She would

either use the opportunity the bounty hunters were giving her (though not quite as they or she imagined, surely), or not.

She'd had *weeks*, and yet she was... elsewhere, and Skywalker was, supposedly, in custody here on Utapau.

"Do you still have him?" he rumbled as he came up to the officer, speaking before she could. The woman twitched, nodding in a jerky, reflexive motion.

"Of course. He's awaiting identification back at the outpost. This way, my lord."

Utapau. A holding cell in the Imperial outpost in Pau City.

It hadn't worked.

Well, no, it *had*. Up to a point.

Pacing, Luke considered once again to try and open the lock, but he'd been trying on and off for five hours and so far hadn't had any success, so why should he expect results *this time*? Groaning angrily, he dragged a hand through his hair and threw himself on the niche that functioned as a cot.

They'd checked the place out before actually getting into their 'roles', and Han had said, with complete certainty, that he'd be able to break into the outpost through one of the side doors. It wasn't actually a back door as such, but that, Han said, was even better than a literal back door. The side doors would still have lower traffic, but no one would find it necessarily *odd* to see someone standing by such a door.

So, so far so good, and no one had looked twice at Han as he came in, dragging Luke along with a hand around an upper arm and pushed him forward, announcing loudly (and a bit too theatrically, in Luke's opinion) what he was here for.

The Imps hadn't questioned it. After a moment of staring, blasters had been cocked while someone called the Lieutenant of the outpost.

She'd come marching out, face severe and an obvious military regulation cut underneath the cap that didn't make use of the 'al-

lowance' the rare women in the Imperial military were afforded to keep their hair at shoulder-length but pinned up.

Then things had gone so far south it actually did feel like the air had scorched Luke's lungs on his next breath. Because then she'd said Han would get his payment as soon as Luke's identity had been confirmed, which would be arranged through a visit by whoever was authorised to perform said identification.

Which was what he was waiting for now, but Luke knew he *couldn't* just sit here and wait for that. There was a lurking sense of pressing *cold* hanging over him, threading through what little shadows were cast in the corridor outside and in the cell and Luke just *knew* he had to get out. This had been a good, well, okay, a *possible* idea up until that 'independent confirmation of his identity' had cropped up. The question was just if Han would think of--

"Hey kid. You okay?" Han muttered as he came down the corridor from the opposite end to the one Luke had been taken in here from, and he couldn't deny he was almost embarrassingly relieved.

"Stars, Han, am I glad to see you," Luke grinned as he got off the supposed cot and crossed the small cell - it took about three steps - and letting out a breath in relief when the door opened under whatever Han did to it. "And I'm fine. Not like anyone's done any questioning or anything." He shrugged, not particularly interested in knowing why they hadn't done anything aside from putting him in the cell. It didn't matter; all that mattered was that they got out of here as soon as possible.

The urgency seemed to burn down Luke's limbs, now, hot and dark.

"Probably leavin' that to whoever's supposed to tag you. Come on," Han said with a grunt and a shake of his head, hair still blood-red even if he'd combed it out and changed clothes. He turned back the way he'd come and Luke let out a breath, relieved that while they would still not get the credits they needed, they'd be out of here.

Behind them, the door Luke had been pushed through over five hours earlier suddenly clicked open and swept aside. Both rebels froze as a very distinct noise filled the air, rhythmic and damning.

"Sithspit!" Han yelled, grabbed Luke's wrist, and ran.

Or would have, but Han suddenly staggered, breath gurgling in his throat as he coughed. Luke barely kept from running into him and whirled around, mind too scattered to try to reach the Force and... what? Bend Darth Vader's mental grip on Han's throat open? Was that something he could do?

"Stop it!" Luke cried, angry and nearly ready to throw himself *bodily* at Vader if that's what it took, even with the stormtroopers right behind Vader and the lieutenant beside him, her own slim service blaster raised. Han's choked gurgling, contrary to all Luke's expectations, stopped.

Stopped suddenly enough he cast a glance behind him, ready for the worst, but Han was standing, hands on his knees, and breathing harshly.

Why had Vader *stopped*?

"This is the pilot," Vader said, not acknowledging Luke's cry or the fact that he'd stopped choking Han. Luke turned his head back to watch the black-armoured giant stalk closer, prompting him to shift back until he almost walked into Han.

"Back off, your lordliness," Han snarled, though his voice was rough and disappeared into a whisper right at the end. Darth Vader didn't stop until he was barely a step or two away from them, helm tilting.

"Captain Solo. Since you endeavoured to *free* Skywalker after handing him over, I presume this was an ill-conceived scheme of some sort," Vader said slowly, his dark baritone rumbling through the corridor, a condescending and surprisingly disapproving sneer loud and clear in the modulated voice, "I suppose it is not surprising you would gamble with your comrades' lives."

Luke huffed and straightened up, though even like that he couldn't really cover Han.

"It was *my* idea!" He wasn't sure why he suddenly felt like he had to defend Han and claim responsibility for this mess, but it felt important in some way. As if it would help Han, however vaguely.

The helmet turned to him, the light catching in the red-tinted lenses and Luke stiffened. Felt not just Darth Vader's very mundane and still overwhelming attention settle on him, but in addition something cold and tightly leashed curled over his shoulders.

Luke was honestly surprised that that dark *thing* hadn't made Han move his hands off his shoulders.

"And you would sell yourself out for the Rebellion, young Skywalker?" Scepticism and disapproval laced each and every word, and Luke had no idea how Vader had guessed to use those exact words, but he felt a brief flush rush through him.

"The kid's crazy, but it *would* have worked," Han snapped from behind him, and Luke swallowed a groan as he caught one of Vader's hands tightening into a fist and then relaxing again.

"You may leave, *Captain Solo*. Consider this your only warning."

Luke stared, then belatedly blinked. He hadn't expected *that*. Han hadn't either, by the sputtering coming from behind him. Luke was sure he knew what was coming, so before Han could speak up, he buried his elbow in Han's stomach.

"Kid! What the *hell's* that for?!"

"Han. Go." It *hurt* to say it, and he was already feeling vaguely abandoned, but he knew, with utter certainty, that if Han didn't go now, he was going to be *dead*. He did not want Han dead.

"*Luke!*" Han's protest was accompanied by his hands tightening on Luke's shoulders, his weight shifting backward to pull them back. Luke dug his weight in and down. He wanted to let Han pull him away and to run, but they were far too close to Vader and he could see the tension gather in the man's limbs, his weight redistributed just a shade in preparation.

For what, Luke didn't care to find out.

“Lieutenant. Escort Captain Solo to his ship and see to it that he leaves Utapau.”

Han protested, but faced with two blasters levelled at him and the stone-faced, dark-eyed lieutenant, he started to back up.

“And see to it that the credits are transferred to an account of his choosing,” Vader added, his baritone silky soft despite the threatening rasp, and Han swore as Luke jerked his head up, paling. That wasn’t a *kindness*, even he could see that. That was basically an *insult*.

“You...” Luke trailed off, because he wasn’t sure what to say. Vader’s helmet hadn’t left him at any point during this, but the attention was back full force again.


“You will have no use of those credits, young one, but since you thought up this foolish idea yourself, the credits ought to go where you would, presumably, want them to go, should they not?”

Sour nausea fluttered through him, though whether it was for the slight, if very flat, sarcasm Luke could swear he could hear, for the implication in what Vader was saying, or the reality settling in, Luke didn’t know.

“I don’t need you to tell me I’m not gonna be alive much longer, Vader,” he snapped, rallying as best he could and glowering. Vader stared down at him, the silence stretching, before he reached out and laid a heavy hand on Luke’s shoulder. His attempt to shake it off was thwarted, the grip tightening enough he reflexively winced.


“*Death* isn’t the reason you will not be using the credits from your own bounty, Skywalker. Come.”

As if he had a *choice*.



Chapter 35:

In Which the Infinite Empire Leaves Something Small Behind



We're going AU after ESB for this, and pure tropey fun.

This involves a machine that uses the dark side, Luke getting caught in the backlash as it's destroyed, and Darth Vader having Feelings about what he's missed.

Glancing from the door propped open at the other end of the large hall this small base's hangar was housed in to the base commander beside him, Luke was starting to have a bad feeling about this. Two days ago, he'd been given a request for his presence at this base, and with no mission given just yet - Leia insisting that he rest another week, at least, despite having already done so for *three* - he'd had nothing better to do.

He'd wondered why they were asking for him, specifically. Wondered until he'd landed in the hangar and felt a creeping cold descend like a pall over him in the Force, and a distant cry of agony rising up around him.

Not that anyone here would be able to sense *that*, he knew, but... The whole base was nonetheless thrumming with anxious energy. The ground crew and pilots he'd spotted in the hangar kept casting glances around and were very twitchy. The base commander, a slightly heavy-set, statuesque Nautolan, didn't seem as affected. But there was a deep furrow between her solid black eyes and the mass of tentacles on her head rippled every now and then with a tense energy that revealed her actual state of mind.

"So what am I here for, Captain?" he said quietly, and immediately not sure *why* he was so quiet. Captain Ruusi gave him a

tight smile that contained no humour at all and gestured around them.

"You've seen the soldiers, Commander Skywalker. It wasn't like this when we first got here, but the more we cleared of the place to use for our base..." she trailed off, head twitching minutely in the direction of the door they stood by, then back to him, "it's cold when it shouldn't be, people keep claiming they can hear children crying and begging. I've had a few patrols check deeper into the place, but found nothing. I know - am *old enough* to know - that the Force has nothing to do with ghosts, but if you could have a look, Commander, I think it'd set everybody at ease. This base is in too good of a spot to give up, but we're hardly getting anything done at the moment."

Luke believed it - in the two hours he'd been here, no one seemed to have done much of *anything* aside from going through the motions of tasks, frequently interrupted by tense glances around and slight twitches.

"I probably won't find anything, Captain," Luke said with a frown as he walked up to the door and peered inside. He saw nothing, the draft of air that hit him was cold and smelled of rust. The slight sense of pained *fear* that clung to the Force was stronger here, though.

The most interesting thing was that, apparently, the cry he'd been hearing wasn't *just* audible in the Force, then. Which made him wonder if ghosts *could* be part of the Force, despite what Ruusi had said - ghosts that weren't dead Jedi Masters, that was.

Glancing to Ruusi, he decided not to mention that just yet. He didn't think she'd be particularly happy to hear it.

"But I'll have a look."

"You don't even have to go deep, Commander Skywalker," Ruusi said as she came up to stand beside him, handing him a small bag containing several glowrods and extra blaster clips, "we don't know how large the place actually is, and I'm sure people would relax at least a little knowing you had a look around. Even if you don't find anything."

Probably *especially* if he didn't find anything, as it might let them try to convince themselves they weren't hearing the cries and feeling the cold.

Luke nodded and mustered a smile for her, turning one of the glowrods on as he stepped through the door. The space beyond was rusted, with a faint sheen of water on the ground and long-since broken, and absolutely *ancient* fixtures of some sort high up on the walls. Luke couldn't even figure out if they were light fixtures or something else.

It was cold and quiet, and the weirdest thing was that every door off the corridor led into spaces too small for an average adult... of several *species*. You'd have to be a child or an adult of a short species to fit in the rooms and corridors beyond. On its own, that wasn't really very strange, but what *was* strange was that some parts of this building had clearly been made with taller sentients in mind.

The Force twisted darkly around him, tainted cold, carrying old death and agony - whatever had happened here to colour the Force to the dark side here, it was *old*. Faded and ethereal, but still lingering.

Please.

Luke froze, swallowed, and closed his eyes. Reaching out, he found nothing. Nothing but what he'd been sensing already...

Please stop it.

Eyes snapping open, he looked around the puddle of light the glowrod made and into the darkness beyond. The whispers were carried on the same distant noise of crying, a child's high, keening sobs. Luke wanted to turn around and walk back out, leave this base instantly and tell High Command they should move this base, no matter how strategic.

But he couldn't leave.

Not with that plea ringing in his ears and through the Force both. He started moving again, this time noticing the direction the coldest draft came from, where the sense of anguish deepened into despair and, strangely enough, confusion. He left the

broken down but straight corridors behind for a path that went through a rock arch and down winding, polished-smooth rock tunnels instead.

The air was still and frigid, and the not-noise of crying was a constant pressure in his ears, now.

It's starting up again. It needs to be destroyed.

Please.

"All right, all right, I'm *going*," Luke muttered, unable to not wince at the sob that broke up the 'please', ringing unpleasantly in the Force. It somehow had enough effect to make the dark side actually react despite being... what, a long-dead child's plea?

Glancing around the corridor, Luke was uncomfortably reminded of the cave on Dagobah, except this smooth tunnel felt more... intent. It was like something between the pressing unfocused cold death of the cave and his... his father's giant sun of blade-sharp rage.

There was no rage here, though, just pain, despair and some sort of malicious intent which weighed down everything.

And when the tunnel opened up into a cave filled with broken power cables, rusted pipes and some other cables containing circuitry of some kind, all leading to the center where three slim pylons leaned in against each other, Luke knew *that* was the reason for all this. Where the three pylons met, there was an oily shimmer, a not-precisely-visible nexus in the dark side that had some sort of purpose Luke didn't know what it was.

It didn't matter, because the whispers were right; he could *feel* the whole thing slowly becoming stronger, more *active*. Luke could also tell it didn't matter if the base was evacuated right this moment, this thing wouldn't shut down even if they left now, and it *had to be*. Because what if others came after the rebels had left, and got affected by whatever this thing did?

Staring up at it, Luke took a breath and closed his eyes, feeling around the cave and the... machine? Luke couldn't figure out what it was supposed to do - was, in fact, utterly flabbergasted you could make an actual machine that interacted with the

Force. One thing was clear, however; the machine was ancient, and it was damaged enough that while it still worked, he would be able to... hopefully, destroy it. There were several 'weak spots' that were bright in the Force, loud and clear enough even the dark side couldn't hide them, which it was definitely attempting to do.

Slowly walking closer, crossing the smooth floor and taking the three steps up to the machine's base, Luke tilted his head back. Swallowed, and reached a hand out, but didn't touch the nearest pylon. His head was buzzing with the ill intent and the agony of all the ones who'd been, in whatever way, the victims of this thing.

It took several moments for Luke to gather himself and the Force enough to strike, and he hesitated for long enough he almost felt like crying himself from the Force-borne echoes of untold millennia-old suffering that thrummed around him.

Just as he struck, his comlink trilled, but it was too late.

Ruusi's voice bled into screaming as light and dark flared around him. The oily shimmer at the top of the pylons twisted and then burst and *everything hurt---*

Adults of species he had both seen before and others he wasn't familiar with were led into the cave, herded in neat lines by guards of some sort of amphibious sentient species. The thunder of the factory above the cave rumbled down through the rock, but despite the heavy anticipation hanging in the air, nothing happened until the fifty-some group of chained sentients were arranged in circles around the machine.

The core of the machine flickered with waves of pure dark side power and the prisoners screamed, thrashing as they fell to the ground. They curled up as small as they could and then seemed to become even smaller...

Thank you.

Luke woke up staring up at the ceiling and with dust and pebbles raining down on him, the echo of old-new gratitude soothing away the last of the pain that pierced his limbs. The pylons

were cracked and half-melted where they towered above him, and the only thing left of the dark side was old agony and fear. The malicious intent was gone.

He'd destroyed it, whatever it was.

With a groan, Luke rolled over and then immediately froze. That had been way too high. His *voice* had been way too high. Getting his hands under him, Luke looked down and stilled again. He knew he didn't have extremely large hands, but that... wasn't right. Heart suddenly loud and wild in his chest, Luke ignored the memory of the comlink having trilled earlier, of Captain Ruusi calling him, and sat up, staring at his hands.

Far too small for an adult, and when he groped around for the glowrod and found it, clutching it and turning it on again, it was larger than it had been earlier. His stomach did a slow, sickly twist around itself as the cave shook again. The glowrod wasn't larger than it had been.

He was smaller than he'd been, just moments before.

The vision of the slaves twisting on the ground around the dark side machine, curling up smaller and smaller suddenly made sense. Luke blinked, felt sour bile bubble up and swallowed it down as he remembered the smaller spaces he'd wandered past. This was a factory. A pretty large one that the base only occupied a very small amount of space in. What better way to use the space available, make the factory even *larger*, than by building for short individuals?

... and why limit yourself only to slaves of short species if you had the capability (not that Luke understood *how*, even now) to make *any* species fit the space available?

Crying children.

Except they hadn't exactly been *children*, had they? They'd only *looked* like children.

Another distant explosion thrummed through the stone and sent grit falling down, coating Luke from head to toe, and he jerked, looking up, remembering Ruusi's comm. They were under attack. The realisation was clear as day, and following that,

until now having been hidden behind Luke's distraction and the cooling sensation of old pain was...

"*Blast,*" Luke hissed, then immediately winced, hearing a far too high voice curse with surprising weight. It sounded all wrong.

Focus.

He got to his feet, grabbing the glowrod and the little bag, cast a single glance at the now-dead machine, but staying here wouldn't fix his situation. That thing was thoroughly destroyed, and he wouldn't want it any other way.

Hopefully, there'd be *some* way to fix the fact that he was years younger than he ought to be, but it couldn't have been fixed with that machine, Luke was sure. With a scowl at the pylons, Luke turned around and set off running - and immediately misjudged the three steps down from the machine's platform and the length of his own legs. He landed on his feet, breath in his throat, having drawn on the Force to somersault and keep himself from falling flat on the ground after his stumble.

Not good, not good, not good at all.

That didn't mean he didn't take off running immediately anyway, though. Tossing the bag over a shoulder, he felt for his blaster and expecting to be able to easily draw it, forgetting the now-disproportionate size of the glowrod. He almost fell over again, because while his clothes had conveniently shrunk with him, even the belt, in comparison the blaster and the holster it was in, had *not*. It was awkward and huge in his hand, and there was no way he'd be able to fire this easily, or maybe even at all.

The looming, cold fire of Darth Vader somewhere above pressed in on him, and Luke closed his eyes briefly, trusting the straight corridors and the Force to keep him from crashing into a wall. He wasn't ready for this. He *couldn't do this*. Not like *this*! How had his... his father even *found him*?

Even he hadn't known where he was going to be two days ago, and he'd only been here a little over two hours.

Grimacing, Luke staggered to a stop by the door that led out

into the base's hangar, listening to blaster fire and shouting. Maybe it didn't matter how Vader had found out; he was here, and somehow Luke had to *avoid him*. Because he certainly couldn't fight him. He didn't have a lightsaber. He didn't *want* to fight his *father*, a thought he'd realised quickly after the initial horror of Bespin had settled, though that had only made guilt follow.

Guilt which bubbled up again, but he shook his head and pushed it away. More than that, he couldn't fight his father *like this*. He couldn't even fire his blaster!

Peering out the doorway, one which seemed both larger and wider than before (because it *was*), Luke saw no one in the immediate vicinity. The fighting seemed to be further away. He might have a straight shot to his X-wing... Biting his lip hard enough it hurt, Luke knew he couldn't help the rebels in the base, not like *this*. His best bet was trying to get away.

Something which might be difficult considering he wouldn't be able to reach a lot of the X-wing's controls. And he didn't have Artoo with him this time, which meant he couldn't have Artoo control the X-wing *for him*. This was supposed to have been a short trip, estimated no longer than half a day, and now...

Shaking his head and taking a breath, Luke cast another glance out the door and to his awareness of Vader - close by, but he couldn't tell exactly where he was - and left the protection the fading dark side presence gave the hallway that led down into the factory proper to dash into the hangar, focused on his X-wing. It was further to run than it would have been when his legs were longer. It was taking far more time than he really needed it to, but the fighting seemed to have moved away into the corridors of the base, out of the hangar, so maybe---

"Skywalker!" The deep thunder of Vader's voice rumbled through the hangar and Luke froze. He was two-thirds of the way to his X-wing when the Dark Lord of the Sith came into view at the hangar's entrance, backlit by the afternoon light. Came into view, one hand at a hip, the other clutching his unlit lightsaber,

and then froze as Luke had done.

... **Luke?** The hesitant, *bewildered* tone of his father's mental voice would have made him laugh if this was in any way even vaguely funny, but all Luke Skywalker felt was a deep, pervading sense of alarm.

Darth Vader was *huge* when you were, at best, nine years old.

Staring down at the pre-teen boy frozen partway to the X-wing, staring up at him with wide blue eyes and dressed in the most ridiculously accurate miniature rebel-issue flight suit, Vader would've sworn someone (or maybe *something*) was laughing at him. Because he knew very well the age of his son; it was impossible *not to* given when Luke's mother had died.

And yet.

Yet he was currently faced with Luke's brilliant Force presence concentrated firmly inside the lithe, compact frame of a boy *several years* off from being a teenager, a nearly taunting suggestion of fading baby fat clinging to the soft, cheeks, and eyes wide enough they rather seemed to swallow half of his shock-pale face.

Luke? Vader repeated the question he'd made of Luke's name because he couldn't quite find any other words at the moment. In response, the connection between them *cringed*, confirming what the Force was telling him. Whatever he'd expected when the Force had nudged him in this direction, to this moon, it wasn't *this*.

Luke barely reached his *waist*.

"... no," Luke said quietly and immediately winced at his own high, *young* voice, clearly not used to it. Whatever had happened couldn't have happened long ago, Vader concluded quickly while Luke shook his head, sending the familiar mop of hair flying around him - and then the child set off running.

"Luke! Come *back here!*" The words were out before he'd even been aware of thinking them, the bellow echoing through the

hangar as Vader sprung after him. He ran around a ruined shuttle, watching the slight form dart underneath the body of the X-wing and towards the Y-wings neatly arranged along the wall, close to the entrance to the rest of the base.

The rest of the base, where the majority of the fighting was taking place.

The vision of blaster fire surrounding Luke as he was, without a lightsaber, a target neither the rebels nor the stormtroopers would recognise as friendly or neutral, and probably unused to his new limits...

"*Luke!*" Vader roared, his heart briefly and suddenly stuttering like his breath was unable to do. He'd lost the boy somewhere to the shadows and ships in the hangar which was infuriating, and his only response was a chunk of debris the initial bombs had undoubtedly shaken loose coming flying at him, which he barely avoided. Frustration and pride at Luke's easy skill warred with the fear the earlier image his imagination had conjured up as he scanned the hangar.

All he needed was a vague knowledge of where the boy was before he acted - the now-mutual bond let him pinpoint Luke's location far easier than before Cloud City, but this close it was still difficult when his son wasn't in view and he was short on time. And then, as another hunk of debris came flying at him, he spotted the boy, half-hidden behind the last four fighters next to the entrance into the innards of the base.

Ignoring the debris and allowing it to impact with surprising force into his shoulder, Vader grit his teeth and reached out with the Force, forcing the door closed and closing his fist, destroying the controls. Then, suddenly uncertain if Luke would think to simply pull the door open with the Force, yanked on the nearest Y-wing. The fighter moving sent Luke stumbling backwards away from it (and marginally closer to him), and he pulled on it further, sending the Y-wing sliding forward and sideways, blocking the doorway.

And most of the wall on *both* sides of the door.

“Are you *crazy*?” Luke sputtered, yelling at him from where he still lurked between the wall and the rest of the Y-wings, his presence in the Force clammy with fear-edged alarm.

“Come out, Luke.” There was, after all, nowhere else for Luke to go. The only other exit was the hangar doorway, and that was well behind Vader. Luke followed the wall until he was forced out into the open by the Y-wing covering the door. His alarm had faded into frustration, and the glare he aimed at Vader from that round, young face was as far from fierce, regardless of his efforts to the contrary.

The blaster he held in his hands, oversized for a child, didn’t help matters.

With a sigh, Vader let this go on for a few steps; Luke slowly walking sideways, trying to round the hangar towards the entrance, blaster levelled at him but not firing (Vader was sure the boy would stumble if he fired. If he *could* fire it), and Vader following along. But he wouldn’t let the boy get too close to the hangar entrance---

The blaster suddenly came sailing at him, and Vader, too concentrated on Luke’s progress and their distance to the hangar doors, got caught squarely in the mask. The impact rattled through his head as he whirled around with a snarl, seeing the boy - so much shorter, so many places to hide if he just got out among the rocky surroundings outside the base - disappear from him. Without thinking, he reached out, caught a leg with the Force and *yanked*.

The surprised cry followed by the thump of Luke hitting the floor stabbed right through him and made him regret the simple action almost as much as he regretted the loss of Luke on Bespin, almost as much as cutting his son’s hand off, however necessary it had been in the moment.

No matter. Here and now, Luke was unharmed aside from a possible few bruises.

Shaking his head, he quickly crossed the distance between them and grabbed his son’s arm. Briefly surprised into frozen in-

action when he was once *again* reminded of Luke's current size and apparent age as his hand basically engulfed the thin, if surprisingly wiry arm.

"Let go!"

Darth Vader was hardly inclined to listen to many people. Not even his son and particularly not for *that* sort of demand, and so hauled the child upright, ignoring the kicks to his leg and the attempts at yanking his grip loose.

For half a moment they stared at each other, Luke's head tilted back, anger, fear and a thin frisson of confused guilt thrumming over the bond.

Then Vader decided that he could not trust the boy on his own two feet, and lifted him *up*. Luke was far, far too light, and he was so... small. Something which he'd already observed, of course, but having Skywalker in his arms, now, easily holding on to the wriggling child before Luke simply slumped, pushing against his shoulders, and glared at him.

The control box, whatever it did, was within very easy reach. Luke stared into Darth Vader's mask, angry and frustrated he hadn't had better success at getting away, afraid of what would happen now because while he wouldn't go along with those *offers* his father had made in Cloud City, he *wanted*...

He wasn't sure what he wanted, which was as much cause for the fear as the fact that Darth Vader, his *father*, was holding him as easily as if he was a child.

Which... admittedly, he was. At the moment. That thought brought an unwelcome hook of fear that had nothing to do with Vader, threading through the confused guilt over what he *wanted*. Luke pulled himself together into a glare and still didn't attempt to mess with the buttons of the control box. That just wouldn't be *right*.

A light, searching slide of fingers down his right arm startled Luke out of staring at his own reflection in the red-tinted lenses,

and Luke yanked his hand away from Vader's shoulder and hand both, glancing down at it and then back at his father, frowning.

"What was *that* for?" This time, at least, he didn't wince when he heard his own voice, but it still sounded all *wrong*.

"You still have a prosthetic," his father said, sounding somewhere between bewildered and disapproving. Luke stared. Vaguely realised his father probably was confused because he looked like he was *nine*, and Luke could certainly attest to having both his original hands at age nine, but clearly the machine could only work with what it was given.

That, however, wasn't at the forefront of Luke's mind.

"Because you *cut my hand off*!" Luke yelled, then jerked, slapping a hand over his mouth as the shrieking echoes danced through the hangar, tossing the words right back at them. Squeezing his eyes shut, Luke bit his lip until it hurt, pushing himself as far away from Vader as he could and ignored the way his arms trembled.

His father was silent for several heartbeats, which were loud in Luke's ears.

"... I know that, Luke. But you cannot have had it when you were a pre-teen," Vader said, his rumbling baritone surprisingly quiet. Not exactly soft, but Luke stopped pushing away quite as much as he had been. It did nothing for the hard lump in his stomach or his heart, but it let him focus.

"No, I didn't," Luke huffed, eyes narrow, "I think the the... machine, or whatever it was, can't change anything, it just... de-ages you?" He shrugged, the word feeling uncomfortable and strange in his mouth. But that was what had happened, wasn't it? Then he became aware he'd been fiddling with Vader's cloak where it hung over his shoulders and stopped, fisting his hands into the cloth and squeezing until his knuckles hurt.

"What *machine*?" Vader's voice dropped, turning still and gaining razor edges all over. Luke stared into the opaque mask and not-quite opaque lenses, feeling... he wasn't sure. Because there was deadly intent in those two words, aimed at whatever

had done this to him... Luke shook his head.

"Down below. Some sort of dark side machine. I destroyed it."

"You--"

The sudden trill of a comlink cut through the sharp, almost reprimanding, incredulity in Vader's modulated voice and in the Force, causing Luke to jerk and Vader to twitch, just slightly. Luke considered his chances of fighting out of Vader's grip while he got his comlink out, but what was he going to do *then*?

Hide?

He could do that, but he couldn't exactly fly away himself, and he couldn't - wouldn't - contact Leia and ask her to come get him when the *Executor* was, most probably, in orbit. And his father wouldn't leave until he found him again, Luke knew that.

"Commander."

"Lord Vader. The rebels have been subdued and the base searched, but the door is--"

"Use whatever means necessary. There is a Y-wing in front of the door, and the controls to the door have been destroyed. We will leave after you and your men are out."

"Yes, Lord Vader."

Luke's stomach dropped out and twisted on itself somewhere around his feet at the mention of the rebels. That had, obviously, been the foregone conclusion here, but that didn't make him feel any better about it. Then Vader started to walk, and Luke stiffened.

"Put me *down*," he hissed, pushing against his father's shoulders again and realising he'd missed his opportunity. The arms only tightened, and Luke was gripped with the sudden certainty that if he didn't get away *now* he *never would*. The tangle of emotion that created had him reacting before he thought about it, a much too small fist smacking into Vader's mask between the nasal ridge and the left lens.

The vocoder spat out static, followed by a flare of incredulous anger across the bond, and then Luke yelled as he was pulled and hauled around, grunting as he met the unyielding armour of

Vader's shoulder.

"Let me go!"

You can't just--- But how he was supposed to finish that thought, Luke didn't know, and his new vantage point didn't let him do much more than try to pull at the cloak, Vader's hand at the back of his knees quelling any kicking.

*You're my son, Luke. I most certainly **can**.*

There was a weight in those words that made Luke flush, somehow suddenly even more aware of the situation he was in than he'd been so far.

Just because he *looked* like he was nine didn't mean he *was*!

His heart ached like there was something wrong with it.

Darth Vader stood just inside the door of the room he'd locked Luke in, having come back two hours after putting the child in there (and left fifteen of the best of the 501st outside the doors to his quarters until he was back) to check out this 'machine' Luke had mentioned. He'd found it all right, cold and irrevocably broken, with only the barest traces of the dark side still clinging to it.

Luke *had* indeed destroyed it, and must have been caught up in some sort of backlash, resulting in this... situation.

Vader stared at the child - twenty two and not nine, no matter what he looked like, but it was so *hard* to remember that, looking at this scene. Luke sprawled on a bed that'd gone unused for nearly three years since the *Executor* was built, a pinch of annoyance clinging to his eyebrows even in sleep.

He didn't know what was supposed to be done about this.

Slowly crossing the floor and stopping by the bed, watching Luke's sleeping frown twitch, deepen and then smooth out a little but still remain, doing nothing to dispel the childish round cheeks, Darth Vader could admit to himself that he wasn't sure he *wanted* anything to be done about this.

Practically, Vader acknowledged as he watched his son sleep - probably having exhausted himself in the two hours since he

was put in here - this situation was an impractical nightmare. Like this, Luke was even more vulnerable to his Master, and if this wasn't set to rights as soon as possible Luke couldn't be expected to fight.

Closing his eyes, Vader opened them almost immediately again, staring down at the small frame on the bed. His heart ached, and then twisted, sending a stab that wasn't physical through him. He had *missed so much*, and watching the boy sleep, now, only underscored that point.

He'd missed first words, first steps, running. He'd missed tantrums and bright-eyed, sweet looks. The probably awful teenager years too, but he would have taken them as well, if *only*...

Darth Vader sat down on the bed as if he was afraid getting any closer would make Luke disappear, or perhaps instantly reverse the backlash effect, or just wake the child up. The only thing that happened was that the bed dipped underneath his weight, Luke made a noise, briefly looking angry, then rolled over and curled up slightly, leaving the crown of his head just barely brushing Vader's thigh.

He could not draw a sharp breath in reaction; the respirator didn't allow for that, but he stilled as if it had happened despite this.

Staring down at his son, Vader slowly reached out. Trilled his fingers lightly down the curled-up artificial hand he was the cause of and then, hesitating above Luke's head, dared to rest his gloved hand on top of the small mop of hair.

The bond pulsed, then twitched, forming no real words and carrying no distinct emotion; Vader stiffened, prepared to move away in case Luke woke up, but the child remained asleep.

Practically, he should wish for and assist Luke in trying to find a solution to this.

Impractically, and what he was suddenly wishing for sitting right next to the small form of his not-actually nine year old son, his hand lightly resting on Luke's head and just barely caressing the strands of dark blond hair, was that this would last long

enough for him to get the chance he hadn't had.

Couldn't ever really have.

But as Luke sighed, nose scrunching up for a moment before his expression finally smoothed out completely and he caught a fistful of cloak in one sleepily questing hand, Darth Vader could almost pretend he *had* said chance.

At least for the moment.

◆

Chapter 36: In Which There Technically Is a Kidnapping

◆

In honour of one of the tags on this fic, because I've wanted to use Vader's assassins for a good while now and I clearly shouldn't write things when it's late.

Luke woke up with the severed end of his wrist throbbing dully, and someone sniffing his hair.

“Wh---”

“Do not move,” the whisper was rough and sibilant, causing Luke to freeze half-way through twisting around on the bed. “Tilt your head back, please.”

For some reason that ‘please’ sounded nearly comical - not that Luke was inclined to laugh at the moment. It was, probably, partly because there was no need for a random intruder who, presumably, could back up the threat implied in the words and tone, to use that word at all, and partly because the ‘please’ was actually sincere.

Still half-asleep but waking up quickly, Luke couldn't come up with anything better and did as asked, slowly tilting his head back and glancing back behind him as he did so.

It was dark enough he could barely see anything, but there was always a little light on ships, even during the night-cycle, so what Luke *could* see was a small, compact form kneeling over him on the bed, the faintest glimmer from small, deeply-set eyes and a curious shape to the skull - either some sort of headgear, or this was an alien.

And then he got a flat nose shoved nearly into his bared throat, so suddenly he almost swallowed his tongue as well as a surprised cry. There was the bare suggestion of teeth behind

thin, wrinkled lips, but all that happened was another two deep sniffs, and then the figure stiffened, muttering something that sounded nearly reverent.

“What do you want?” Luke muttered, glancing at the comlink laying on the table, wondering if he could reach it and call Leia so she’d know something was wrong before his uninvited visitor reacted...

“Your father, Son of Vader---”

“He’s *not!*” Luke cried, cutting his intruder off as he twisted around on pure reflex, grabbing after the comlink - and realising, as the hard, plastic cap banged into the bedside table and sent a spike of pain vibrating through the protective cap, the bacta inside and up through his still-raw arm, that he’d forgotten he didn’t have a right hand any more.

He hissed and curled up, clutching the cap in his left hand and breathed through the pain. Luke blinked his eyes open to a sinewy, clawed hand gently running through his hair and a sibilant and strangely soothing hum coming from what was most probably the alien intruder. He pulled back, and the intruder did nothing, merely let their hand drop and tilted their head, a bare suggestion of movement in the shadows.

“He is, Son of Vader. You smell like him,” his intruder said, a briskly matter-of-fact whisper that was followed by a strangely sympathetic squeeze to his knee, where the hand that had earlier been in his hair had landed. “I was not sure, at first, what it was that I was smelling, but it’s clear now.”

You smell like him.

Staring at the alien, clad in some form of close-fitting clothing that did nothing to disguise that even if they were short (Leia’s height, maybe?) they were very muscled, Luke felt the first trickles of familiar but new panic bubble up.

*You smell like **him**.*

He’d wanted someone else - Yoda or Ben, not like *this* - to confirm or deny what Vader had told him three days ago, but he’d been expecting a denial. *Wanted* one. A reassurance that it was a

lie, that Vader had done something so it seemed like the truth...

But if that was the case, Luke was pretty sure the effect shouldn't linger after leaving Cloud City, and yet... Every time he thought back on that impossible moment, thought the declaration over again, the truth rang, cold and sharp through the Force.

"I... He's. He *can't*," Luke whispered, hearing his voice crumple at the same time he did, leaning his head on his knees as he curled up, wrapping his left arm around his legs and tucking his right arm up against his chest, trying to stop his shoulders from shaking.

There was a hand in his hair again.

"You did not know."

A statement with genuine sympathy in the hissing whisper and he could finally get himself under control again.

"You're not here for me," Luke said, frowning up through his eyelashes and past his fringe at the alien, knowing it was the truth even as it came out. The alien froze, eyes widening into a slightly rounded flash of light on the whites, and then tilted their head again, not quite a nod.

"He does not know you're here," the alien said, slowly, the words turning sand-roughed in their mouth, "we are here for other reasons, but now that *we* know you're here..."

Luke froze, felt a lump form in his stomach as he watched the alien raise their wrist and activate a comlink.

"Albarakh," they whispered to whoever was on the other end, then continued in their own language, a short exchange that nonetheless meant his intruder was distracted. Luke used that, twisted around on the bed, heart thudding in his ears and ignoring the weight of the alien and his own legs tangled in the covers. He reached out for the comlink and it didn't matter that he couldn't reach it physically; he just used the Force to call it to himself.

The comlink fell on the bed and then bounced off as Luke lost control when a hand locked around his wrist, twisted and yanked him around and forward. He ended, uncomfortable but

unharméd, nearly bent double over himself and his left arm forced out at an angle.

“Son of Vader, we will not hurt you.”

There was a ‘but’ the size of the *Executor* hanging at the end of that statement.

“But?”

“But no one else on this ship is you. Our target isn’t here, so we will do what would be wished of us in the stead of fulfilling our given mission. Come peacefully, and no one will be hurt.”

Swallowing down the lump that had migrated from his stomach to his mouth, Luke gritted his teeth. Dark panic clogged up his thoughts, and he knew that unless he could take the alien out - but there were at least two of them, where was the other one? - he would have to go with them. He wasn’t going to let anyone else be hurt.

But...

He couldn’t...

I am your father!

The memory rumbled through him and he shook his head. He’d *cut off his hand* and *offered him the Galaxy* on the condition of turning to the Dark Side and he *couldn’t*. Wouldn’t. He didn’t want the Galaxy either way, but the offered hand had been far more tempting than it should be and---

Luke reached for whatever loose thing there was in the room and flung it at his intruder, but the darkness didn’t seem to stop them and each and every projectile was slapped out of the air before they lunged at him, one hand closing carefully and precisely around his right arm, squeezing only gently.

It was enough, and everything fell to the floor.

“If you wish to walk on your own feet, Son of Vader, cease.” A pause, and the alien tilted their head, looking him over slowly. Luke, despite that he didn’t want to, felt the sympathy aimed at him. “Perhaps you should not be thinking of what *is*, Son of Vader, but what you *will do*. Will you come?”

Breath loud in his ears and a sick twisting in his stomach, Luke

stared up at the alien, knew that ‘what you will do’ wasn’t about coming with these... assassins? or not. It was about *other* things.

He closed his eyes.

He wouldn’t turn.

He wouldn’t take the Galaxy.

But...

“I will.”

Darth Vader stared, incredulously, at what Vir’tarukh and Albarakh escorted through the doors of his quarters between them, barefoot and in slightly-too-long sleeping pants and a singlet, hair still mussed and a haunted look in his eyes that had nothing to do with lack of sleep.

He’d felt Luke’s presence the moment the Noghri ship had dropped out of hyperspace, of course, but he hadn’t been able to believe it. Believe his luck, believe that it was possible at all. And yet, here the boy was.

“The target had already moved when we got to the destination, Ary’ush,” Vir’tarukh said, her voice dipping lower, growing rougher with her apologetic tone. He waved a hand, dismissing it. They’d brought him something far more important than the death of Mon Mothma, after all.

“Your instincts and sense of smell have served you well. You may consider this assignment fulfilled.”

Both Noghri perked up, teeth briefly bared in gleeful grins, then they quickly bowed and left. Vader wasn’t sure whether to feel amused or annoyed by the way Vir’tarukh patted his son’s arm as she passed, clear support and a rather maternal weight to it.

He shouldn’t be surprised, he supposed; she had children of her own and had only taken this assignment because it was a matter of honour for her family and clan. She was among the best of them in her clan, after all. Albarakh was yet a bit too young to judge what his skills would be, but he’d come recom-

mended by his maithrakh so Vader was disposed to believe there was promise there.

He looked back at his son, who hadn't yet gotten a replacement for the hand he'd lost--- No, that *Vader* had cut off. It wasn't right to Luke to try to phrase it in any other way, even if he still couldn't see another way that confrontation could've gone at that point.

Coming around the desk, he stopped in front of his son, who slowly tilted his head back to meet his gaze, even masked as it was.

Luke looked small and very worn, like this. There were dark circles under his eyes, and while the boy clearly was fit, his shoulders were still narrow and there was a slight tension of pain stiffening his spine. Vader had no idea what to say, now, faced with this too-pale, pale-eyed version of his son, who was dressed for sleep.

Apparently his agents hadn't seen fit to let something as mundane as clothing or shoes hinder them in their aim to fulfil their new mission.

"Luke..."

As if calling his name had sparked a fire somewhere, Luke jutted his chin out, eyes narrowing a little as he squared his shoulders.

"I want to know when you found out, and who my mother was."

Darth Vader would deny that he might have swayed back, just a little, as those words were flung at him, far stronger than Luke's demeanour had suggested so far. The only thing he could come up with as he stared down into a determination that was familiar both from the mirror and from looking into brown eyes, was that Vir'tarukh would not be allowed near his son in the future, if this was the result.

He could recognise a mother's touch in a child's determination, which apparently worked even when the child in question wasn't the mother's, and the mother was a completely different

species... and had kidnapped the boy, as well.

Or rather, returned him to his father.

Vader straightened up and tried to find the words he'd need, or any words at all.

He did not quite succeed.

I love Noghri!

But I can never agree that Vader would just quietly agree to enslaving them, so in this case either it's Palpatine who's doing all the poisoning of the land etc and Vader doesn't know, or, my favourite idea for this; Palpatine doesn't know about the Noghri, and Vader is doing what he can to help them on its own, which means the time it takes to clean up the land is legitimate because it's not like Vader can do a lot and not have it noticed.

But Honoghr is slowly getting cleaned up, and the Noghri are offering up an agent or two here or there genuinely, and not being tricked or enslaved, even unknowingly.

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Chapter 37: In Which Luke Doesn't Quite Drown

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Set either in the weeks between Vrogas Vas/Vader Down and Rebel Jail (for mentioning Vrogas Vas), or sometime after Rebel Jail, have Luke crashing in a lake.

“Artoo? Artoo, blast it---!” Luke swallowed the rest of the words that wanted to spill out as he tried to control an X-wing which was practically dead in space after a grazing shot to the upper starboard engine and getting caught in the crossfire of an ion shot.

His heart hammering in his throat, Luke knew that if he let up his grip on the controls even a little, his hands would be shaking. The damage to the engine wasn't a problem, really - it was only one out of four and while he'd have had to retreat one way or another after it got damaged, he wouldn't have blown up or been left hanging in space like a limping eopie hunted by a flock of anoobas. The problem was the ion cannon shot that had gotten him right at the edge of its limit, the energy dissipating right past him before the X-wing dived like a stone.

Dived like a stone because he'd been intending to find some place to hide on the planet below and had just entered the atmosphere when the Star Destroyer that had come to support the weapons development and research orbital station had fired. Luke hoped not too many of the fighters in the two squads - or the cruiser - had been caught in it, because *they* were all in space still and would, literally, just hang there and be unable to defend themselves from the TIEs or the Star Destroyer.

This in comparison to Luke, who was in a dead X-wing, with a short-circuited and very dead astromech, dropping like a stone

through the atmosphere, and whatever sluggish responses he was managing to wrangle out of the X-wing wasn't enough to stop the descent. Feeling the fighter tremble around him and change its steep angle of descent the barest shade, Luke swallowed another terrified curse.

At least he'd had more systems, more *control* when he crashed on Vrogas Vas.

Now he had *nothing*, and was left yanking on the controls, desperately shifting levers and pressing buttons over and over and trying to force the X-wing to obey the non-existent input through sheer force of will. If he could focus, if he could calm down, Luke wondered if he could use the Force to try and control the dead ship, but there was no time to consider such an impossibility, such a fanciful *stupidity* that was far out of his knowledge and control of the Force and just... try to work with what he had.

The last cloud layer disappeared in a whipped sigh like the clouds had been ripped away, and below him stretched ground that glittered like it was made out of metal in the late afternoon sunlight.

It took Luke several more tens of kilometers (disappearing faster than his heart was racing, trying to escape through his mouth) to realise that the huge swathes of sparkling, blue-turquoise-green ground wasn't *ground*.

It was *water*.

The X-wing evened out a minute angle further in defiance of the dark cockpit and unresponsive controls, but what did that matter?

He *couldn't swim*.

As Luke Skywalker swallowed fear and the briefest flicker of wonder at the stretches of huge lakes he was rushing over and by - and soon into - a flock of aiwahs, their ancestors long since transplanted here from Kamino, dove back under the waves in a flurry of startled cries as the metal contraption roared past them.

At the last possible moment, the X-wing gave a shuddering

jerk and veered off from continuing out over the deepest parts of the giant lake, which would instantly have doomed both astromech and pilot to a quick drowning death. Instead the dead snubfighter dropped the last few couple ten meters with its nose pointed towards the beach, slamming into the water in an explosive spray and tearing up the shallow rocks that poked up just underneath the surface.

It came to a precarious stop, neatly speared in the shallows still hundreds of meters out from the actual shore, its hull still sizzling due to the shields being nonfunctional and thus not protecting the fighter from the heat of atmospheric re-entry.

It took several minutes before Luke could force himself to open his eyes. Another few breathless, heart-thundering moments and Luke took a deep, careful breath that made his lungs protest. Or rather, his chest and ribcage. Wincing, Luke knew he was lucky if he hadn't broken anything from the way the crash webbing undoubtedly had cut into him *and* held him firm when they impacted on...

On---

"Oh no..."

Staring at the water lapping gently against the bottom edge of the closed cockpit, Luke let out a string of only *slightly* terrified cursing. He'd hoped, since he'd survived at all, that they might have crashed on what little ground seemed to spread out around the huge lakes like a web, but apparently they weren't that lucky.

Maybe they'd been lucky enough and they were close to the shore, even if he couldn't see anything from this angle. They weren't, after all, sinking, but rather stuck on something. Maybe the bottom of the lake.

"Artoo?"

No reply of course, and Luke grit his teeth as he fought with the straps of the crash webbing, wondering how he was going to get a short-circuited astromech from the X-wing to the shore, no matter how shallow the water was. Finally free of the straps, Luke sent a quiet prayer to his grandmother and aunt and uncle,

to Ben, to the *Desert*, for protection and the hope that the water would be a blessing and not his death.

Standing up to get some idea of how far away from the shore he was and how deep the water was, Luke had barely cast a glance out the cockpit before the X-wing teetered, metal shrieking distantly. Luke dropped back in his seat with a startled curse, one hand patting for the lightsaber clipped to his hip, the other flying out to balance him and, impossibly, the X-wing. At least it stopped tilting.

“Blast, blast, blast---”

They weren’t by the shore. Not even *close*, and while he hadn’t got the chance to see how deep the water around them was, there was a bigger problem; Darth Vader was standing on the shore. Even several hundred meters of water between them and only a second or so of catching sight of the armoured giant, Luke could tell that’s who the dark silhouette on the beach was.

He could also *feel it*, now.

No longer focused on his descent towards an explosive or watery death (though the latter could still happen but might be preferable), Luke could sense the creeping press of cold that apparently was the dark side of the Force in Vader’s presence. Sliding down in the seat, ignoring the faint grinding of definitely-cracked and possibly-broken ribs as he hunched over, Luke fingered his lightsaber and wondered if Vader might have missed him.

Maybe he had. Maybe he might assume the pilot was already dead, or there was some other reason he’d landed here, because he hadn’t crashed, Luke didn’t think. He’d seen nothing but a brilliant sky over brilliant water and the black blob of the Dark Lord before he sat down again. No plume of smoke... though if his TIE had crashed in the water, there might not *be* a plume of smoke---

The transparisteel of the cockpit canopy cracked, metal screaming in protest and the X-wing rocked as the cockpit canopy suddenly was ripped away and went sailing out of Luke’s field

of vision, followed by a loud splash.

Luke wasn't very worried about *that*, however, as there was now *water rushing into the cockpit* now that there was no barrier between the inside and the liquid outside. He hadn't ever imagined he'd be *afraid* of water!

"Stars..." Maybe it'd equalize before the cockpit filled, he didn't know, but he shifted away even as he tried to peer towards where he'd seen Vader earlier and then froze as the X-wing teetered again, the air filling with the tortured noise of rock scraping across metal.

"Artoo..?"

No response.

How was he going to get his friend out of the astromech socket and back to the shore, *especially* with Darth Vader there---

"Hey! What... *Stop that!*" Luke's cry rang out over the water and echoed, causing haunting cries to be struck up in the distance from some animal or other in response. It was beautiful and might be worrying if he had to spend any longer time in the cockpit of his sinking X-wing, but Luke was more focused on trying to grab just about *anything* he could reach of the X-wing, kicking uselessly in the air as he was lifted up.

He wasn't stupid, he could guess what was happening.

Vader was using the Force, just like he'd called Luke's lightsaber to himself several times on Cymoon. Cursing and attempting to struggle, Luke twisted around to look at where the man still stood on the beach, one hand outstretched, almost as if beckoning.

Well, he wasn't going to come if he could *help it*.

"LET GO!" he yelled just as his aching fingers lost the battle between his grip on the X-wing and Vader's grip on him through the Force. More echoing cries from the animals rang up over the waters, and Luke fumbled for his lightsaber against his swaying vision - the grip on him was pressing down on his abused torso and broken ribs, threatening red-shot darkness.

"You would rather drown, Skywalker?" Vader's baritone sent

echoes out across the water as he dumped Luke on the ground, jarring enough his breath choked in his throat and he staggered on his feet, a throb pulsing through him, radiating out from his ribs. "Or have you had the chance to learn to swim?"

"Don't---" hissing, because that was all he could manage at the moment, Luke tried to keep hold of his lightsaber, wrestling the large, black-gloved hand for control over the weapon. For a few, handful of seconds, Luke almost thought he had it. Almost had an angle that meant that if he could just turn the weapon on, the lightsaber's blade would spear through Vader's chest, probably sending sparks out from the box on his chest as he was impaled---

The hand grabbing his side, underneath his arm, and *squeezing*, sent a shrieking wave of bright hot whiteness and pain through him. Luke collapsed against black leather and cloth as his ribs screamed in protest, grinding against each other.

He was probably lucky nothing had broken enough to pierce a lung.

When he realised he'd lost his grip on the lightsaber, Luke didn't feel lucky in the least and glowered up at Vader. His breath came in shallow, heaving gulps and harsh huffs through his nose as he tried to collect his thoughts enough to fling at least some sort of angry defiance at Vader before he died, but his brain could come up with nothing. Luke still opened his mouth, but then closed it again, scowling.

An unearthly racket rising through the air and tossing itself in broken shrieks across the waves startled Luke enough he staggered away from Vader, looking towards the X-wing. Or attempted to stagger away anyway, as the arm that had been grinding his broken ribs was now around his waist instead, effectively keeping him trapped against the Dark Lord.

"Artoo!"

The X-wing slid, in near stately elegance, away from the shallows and disappeared under the waves as the rocky spires broke underneath its weight.

"Let go, I need to---! *Artoo!*" Luke struggled, then fell back, gasping, as he was squeezed against Darth Vader's side again when he tightened his grip.

"Cease, Skywalker---"

"I can't just *leave him there to rust!*" Luke snarled, trying to push away and having to swallow a groan of pain. He didn't care if *he* died, but leaving Artoo like that...

Something that sounded like an aborted static rattle from Vader's vocoder shook Luke out of his narrow panic and made him blink up at the armoured man, so much taller and broader than he was, wondering if he *hadn't* crashed earlier and the noise was from some injury. Not that he cared or anything, but it was startling.

"And how were you envisioning your rescue, young one?" Vader said, helm tilting. Luke opened his mouth, flushed, and snapped it closed. "Because unless you can swim and have the capability of dragging an astromech to shore you will be unable to do anything for him."

"But..." Looking away from Vader even as he knew that that was a bad idea, Luke stared out over the water - such a wondrous, *impossible* thing, and now deadly and unforgiving as well - to where the X-wing *had been*, just moments before. The water was, obviously, deep enough to have swallowed the fighter whole with no proof of it ever having been there. The surface was still, glittering reflections flickering over the waves from the sunlight pouring down.

The moment stretched. Vader took a step back and Luke dug his heels in, sliding slightly over the sand and gasping again as his shifting stance and weight, as well as Vader's tightening grip, meant his ribs were abused again. Something like that rattling static, softer this time, was heard again, and then Vader stretched his arm out again.

A bare half minute later, Artoo's inert form rose from the water, hovered slowly over the surface of the lake, and was set down a few meters away, water running off him in rivulets.

Luke stared, *gaped* to be honest, and wasn't sure what to think. Why had... had *Darth Vader* just---

"In ten minutes a shuttle will be landing, Skywalker. You will be going on it," Vader proclaimed and Luke startled, grit his teeth and stomped down on the toes of the nearest boot.

"Like *hell* I--ah!"

He collapsed against Vader's side again, his cry once more ringing out over the water. Through his wavering vision and the sweat and tears blurring it further, Luke finally got a glimpse of the graceful, winged(?) creatures that had been answering his involuntary yells of pain with a song of their own as a flock of them leaped up out of the water.

Swearing silently, Luke grit his teeth and went for the blaster at his other hip, but he was suddenly yanked around and the weapon torn out of its holster and tossed away. It landed with a *plunk* in the water and disappeared from view.

"You would do well to resign yourself, young one."

Glowering at the spot where his blaster had disappeared and, beyond that, at the somehow now-flying creatures that dipped in and out of the water, Luke tried to angrily breathe through the pain.

Nothing he could do, really.

But, at least...

"... *thank you*," Luke muttered, the gratitude mostly choked underneath a hiss but there nonetheless. Luke was sure he must have imagined the strange little *flicker* in Vader's burning Force presence, and he got no reply. It didn't matter. It wasn't as if he actually *wanted* a reply, but not thanking him, even if it was *Darth Vader* didn't sit right. It was thanks to him Artoo was okay and *wouldn't* be left to rust on the bottom of some lake.

Hopefully Luke could keep him from being strip-searched and melted for slag before *he* was killed, however, otherwise that rescue wasn't worth much. Luke knew the odds of that were probably slim, though.

Glancing up at Vader, Luke frowned. The armoured giant

was staring out over the water, towards the flock of animals, his breathing inexorable and grip firm. Luke could tell absolutely *nothing* of his mood, or what the faint, twitching swell of the cold sun that was Vader in the Force meant.

They stood like that for another few minutes before the distant hum of an approaching engine could be heard. The descending shuttle scared away the flock of creatures, and Luke was surprised to find himself sorry about that. Sorry, and also surprised ten minutes had passed so quickly in a silence that hadn't been *entirely* uncomfortable.

Well, aside from his dully aching ribs and the bruise his whole torso now was.

"See to his injuries," Vader rumbled as the squad of stormtroopers and a uniformed man came up to them, surprising Luke again.

"What about---"

"Your astromech will be taken care of, Skywalker. Worry about your *injuries*."

Luke frowned, not sure what to think of the strangely *reprimanding* tone as he was led away into the shuttle, letting the medic do her work after he was pushed to sit down mostly because he *hurt* and would rather it didn't. And he wouldn't be able to try and escape if he had broken ribs.

Because somehow, Luke didn't think Vader would bother having a medic look over him for something as frankly inconsequential as *broken ribs* if he was going to be killed. He didn't *get it*, but the conclusion was obvious.

The shuttle's ramp closed behind Vader and the stormtroopers that put Artoo down on the deck, and Luke, reluctantly, relaxed. Couldn't do anything right now, anyway. Not with a whole squad of stormtroopers around him, his lightsaber at Vader's hip and no other weapon available.

Somehow, he *would* escape, though. He had to.

With Artoo, of course.

◆

Chapter 38: In Which Names Mean Something

◆

Veering into AU before the Rebel Jail arc and during the Shu-Torun war arc in the comics; Luke, on a mission set during one of those weeks before Aphra is transferred to the Sunspot Prison, crashes on a planet and gets help from the natives. More or less, anyway.

And even more, Luke doesn't ask the right questions.

(For this, then, I am setting the Shu-Torun war as happening mostly in the weeks between the events of Vrogas Vas and before Rebel Jail.)

Staring up at his X-wing, partly-buried in a field of dry, swaying grass and the earth that it had ripped up around it, Luke grimaced. Smoke rose up in a fitful plume, not yet thick enough to be anything to worry about, but it was dry enough out here Luke wouldn't bet on the damage to the fighter *not* causing a wildfire. Which might be okay, but he was sure he'd seen a settlement some distance away, and the wind was blowing in that direction.

Artoo whistled and beeped, rocking beside him.

"Yeah, I know we should move," Luke said with a frown, crossing his arms over his chest as he partly guessed what Artoo had said, but managed to catch *some* words. "But I'm worried about a fire. You don't think it's salvageable, do you?"

Glancing down at the droid as Artoo whistled out something dubious-sounding, Luke chuckled.

"Yeah, probably not. They got in some lucky hits before we scattered."

Sighing as he ran a hand through his hair, Luke surveyed the damage. It wasn't really a laughing matter, but it was that or wor-

ry about being stuck here. He couldn't get to the external emergency beacon stored in the equipment compartment the way the X-wing had crashed, tearing up long furrows behind it, and the internal one was dead.

He and Artoo should probably be grateful that there'd been nothing wrong with either set of engines and that they'd crashed two scatter jumps away from the TIE fighter depot they'd attacked. But one more and they'd have been back at the current mustering point for the Fleet.

Groaning, Luke scrubbed his face, then staggered as Artoo ran into him. Several times and beeping loudly.

"Hey, come on, *calm down*. We've got---"

"Are you injured?"

"Gah!" Whirling around, almost falling over Artoo, Luke flailed and used the droid's stout dome to catch himself. Staring down at the smoothly gray-skinned little alien that stood a few meters away, the tall grass almost completely swallowing them, Luke took a breath and tried to tell his heart to calm down.

He'd misunderstood Artoo's warning, and had *completely* missed the alien's approach.

"Uh... no. Thanks for asking," Luke said, smiling hesitantly and patting Artoo as he whistled sharply, "hey, calm down, Artoo. They're just concerned."

It was a bit worrying he hadn't been able to notice the alien coming that close though - he'd gotten pretty good at sensing anything alive nearby, after all... Though he also usually had to be focusing to get a read.

"Talking of concerning, though, my fighter might explode and start a fire, and it's pretty dry out here," Luke continued after a moment, refusing to shift on his feet at the intent, unblinking stare the little alien was aiming at him.

"The Maitrakh will be informed," it said, its voice a low, sibilant hiss, rasping a little over certain syllables as it spoke. It then stared up at him for a quiet moment before it continued, "you should talk to her as well."

Artoo beeped a protest, but Luke just grunted as he patted Artoo's dome again, glancing to the X-wing. The emergency beacons were either damaged or unreachable, which meant his best option to try and get the Alliance's attention was to either find access to a proper holo transceiver, or a signal enhancer for Artoo.

"Okay."

Luke sighed and patted Artoo's dome when the astromech protested again.

"Come on, Artoo, this is the best option. Hopefully they'll be able to help us," he said, smiling in what he hoped was a reassuring way and followed the little alien as it started to walk off. He tried not to be *too* startled when three other aliens of the same species formed up around them, Artoo beeping in frantic surprise.

Great.

How had he missed *them*?

Fifteen minutes later and with *some* knowledge of where he was (not that the name Honoghr meant anything to him, but with a star map...), and the name of two of his escorts (Tass'rakh was the one who'd first appeared, and Albarakh was the only one of the other three who'd responded to his inquiry of their names), they reached the settlement. And had immediately been surrounded by curious children.

At least Luke *assumed* they were children, but they were, either way, shorter than Tass'rakh and the other escorts, and there were others - who sometimes pulled some of those children away - who were a little taller than his escorts. They were all steel-gray or blue-gray in colour, with a curious crest on their skulls which was, for some reason, vaguely familiar. Luke couldn't quite put his finger on *why* that was.

"Wait," Tass'rakh said, the command turning her rough voice briefly sharper as she held up a hand when they stopped in front of the largest building in the settlement. She then disappeared inside, and immediately Artoo rocked from side to side and

beeped a sharp reprimand, completely ignoring Albarakh and the other two escorts. Probably a good thing they couldn't understand Artoo.

At least the astromech was also ignoring all the children still around them, because they were intermittently darting close to tug at cloth or scratch claws down Artoo's metal - Luke had managed to make him retract his shock prod earlier, luckily enough.

"It's *okay*, Artoo," he said with another smile down at the droid, who whistled dubiously. Really, he sort of shared the worries, but they hadn't been shot on the spot and no one was pointing weapons at them, so so far, so good, right? Luke kept a hand on his lightsaber just in case, but his other hand was well-away from his blaster, hoping that'd be enough. It wasn't as if he had *missed* the narrow stares at his holster while they walked.

Tass'rakh appeared again and waved him on, Luke waiting to let Artoo navigate the stairs before he ducked inside the round building. It was lighter inside than the windowless building had implied, thanks to a metal disc that hung near the ceiling, casting light upwards. It revealed carvings that covered the pillars around the single room, intricate and probably telling a story of some kind.

"Come," the Noghri sitting on a throne-like chair slightly past the center of the floor hissed, waving him forward. Luke approached, starting to feel vaguely worried as he looked between the two Noghri females; they were grim-faced and cool, as far as he could interpret their expressions. At least he was pretty sure he could tell their men and women apart, now, and Tass'rakh *had* called the Maitrakh by female pronouns when she mentioned that she was the leader of the clan.

"You bring war to our planet, Rebel," the Maitrakh said quietly, her voice rough, when he came close enough, and Luke stiffened in alarm, Artoo hooting beside him.

"Nothing will happen, I promise. Just let me call someone to pick me up and the Empire won't even notice I've been here," he said quickly, bringing his hands up, palms out.

“Do not scare the child into offering falsehoods to reassure *all of us* that nothing will happen, Maitrakh,” the Noghri beside the Maitrakh said, amusement scratching at her voice, “he clearly does not like this idea either.”

The Maitrakh sighed, a soft, nearly snarling huff, and gave her companion a tilted look.

“Wisdom perhaps, Vir’tarukh, but whether those who come to pick him up go as unnoticed as this one *might* have done, there is no guarantee for.”

Luke was relieved they spoke Basic even when this wasn’t actually for him. He really couldn’t demand they speak Basic if they didn’t want to him to listen to what they were saying, no matter *what* they were saying and that it involved him.

“I’m sorry, Maitrakh,” Luke said softly, the title somewhat weird in his mouth and not sounding quite right, “if my fighter hadn’t been damaged I wouldn’t have been more than a few minutes in your system.”

She eyed him silently for a few moment, then huff-sighed again.

“Are your worries for the Empire noticing that you have crashed and are currently an easy target---”

“No!” Luke protested, then flushed and shook his head, “all right, *yes*, ‘cause I don’t want to die of course, but if they’re not here already, I wouldn’t want to be the reason they noticed your planet and decided to make use of it.”

Vir’tarukh was smiling - or sneering, it was a *little* hard to tell with the narrow baring of sharp, *very* sharp, teeth, and the Maitrakh stared silently before she snorted.

“You have honour, Rebel,” she said slowly and held her hand out. Blinking, Luke stepped up, offering his own before she waved it off. “Take your glove off.”

Even *more* surprised and more than a little confused, now, Luke nonetheless did as asked, pulling *both* of his flightsuit’s gloves off and stuffing them in a pocket before he offered his hand again. The Maitrakh took it, but barely squeezed it before

she turned it around and lifted it up to her---

Luke couldn't quite help the skip of his heart or the minute twitch of his hand, but the Maitrakh's grip was strong and as such he didn't manage to yank his hand away, and she could raise his hand to press his wrist to her flat nose.

And then she took a sniff, which Luke *almost* missed, distracted by the slight suggestion of teeth near his palm, even if there wasn't any *threat* in that. Luke looked up as her grip tightened briefly, a sort of jerky little twitch that was almost cramp-like.

"... are you all right?" Luke blinked down at the Maitrakh, who glanced up at him from under the edge of her crest, her eyes wide.

"Yes," she said with a nod but then immediately looked to her companion, changing her grip on Luke's hand to offer it to *her* instead. "Vir'tarukh."

Luke stood still in confusion, glancing down at Artoo and shrugging in response to the rising little whistle. He didn't have a clue what was going on. Vir'tarukh took his hand, giving it a perfunctorily squeeze in greeting before she lifted it up and did what Luke assumed was a *Noghri* greeting, taking a brief whiff of his skin.

She stilled as well, intense gaze flickering from Luke to her Maitrakh and murmured something in their own language. Then she looked up at him smiled, surprisingly softly (if he was interpreting the quality of the smile against those teeth right), and straightened up, patting his hand before she let go.

He didn't understand what was going on, *at all*.

"Your name." It was a demand, and *unquestionably* so, but much softer than Luke would've expected from the Maitrakh's behaviour so far. Frowning, Luke glanced down at Artoo's hesitant and slightly warning beep, and then back to the Noghri.

There was a bounty out on him, yes, but it didn't use his *name*, and the way they had talked so far, it didn't seem there were any Imperial presence on the planet at all, so...

"Luke Skywalker."

Artoo gave an annoyed electronic mutter, not-so-quietly reprimanding him, Luke could half-guess, half make out himself, and was hard-pressed not to grin. His name, as expected, didn't bring much of a reaction from either the Maitrakh or Vir'tarukh. Or at least, no reaction that would explain the way they'd twitched when they'd *smelled him*, but Luke wasn't sure if it was polite to ask about it.

Maybe they'd just never met a Human before and thought he smelled weird.

"Vir'tarukh has space in her home for both you and your droid, Skywalker," the Maitrakh said, and Luke could've *sworn* there was the faintest of hesitations - more like a catch in the Maitrakh's voice - before she said his name and then continued, "in a few days we can arrange travel to Nystao, where you will be able to contact your friends."

"I couldn't..."

"I have space, child. It is no bother," Vir'tarukh said with a smile, and Luke didn't bother to ask if Nystao was too far away for him just to try by foot - it obviously was. With a sigh he couldn't muffle, Luke nodded and thanked them. Both the Maitrakh and Vir'tarukh smiled at him, amusement he was easily familiar with from Aunt Beru---

He quickly pushed that thought away, swallowing down the sudden tightness in his throat, and followed Vir'tarukh out of the building.

Shu-Torun. Darth Vader's quarters in Queen Trios' Palace.

Darth Vader came back from the latest attack on the rebelling ore barons to a strongly encrypted message left for him with a frequency originating from an equally protected source.

For a brief moment, he simply stared in confusion at the brief message because he didn't have any mission out currently that might warrant contact to be made. The message itself amounted to nothing more than a request for him to call back at his earli-

est convenience, which was prudently phrased, but gave him no clues.

Sitting down in the seat in the center of his hyperbaric chamber and delaying taking the helmet off, Darth Vader frowned at the comm suite for a moment. He'd contemplated calling them up before this and setting one of them after Aphra, but had refrained at the last moment - it was not dire enough to warrant their use. Not yet.

The same reason why he'd gone to Aphra initially and *hadn't* brought a squad or two with him when they had found out about Cylo's experiments; not dire enough. And the Noghri would rouse far more *questions* than the droids, which was not something he was willing to open up for anything less than a single individual.

One which, as soon as he had a better idea of things, he might actually send the Noghri after, and, if Aphra didn't disappoint and came back in one piece, he could send Aphra herself for *other* things.

In retrospect, Vader could admit he'd been distracted and intent enough he had completely forgotten about the possibility of sending the Noghri to Vrogas Vas. Instead he'd gone himself, with... all too disappointing results.

If he hadn't, if he'd sent two or three Noghri instead, Vader realised with sour annoyance that he would probably have had the boy in hand after that... mess. Nothing for it. Slowly, he shook his head, chasing those thoughts away and let his hand fall to connect to the frequency the message had come from, because even just a slight nudge of the Force told him loud and clear that he did not want to let this message wait.

What could the Noghri Dynasts want?

"Ary'ush!" a young attendant answered his comm, probably bowed if the pause was anything to go by, then blurted out he would get his Dynast and ran off, the racket of the child's steps dwindling over the comm with his distance. If he was not pressed by the situation, he might have been amused - and, as

always, pleased by the swiftness of the reaction to his call, of course.

“Ary’ush,” voice of the Dynast of Clan Har’vakh floated over the frequency, rougher than usual due to her age, “your swiftness is an honour to you and humble us. I assure you the news we have is worth your speed and time.”

The pause the Dynast took almost left Vader snarling, because while he didn’t *doubt her* - the Noghri never contacted him unless it was of utter necessity - this really wasn’t the time and place for a comm even a *second* longer it had to be. He didn’t have the chance to demand an answer, however, as she continued before he’d done more than open his mouth.

“A rebel crashed around noon yesterday outside one of my Clan’s settlements, one which introduced himself as Luke Skywalker. He shares your blood, Ary’ush,” the Dynast Har’vakh said quietly, pausing momentarily to allow him some input.

All Darth Vader could muster was silently staring at the stark white plastoid innards of his meditation chamber, triumph and utter baffled *surprise* warring within him. After the too late arrival to Nar Shaddaa, after the *multiple* misses on Vrogas Vas...

The boy had no manner of luck at all.

“The Maitrakh of the settlement will be able to transport him to Nystao in a few days. Would that be enough time for you to come collect him, or should other arrangements be made?” the Dynast said, taking his silence for admission of knowledge of his son’s existence and continuing before falling silent.

“I should be able to tie things up here and fetch him myself. If not, I will contact you and make other arrangements.”

“As you wish, Ary’ush. We will make sure your blood does not leave before you have arrived, or we have delivered him to a location of your choosing,” the Dynast Har’vakh said, the promise thick enough in her voice it turned it into a rough snarl, and Darth Vader sat back with a pleased smile pulling his pale, aching skin.

The Noghri wouldn’t fail.

He, in the meantime, had to deal with Cylo and his... annoyances, as those were the real obstacles to him briefly leaving Shu-Torun unquestioned. Tightening a hand into a fist, the leather creaked.

Nothing would stop him.

Honoghr. The Eastern Settlement of Clan Har'vakh.

"Patience, Har'ary'ush," Vir'tarukh said, amusement clear in her voice, but not looking up from where she was engaged in a simple game of tossing a ball to and between her youngest children and two of their friends. Nearby, Albarakh and Tass'rakh, her nephew and daughter, respectively, were wrestling.

With knives.

Luke couldn't look away, both fascinated, impressed, and worried.

"We have only small use of the sleds, so they travel around the nearby settlements. But since none of us wish for either your friends or the Empire to notice us, it has been redirected back to us ahead of schedule. It will still take some time," Vir'tarukh said, glancing up at him and still catching the ball tossed at her.

Sighing, Luke scrubbed his face and made sure he didn't groan.

"I know, I know. And I'm grateful, Vir'tarukh, it's just..."

"You have friends, and they will be worried, as you are worried," she said, nodding, then called out some sort of correction to her wrestling daughter and nephew before she tossed the ball again, in a sharp, corkscrewing motion that the boy managed to catch. The other three children, all girls, grimaced and huffed, while one of them also stomped a foot, causing a small dust cloud to rise from the hard-beaten ground.

Luke smiled, but looked away studiously so he wouldn't be caught doing so.

"Yeah. Both of that. And I'm worried the longer I stay, the Empire might figure out I'm here, even if I *know* that's just stupid. I

didn't have anyone on my tail, and unless they were calculating vectors for *all* of us, there's no way they'd find anyone," Luke said, grimacing as his gaze was drawn back to Albarakh and Tass'rakh again, their knives flickers of silver in the sunlight.

"Your concern honours you, Har'ary'ush," Vir'tarukh said with a smile, warmth in her rough, but still sibilant voice. Frowning, Luke looked to her.

"What does that *mean*, anyway? You keep calling me that." He didn't get it; while some of them had called him 'Skywalker' after he'd introduced himself to any who'd asked as he followed Vir'tarukh to her home yesterday, after they'd heard Vir'tarukh call him 'har'ary'ush' this morning, that was all anyone would call him.

"It simply means you are your father's son, Har'ary'aush," Vir'tarukh said, and Luke felt like he was *missing something* here. Frowning, he looked out over the dusty paths that wound around the buildings, then looked back to Vir'tarukh and her calm expression as she caught balls without looking at them. Did that mean they...

"... do you... I mean, do you know Anakin Skywalker?" His breath caught, expectant and hopeful. Vir'tarukh stared silently up at him, cocking her head.

"Not in the way you mean, when you ask that question, Har'ary'ush. You need to be precise if you wish the right answers," she finally said, eyes half-lidded, the gray of her skin almost looking like polished steel in the sunlight. Luke slumped, confused and a bit frustrated, feeling the weight of the lightsaber against his thigh. Blinking, he straightened up and unclipped the weapon, holding it out.

"Do you recognise this? It belonged to my father."

Vir'tarukh looked down, catching the next throw of the ball one-handed, and tossed it with another whirling corkscrew path - this time neither of the four children caught it, to their loud dismay.

"No, Har'ary'ush. I do not."

Sighing, Luke slumped, frowning at the ground.

“But you could still tell who my father was just from *smelling me*? Does that mean you could find out who my mother is?” Looking up again, Luke couldn’t help the faint, aching hope at that question; he didn’t know *anything* about her, and if they had known he was the son of Anakin Skywalker, then maybe...

“That weapon wasn’t carried at the time, Har’ary’ush,” Vir’tarukh said, then held her hand out. Silently, Luke offered his hand, felt sharp, careful claws pinch his skin as she took his hand and turned it over, lifting it up to take a deep sniff.

“I apologise, Har’ary’ush,” Vir’tarukh was frowning, shaking her head, “I can separate out her bloodline from your father’s now that I know what I am looking for, but not having met her or any of her family, I cannot tell you who she was.”

Luke had to bite back disappointment and smiled, nodding. He was surprised at the hand on his knee, patting and then gently squeezing. It felt a little when when Aunt Beru used to do that...

“It will be all right, Har’ary’ush. Maybe there will be another way for you to find out who she was. A mother’s name is important.” There was some sort of weight in that statement, some heavy turn of phrase that made Luke think it must have been a direct - or almost so - translation of something in Vir’tarukh’s native language.

“*You* would say that,” he said, unable not to laugh quietly, and Vir’tarukh grinned at him, teeth glinting briefly in the sunlight, “but I guess that’s true, too.”

It *was* something of great importance that he was missing, even if he he hadn’t ever chosen to miss it.

Three days later, one of which had already been spent travelling with an overnight stay in another settlement, Luke was on his way to Nystao in a gravsled, pulled by some curious animals that bore faint resemblance to eopies. It was an amusingly *almost*-familiar presence on an alien planet.

An alien planet where thick, yellowed grass swayed monotonously, the few trees he could see mostly seemed bare - in some

of the settlements they passed, there were small orchards, startlingly green against the brown and yellow - and in some places the ground was just *bare*, cracked dust plains of absolutely nothing.

They passed a river once, travelling alongside the meandering rust-brown flow for a few hours, and Luke frowned at the water, looking back as they left it behind.

"Is it the season, or does it *usually* look like this?" Luke asked, looking over to Vir'tarukh where she sat opposite him, Tass'ra-kh and Albarakh sitting at the head with the driver, a curiously curved weapon at their sides.

"It did not look like this many years ago, Har'ary'ush," Vir'tarukh said with a sigh, looking out over the dust plain while Luke bent back over Artoo, currently powered down to conserve energy, to clean out the layers of dust that had accumulated in the surface joints together with lube and oil and turning them into a caked mess.

"Two ships crashed and poisoned the land. We have been provided help, but it is, unfortunately, slow."

"That's terrible," Luke said, frowning out over the nearly-barren landscape, feeling only a slow, hesitant presence of the Force around him, aside from his travelling companions. As if paying attention to the Force called more of it, something turned, slow and dark, at the edges of his awareness.

It was gone before he could figure out what it was.

Honoghr, Nystao. The Grand Dukha. Little over a week after Luke's crash on the planet.

Darth Vader sat, the light sliding off the black durasteel and plastoid armour, in the High Seat. He would have stood, or better yet, gathered elsewhere, but the respect offered him for his paltry rescue of the Noghri made them offer him the High Seat every time he came here.

His due or not, the assistance he had managed during the

eighteen years since he, by pure accident, had landed on Hoth and found the planet had been poisoned by a crashed Republic and CIS ship each, hardly seemed enough for the respect and obedience he was given.

He tried to be careful with how he used it, for several reasons. His master would find out and find a way to take more ruthless advantage, if he wasn't careful - he had no illusions that his master wouldn't make the recovery even slower. The amount of clean land around Nystao stretched for three days in all directions with gravsled travel. Not insignificant, but the progress elsewhere was slower.

The other reasons for being careful were... equally unpleasant to consider, for other reasons. The Grand Army of the Republic. The clones had been used, *enslaved*... he would not be responsible for, or use the Noghri in the same way.

So he used them sparingly, and said nothing of the respect - only somewhat different from what the Dynasts were afforded. Said Dynasts were gathered in the room with him, spread out along the walls. He glanced around the room from each of them, six men, seven women. They were all tense and alert, glancing towards the door every now and then.

Since he was *facing* the door, he didn't need to glance at it as he felt Luke's bright, thundering presence approaching. Clutching the armrests, Vader had to force himself to remain in his seat. Waiting until the boy was inside would be easier - less room to run, for one, even if there was no possibility for even someone of Luke's sensitivity in the Force to escape a city full of Noghri.

Luke came into the large, round room surrounded by a small crowd, an astromech right behind him, apparently still completely unaware of his presence.

A situation which didn't last; Luke tensed half a step past the doorway, head whipping up. The astromech shrilled in alarm as it noticed him, and Vader thought for a moment it sounded *extremely familiar*, but he put that aside as the boy swayed, then steadied himself against the door frame, hand going for his

lightsaber---

Which one of the Noghri removed, along with his blaster, quickly slipping away and dashing forward, presenting both weapons to him.

“... Vir’tarukh?” Skywalker said, slow and faint even as his startled expression started to harden, especially when Vader took the lightsaber from the Noghri’s hands, turning the weapon over in his own gloved ones.

“He smells like you, Har’ary’ush,” Vir’tarukh said, standing right behind his son, a light hand on his shoulder and loud enough her words had been nothing less than a proclamation.

Luke stiffened again, going pale. He clearly knew how sensitive a Noghri’s sense of smell was, and how, exactly, it could be utilised.

“... no, you can’t--- That’s...”

The astromech shrieked another loud, electronic trill of a protest as Luke stared right at him, seeming to meet his gaze even through the mask. Darth Vader stood up and crossed his arms.

“Vir’tarukh is telling the truth. Listen to the Force, young one.”

“But---!” Luke glanced away from him, only to look down to Vir’tarukh, betrayal stark on his pale face. She shook her head slowly, gently squeezing the shoulder she held.

“I never met a man who called himself Anakin Skywalker, Har’ary’ush.”

Har’ary’ush.

Son of the Saviour.

I am, of course, completely headcanoning the word for “son” in the Noghri language to complete Luke’s title (as Leia’s was ‘mal’ary’ush’), and assuming there’s no additional word that should be used for Vader’s title.



Chapter 39:

In Which There Is a Party



Luke and Leia, together with Evaan and General Dodonna, is at a memorial event for Alderaan's destruction on its first anniversary. They're of course not here only for that, and Luke ends up following a black-clad latecomer after he reveals he knew his father...

(The AU here is more or less vague departure from the new EU/comics as we don't know what will happen to Aphra, and while I loved the Leia mini, I didn't really like the end, so Leia hasn't actually effectively abdicated and left the survivors to choose Evaan.)

Crystals glittered in the light where they hung in the air, suspended by small, discreet repulsorlifts. Thin, twisted threads of metal were strung between the crystals, and the light caught in them and created threads of fire through the large hall. The whole room was lit in soft lights and concentrated points of bright blazes of colour, echoing the music. Luke had no idea where the music was even coming from - he could see no orchestra, nor any speakers, and there seemed to be no spot anywhere in the room where the music was louder or fainter.

Pulling at his jacket, Luke shifted on his feet and tried not to look around.

He was extremely uncomfortable with being here. He might be dressed to fit in, the cloth softer and finer than any he'd worn before, the colours in white and dark blues. Leia had chosen them, and he had *not* missed her very pleased expression when seeing him... an expression which then had turned bewildered before she'd excused herself. To go get dressed, was the explanation, but

Luke could swear he'd felt the confused distress emanating from her.

He hadn't managed to get any explanation out of Leia, but Verlaine, who was coming with them on this mission at Leia's request, had taken one look at him when she'd seen him and made a *noise*, which prompted him to stop him and ask about it. He didn't mention Leia's reaction, and he wasn't sure what to make of the way she'd stared at him, narrow and tight, her brilliant golden eyes flat.

"I assume Her Highness dressed you," Evaan had said, seeming to be torn between pressing her mouth into a flat grimace and pursing them out of some reluctant interest, "she gave you the Royal House's colours. Fitting, I suppose, since this *will* be during the anniversary." And then she'd turned on her heels and stormed down the corridor.

It didn't make Luke feel any more comfortable about this, at all--

"Relax, Luke. You look fine," Leia said as she slid up beside him, a distant, cool smile on her face that softened into something warmer when he turned to look at her. Reaching out, she adjusted the intricate twists of cloth that wrapped around him, and adjusted the cape with a neat, practised tug.

"I feel ridiculous," he mumbled, but couldn't help but smile at her, "and you look fantastic."

Which she did, resplendent in a high-collared and sleeveless white gown, one side of the skirt partly cut away to reveal a dramatic slash of midnight-blue underskirt dotted with diamond stars. Where the budget for their outfits had come from, where they'd been *bought*, Luke didn't have a clue. Was almost afraid to ask.

He almost wished he'd done as Han and refused to take part of *this* part of the mission, but they had needed a small group around Leia, which had ended up with him, Evaan and General Dodonna. Luke felt pretty out of place in that regard too, being the only non-Alderaanian present, but Leia had asked him and

how was he supposed to say no?

“As do you,” Leia said, arching an eyebrow and leaning forward to drop a kiss on his cheek, “trust me. You’re wearing this as if you were born to it.” She smiled, but the smile froze for a moment partway through, crumpling into that distressed confusion Leia had broadcast when she’d first seen him in this outfit. It quickly disappeared, but he reached out and squeezed her hand anyway, her short gloves breath-soft on his skin.

Maybe it was just because it was the anniversary of Alderaan’s destruction, and any reminder was painful for Leia, especially now. Luke thought Leia shouldn’t have agreed to go, even if this was a celebration memorial *for* the victims of Alderaan, something the Empire hadn’t quite been able to hide, no matter how they’d tried.

He understood that the rulers of Ardashir, a planet found on the edge of the Deep Core, had had close ties to Alderaan’s royal house for centuries... And despite being strictly isolationist, was subtly funding the Alliance and had reached out to the same to honour the survivors of the annihilation.

“Come with me,” Leia murmured, hooking her arm through his and turning them towards the floor. He sure hoped she wouldn’t want to dance, because while he knew a few dances, none of those would be suitable on *this* dance floor. Even if she might be able to lead him well enough through the dances that *would be* suitable so he didn’t make a complete mess out of it and shamed her.

“Has Han and Chewie found anything?” Luke whispered as they dove into the dancing crowd, where Leia *did* indeed let go to position him to participate in the dance. She gave him a narrow, reproachful stare and twitched her head in a shake, sending ripples through the slim veils braided into the crown of her hair and trailing down her back.

Wincing, Luke focused on what he was supposed to do and not on Han and Chewie. He knew he shouldn’t have mentioned them, as they were, right at this moment (hopefully) scouring

the palace for a trace of the reason why Ardashir could remain isolationist and independent from the Empire, even when they were practically on the greater Galaxy's doorstep and a galactic stone's throw away from Imperial Center.

"Luke, look at me, not your feet," Leia said, a chuckle in her voice and the small, warm smile back on her face. Feeling his cheeks warm a little, Luke nodded and pulled his eyes away from the soft-toed and soft-soled gray boots he wore and up at Leia's face instead.

The clothes, once again, didn't make this any easier; the pants were soft, yes, but tight enough he was awkwardly aware of every shift and step, especially when he stepped out of tune from Leia. The only thing in his outfit that was white instead of in midnight blues and dawn-soft grey was the intricate wrap over his jacket, which made it (and him) stand out all the more.

"You should go dance with Evaan or the General instead," he said with a grin, but Leia just shook her head, a smile on her face again.

"You're not getting out of this. I'm dancing with Jan later this evening... then with the Tirbodh. Though I'll be sure to get a few in with Evaan until then," she said and even winked, making Luke chuckle. Realising it *was* getting easier to follow along with Leia's subtle directions and lead when he wasn't trying to stare at his and Leia's (barely seen beyond the toes her her pointed boots periodically sticking out from under her skirts) feet, Luke started to relax.

This wasn't at all anything like the dances he'd learned and participated in on Tatooine, but... it was kind of fun, too, especially since he was dancing with *Leia*. Which was why his next misstep came as a complete surprise, and if Leia hadn't immediately stepped sharply aside (somehow managing to do it in time with the music) and twirl them around, he'd have brought them both to the floor.

"Luke..?"

Luke could hear the concern in her voice, her warm, brown

eyes wide and her mouth hardening into protective wariness. He wanted to reassure her, but he was quite busy with the sudden chill in the Force, something which twisted around his heart and sent trembling spears down his limbs. He could *swear* he heard Ben whisper *run* underneath the music, but it was faint and disappeared in the soft shift of his hair as he shook his head.

The doors to the banquet hall opened, then, and the dance slid to a halt. Leia turned, a hand still on his shoulder to steady him, and Luke looked up, past a dizzying array of jewelled colours into black.

For a brief, terrifying and enraged moment, Luke thought he would have to yell to Leia to get to Evaan and *run*, but then reality set in and differences made themselves known.

Heavy, black robes fell to the floor in thick folds, boots barely seen underneath the fall of the cloth. A tabard was draped diagonally over the broad chest, embroidered in purple so dark it was nearly black on top of the black of the tabard itself and constrained the robes.

The cloak fell heavy from wide shoulders, absorbing the light and embroidered with the same dark purple thread, suggesting a pattern of wings. Light slid off a plasteel mask wrought into the guise of some fanciful creature Luke had seen statues of around the Tirbodh's palace, a snarl of protective rage chiseled into the creature's features. It was a very fancily made air-filter, because the whole thing was closely covered up, so either the wearer was an alien that needed filtered air, or a Human in need of breathing assistance.

Blinking and caught by the display, Luke looked up, and of course couldn't see anything past the mask, but it had turned right towards him (towards *Leia*, surely, *she* was the Princess of Alderaan, after all, and he was, here and now, nobody), and he was caught for a breathless moment.

Something...

"*Someone* knows how to make an entrance," Leia commented wryly, with a touch of impressed disapproval in her voice.

The moment broke, and the newcomer turned away to stride over to where the Tirbodh stood with his husband. Luke barely paid any attention to the heavily veiled (presumably) woman and the armoured man following after the black-clad guest. He kept being distracted by the tall man - alien? - himself instead, and Luke had no idea *why*.

"Luke. Are you okay?"

Jerking, Luke turned back to Leia and shrugged.

"Sorry. I wonder who that is?" What else could he *say*, really? Especially as he was, indeed, fine; despite that sudden reaction from the Force, now there was nothing. Not from the man (he was probably not Force-sensitive at all), not from the Force, not from *Ben*. "I'm okay, really." Luke added with a smile, squeezing their joined hands, and while Leia frowned at him, she let him urge her into the next dance and fell back into leading him through it.

"I don't know. I recognised some of the names on the guest list we were given, but the Galaxy is a large place. Even for royalty," Leia added after half the dance had passed, and he nodded, grinning faintly. He didn't care so much - it was just a late arrival, and while the reaction of the Force right before it had been weird, Luke was wondering if it couldn't have been an echo from the destruction of Alderaan. Maybe that was something that happened even long after the original event. After all, how was he supposed to know?

A leather-clad hand on Leia's shoulder gave a gentle tap, startling both of them. Luke wondered how he'd missed their mysterious latecomer approaching, and Leia whirled around, eyes narrow.

"May I?" The man's voice was deep and cool, edged with an electronic tinge that revealed it was being relayed through a vocoder, and it briefly made both Luke and Leia (as he felt through their grip) tense again, but the difference between *this* filtered voice and the rolling baritone of Darth Vader could just as well have been a galaxy apart.

Actually registering what he was saying, Luke caught Leia's eyebrows shooting up high on her forehead for a very brief moment before her expression closed off. Nodding, she stepped away with a pleasant, cool smile on her face again.

"Luke, I'll be with Evaan," she said, giving him a hard stare and squeezing a hand before she let go completely. Confused, he glanced to her - and then back up at the masked man as he stepped in to take Leia's place, which was *not* what he'd expected.

"Uh... Isn't it Lei--- the Princess you'd want?" Luke ventured after a few moments, finding the solid grip far less weird than when Wedge had tried to drunkenly dance with him a few months ago, and like Leia's self-assured knowledge of the dance, this demanded nothing of him but that he let himself be led.

"No."

Nothing more seemed to be forthcoming, and there was absolutely nothing *inviting* in how that denial had been uttered, but Luke just looked straight up into the fierce-looking animal-shaped mask and cocked his head, an eyebrow raised.

After several more moments and the current dance shifting to another (he spotted Leia being handed over from Evaan to a young man clad in the fancy, heavily embroidered long jackets and loose pants of Ardashir's nobility), the helmet bent just slightly, as if conceding.

"Princess Organa has others more interested in her company, Skywalker, and I may have approached her had you not been present. But since you *are*, she is of lesser import to me."

Luke stiffened, swallowing and stumbling through the next few steps and despite suddenly being very, very worried, because *how did he know*, Luke still let the masked man adjust their positions and lead him back into proper balance. It came with barely a change in grip, which remained firm and only exactly what was required for the dance.

"How---"

"You have your father's chin and eyes."

For a second time in short order, Luke was surprised, but suddenly no longer worried. His head shot up again, searching the mask - uncertain whether the eyeholes of the beast was actually where the lenses of the mask were - for the impossibility of meeting the hidden gaze.

"You knew my father?" He would've been embarrassed at the tone, open and painfully hopeful, but he didn't care. He'd gotten more about his father since he left Tatooine than he thought he'd ever get, but it never seemed enough.

"I was... well acquainted."

There was weighty hesitation and meaning both in those few words, and Luke made a decision he knew Leia and Han both would disapprove of. Especially Han, because compared to Leia, in this case he would probably assume the worst even beyond what *Leia* would, but Luke... had a feeling. Besides, so far (though admittedly that might merely be the crowd around them), this masked stranger had been nothing but distantly correct.

And if that changed with less of an audience, well, he had his lightsaber tucked inside the jacket, and a small (hilariously small in Luke's opinion, but Leia had arched an eyebrow at him and asked him where he thought he would put a normal blaster on his person without it being noticed) blaster tucked into his belt, at his back.

"Could you tell me more? Elsewhere, if you want to?" Luke grinned wryly even as he let himself be pulled into a very precise and sharply executed twirl, "since a dance floor isn't *that* conducive to conversation."

It was still stupid and risky, and Luke was wondering if he was maybe making a mistake despite his earlier conclusions when he could feel a slight shift, not *quite* relaxation, in the man's body.

"If you wish." Quiet and calm, but something seemed to *shiver* with tension. Luke frowned, but when he switched his awareness to the Force, there was no warning, not even a twinge of anything. The huge ballroom was blazing with light from the---

"Pay attention," the man said, quietly reproachful, and Luke

flushed. Casting a glance behind him as he got his balance back, he couldn't spot Leia or Evaaan in her honey-toned Alderaanian suit. General Dodonna was talking quietly with the Tirbodh's husband, and didn't look up. Not *ideal*, but he had a wrist com-link hidden underneath the cuff of his jacket, so it ought to be fine.

He could practically *hear* Han's disapproving stare from across the palace, wherever the Corellian and the Wookiee were, busy trying to find how the shield that protected Ardashir from any assault and literally fired back on any attacker without any proof of turbolasers or anything similar. It was the reason they were here, *mostly*, even if Leia had considered accepting the invitation from the Tirbodh either way, due to the connections between the two royal houses.

Presumably Han and Chewie hadn't found anything yet, since there'd been no alert from their comlinks, which was disappointing.

Cool night air smelling of Alderaanian starblossoms and something Leia had identified as Northern Shah Jasmine flowed over them as the masked man led them down an open gallery that ran the length of the banquet hall, shielded from view by the gauzy but multi-layered draperies spilling down over the windows and transparisteel doors.

Gloved hands were now neatly tucked behind the man's back, hidden underneath the heavy sweep of his cloak, and he walked half a step away from Luke, letting him set the pace. Of course, since he also towered over Luke, the seeming courtesy of keeping that distance between them wasn't as much as it might have been otherwise. Luke was relaxing again, anyway, even if the distant, silent presence of guards spread out along the gallery and glimpsed in the garden below was a bit of a reassurance as well.

"So, how did you..." trailing off, Luke paused. What did he even want to ask? How he'd known him? Met him? How close they'd been? He didn't know, he just wanted... well, *everything*.

"I experienced his flying more than once," his companion

said slowly, something like dry amusement in the quiet rumble, “which was how we met. The Jedi starfighter he flew was painted yellow.”

It was such a tiny, *trivial* detail, but that made Luke treasure it all the more, despite that it really didn’t tell him much about his father, technically. Unless he’d chosen the yellow himself, which made Luke think of what yellow meant on Tatooine... Gravel crunched underneath their feet, and Luke breathed in, closing his eyes for a moment and tipping his head back.

The garden smelled of foliage, the subtle riot of flowers, with the jasmine laying over everything else, and the air was filled by the sparkling tinkle of water from the fountain in the middle of the garden. Luke opened his eyes to catch the animal-headed mask turned down towards him, and he could *feel* the intent stare.

If it wasn’t for the fact that it didn’t feel... *predatory*, just very, very intent, some sort of want that wasn’t actually desire in the weight of that stare, Luke would’ve turned on his heels and left then and there. Whatever Han thought, he knew when to call quits, but it did not seem like this situation was there... quite yet.

“This way,” the man murmured, a hand very, very briefly brushing his shoulder as he redirected them down a left-hand fork in the path they’d followed, which led to a door half-hidden by thick, flowering vines. Something twitched, and Luke frowned, trying to figure out what it was as the door opened for them on approach.

The corridor beyond was polished, shining cream stone inlaid with gleaming bands of bluish metal which both carried a pattern like waves and undulated across the stone like water. Luke looked around and then glanced up at the man, who was now walking with his hands behind his back again, mask turned straight in front of him. He might have been walking a shade closer, but Luke wasn’t sure if he actually was. Might be his imagination.

“What did you... think of him? And where are we going?”

Because it wasn't like Luke wasn't sharply aware of the fact that he was following a man who seemed to know where he was going, and far away from the crowds they had been surrounded by.

"To explore a mutual interest, Skywalker. And..." a trailing, heavy pause. It took almost half a minute before the black-clad giant continued, "I cannot give you an... unbiased account, young one. It is a question better put aside for now."

"What?" Luke wasn't sure which part of that statement he was asking about, because *both of them* were equally confusing - and, for the latter, disappointing. Reflexively, he pulled at the wrapped cloth around himself and then muttered a quiet curse, righting the folds and drapes back to their proper positions again. Leia might not be here to see, but she'd disapprove if he walked around with something *off*. At least it wasn't hard to move in...

"You are curious as to what the *Simurgh's wings* is, are you not, Skywalker?"

"The Simurgh? What're you talking about, we're wondering about the *force field*---" Luke cut himself off, feeling his face heat up. He nearly froze to a stop and turned around and ran, because with that sort of information the man could have the whole Alliance delegation detained by giving the information to the Tirbodh. It wasn't like the ruler could overlook something like *that*, even if Leia was a friend of the family.

"The Simurgh's wings," the man repeated, voice dry again, "Ardashir's protector. 'The Simurgh spreads its wings, deflecting any attack, and Ardashir flourishes beneath'. You should gather all intelligence before diving into potentially hostile territory, Skywalker." Slight, and very confusing reproach in the man's filtered voice, and Luke shook his head. Looked around them, but the shining corridor was empty.

Felt, distantly, something that was like a slight, chilly press against his awareness, but it disappeared between one step and the next. Still, it made him think, and Luke realised with sudden

certainty that he knew where the man came from, if not who he was.

"You're with the Empire," Luke said, and wasn't rightly sure where the accusing tone came from - they'd barely spent half an hour in each other's company, the man had dropped a few, brief things about his father, but that was all. He *really* didn't have any position to feel *betrayed*.

"What makes you say that?" Surprisingly mild as the helmet turned towards him. Luke could swear he picked up on amusement, but it was gone in the next instant.

"You've gone to some pretty impressive lengths to disguise yourself, and while the Empire doesn't like to give non-Humans anything important to do, in a situation like this it'd be *useful*, since you can claim it's because you need it to breathe," Luke said, frowning up at the man even as they walked down a set of stairs, wide at the top but narrowing as they went.

"I do," he said, chilly distance in his tone, before he dipped his head in acquiescence, "but aside from that, there are quite a few elements in society that would like to know how Ardashir's protection functions. We could implicate each other, at the moment."

Luke blinked, quite surprised at that response, and tilted his head as he glanced up at the tall man... non-Human... whatever, that was striding down the stairs with easy command beside him. He hadn't thought about any of those points, but it did make sense. They were both walking down empty (*strangely* so, even) corridors far from the celebration, and undoubtedly there *were* more than the Empire and the Alliance that would like to know how Ardashir's forcefield worked.

"So... what? We work together? Where are the guards, anyway?"

A noise escaped the mask's vocoder, not quite like a chuckle but not just a grunt either. "The guards have been taken care of for the moment, but if we are found, working together would be... beneficial to us both, would it not?"

Frowning, Luke slowly nodded, having to watch his step now

as the stairs narrowed and the corridor turned into a more utilitarian look of metal sheeting for walls, though still spotless and polished. For now it didn't matter that this man, whoever he worked for, knew he was with the rebels.

For now, anyway.

The bottom of the stairs widened out again in front of a set of large, clearly heavy blast doors, and Luke frowned at the controls set into the side of the wall, wondering how they were supposed to get past *that*.

"Keep an eye out in case the guards come back," the man commanded, and Luke had turned around to stare up the stairwell before he even thought about it, and then blinked. Had he *seriously*... Shaking his head at himself, Luke turned back, opening his mouth to ask why the masked man thought *he* was the leader here when the blast doors, and then a second set of doors behind those, slid aside.

The light falling through the open doorway was green, and Luke barely paid attention to his companion as he walked through the doors, staring. The room was huge and round, a glittering dome of transparisteel above them, covered by an intricate pattern of interlocking panels above that. Walkways followed the curve of the room, around the hollow center.

"... what is *that*?" Luke breathed out quietly as he stared up at a giant, green-cast and faceted crystal, which hovered in the empty space of the room.

"Ah." It wasn't so much a word as a noise of consideration, and the man shifted on his feet before he walked up to the edge of the walkway that ended with a sharp drop into the empty center, no rail at all at the edge, "Ardashir will keep its protection. That, Skywalker, is a giant kyber crystal."

"A giant *what*?" Luke frowned, looking up at the fierce snarl of the mask as he walked up beside him, glance flickering between the giant crystal and the man.

"What Jedi use to make their lightsabers, young one," the man snapped and whirled around, temper coming from somewhere.

The heavy, embroidered cloak swirled around his legs and made it look as if the embroidered wings flapped with the motion of the cloth, snapping against Luke's legs before the man was out of reach.

Luke barely paid any attention to that, however, in favour of gaping up at the giant crystal. *That* was the same as in his lightsaber? Except smaller, of course. But it was a humbling and awe-inspiring thought, considering what the giant crystal *did* for Ardashir.

"We should leave, Skywalker. There is nothing either of us can do to bring this secret with us," his companion said from the doorway, and Luke blinked, turning away and slowly walking over and out of the huge room. The doors slid silently closed behind them.

"It's because the centerpiece is a giant kyber crystal, isn't it? Can't be a lot of *those* around," Luke murmured, following alongside the black-clad agent and watching, distractedly, as the toes of the polished boots peeked out from underneath the heavy cloth at every stride the man took.

"Yes," he said, voice rolling like thunder, almost suggesting a deeper tone for a moment, "there are not many of such size around. Especially not *now*." There was heavy distaste in those words, somehow escaping the harsh squeeze of the vocoder, and before Luke could even ask, he suddenly just *knew*.

Because it made sense. All too much sense. A chill went through him.

"The Death Star..."

"Yes, young one. The Death Star."

He hadn't intended to say that out loud. Shaking the chill off, Luke frowned, feeling tense again. He was starting to have doubts this man *wasn't* an Imperial agent, because how would he know, or even assume, something like that? Very little information had gone out about the Death Star to the public, though the Alliance had done what it could...

They walked into the jasmine-scented evening air of the same

garden they'd left earlier, but Luke could see guards now in spots where there before had been none, and in a moment or two they would see them and *know*--- The sudden hand on his shoulder almost made him jump out of his skin and go for the blaster tucked into his belt, and when the masked giant leaned down over him, Luke reached behind him and his hand closed about the grip of the tiny blaster. Ready to do what, he wasn't sure, but he would do *something*...

Gravel and grass crunched beneath the armoured boots of the approaching guards as the regulated breathing of the air filter, the noise barely audible, washed over him.

"Your father, Skywalker, is not dead."

Luke froze, eyes wide as he stared into the blank, jewel-like lenses of the mask, the creature's (a Simurgh, Luke suddenly realised) snarl fierce. The quiet words thundered through him along with his suddenly-loud heartbeat, no longer tense for anticipating an attack, but rather---

"This area is off-limits to guests. Sirs, we must ask you to return to the gallery," one of the three guards that descended on them said, her voice sharp... but at the same time strangely amused. It took Luke half a second to realise what this probably *looked like*, and he could feel his face heat up. His 'companion', however, merely straightened up slowly and stalked off, heavy cloak swaying with every step.

It took Luke half a moment of stunned staring before he felt an almost utterly alien rush of raw anger and desperation flare through him. How *dare he* say something like that and then just... just *walk off*?

He still remembered to apologise to the guards, who all gave him amused, tolerant smiles which seemed to burn into his brain as he hurried after the man. He would reach the doors into the ballroom soon, and Luke, seeing the light catching on the dark purple wings embroidered on the cloak as it fell from wide shoulders, felt as if he'd lose something if he let him walk back inside before he had some sort of answers.

“*Wait*,” hissing, he managed to snag the cloak right before the man walked inside. The man whirled around sharply, and Luke was suddenly no longer gripping cloth, but having his hand gripped by leather gloves instead. It was a large hand, with a curiously unforgiving hardness underneath the cushion of the leather. Prosthetics?

“Are you sure you wish to know, young one?”

The grip on his hand was firm and solid, an anchor and not in any way an attempt at seduction, no matter what, Luke was aware again, this might look like for anyone who might be paying attention. *Especially* not with the way the man kept addressing him, which made it hard not to grimace. He would be twenty in a few days, and was not a *child*. But he’d been ignoring the mode of address so far.

“I have a *right* to know,” he snapped, staring up into the Simurgh’s snarl of the mask, music and light from the banquet hall spilling out over and around them from the door barely half a step behind the black-clad man. Who stared at him, silent, while the music changed into another dance. The comlink suddenly beeped quietly, insistently, where it was hidden underneath the right cuff.

“Yes,” he said, and once more there seemed to be a suggestion of a deeper rumble to that clear, not-quite-mechanical baritone from the vocoder as he leaned over Luke again, towering close, “you do. But do you *wish to know*, Skywalker? What if you do not like the answer?”

“I want to know anyway,” Luke said quietly, straightening up and tightening his captured hand into a fist. It wasn’t let go when he tugged on it, and he felt strangely like when he was seven and Uncle Owen had caught him eavesdropping and he’d insisted he was ‘old enough to know, I *know* you were talking ‘bout me, Uncle Owen!’

His uncle hadn’t been impressed, and Aunt Beru had merely sighed and ushered him back to bed. This man, now, who presumably had known his father and informed him he apparently

wasn't dead, leaned in slightly further, the air charged like electricity and heavy with the scents of jasmine and starblossom.

"Hope you got what you wanted, boss, because the guards are all back in place. Couldn't get to--- Ah, damn. *Skywalker?*" the heavily veiled woman who'd been with the man when he arrived came up behind him, not from the direction of the ballroom, and Luke froze.

That voice...

Turning his head, he was met with an opaque veil which the darkness in the gallery did nothing to help with, and the golden-pink light falling out of the doorway didn't help either. He didn't need to see her, though. And the man in armour beside her, despite the front of the helmet that cast a shadow on his face...

"*Aphra?*" It came out slightly strangled, and Luke was utterly sure the other one was that... stormtrooper he'd met on Nar Shaddaa. The one who'd for some reason been stuck as Grakkus' slave and slave gladiator trainer. A sigh, crackling with static, came from the man still gripping his wrist, and cold certainty, despite that he felt *nothing*, still, from him, pooled like lead in his gut.

Vader.

That was---

The comlink beeped again, but no longer muffled by cloth, and Luke twisted back to watch Aphra drop his comlink on the ground, the cloth of her long robes sweeping out over it, and then a crunch of plastic and metal as she stepped on it.

"Your timing leaves things to be desired, Aphra," Darth Vader said, his voice still in that lighter, somehow more *human* baritone than his usual flat rumble. Luke sucked a breath in, and found his voice refused to obey. Suddenly he was choked with the icy chill of the dark side, and there was a pinch at - *inside* - his throat that smothered all words, but not his breathing.

A hand at his back and Luke watched as the small blaster that had been tucked into his belt was crushed in a black-gloved

hand. Then he was twisted around, and while he drove into Vader's side instead of trying to pull away, and aimed for what he hoped was a foot, he caught nothing but cloth and was pulled against Vader's side with no difficulty.

"The ship?"

Gritting his teeth and breathing in through his nose, Luke swallowed the urge to let out a noise - if he even could have - as the bones in his wrist were ground together, his arm twisted up behind him. Another hand was resting on his shoulder, seemingly light but heavy enough he couldn't make a scene as they passed the doorway into the banquet hall and continued down the gallery.

"Ready to leave, Lord Vader," the stormtrooper murmured, and Luke felt a sick twist in his stomach. He still had his lightsaber, so as soon as he got a chance, he would hopefully be able to use that to get away, but...

The music and the light from the ballroom faded, replaced by sparkling lights casting a pearlescent glow over the polished stones of the walkway as they crossed another garden, the guards stationed around noticing nothing wrong as the small group of four disappeared towards the palace hangars.

He just needed *one* chance, a small one, but as the corridors grew and the lighting turned from decorative to utilitarian, nothing came up to offer him one. The surroundings stayed polished and far richer than any hangar Luke had ever been to before he'd come here, but they turned distinctly utilitarian as well, matching the lighting, and the ship set in the middle of the hangar they stepped into was, of course, not one recognisably imperial.

Instead it was a beautiful, silver-tinged affair of curves, an oval dagger with powerful engines, and Luke would have been taken by it (still was, on some level), if his situation wasn't so very bad. He wasn't sure if he was relieved Han and Chewie hadn't found him or not, since if they'd attempted to attack, they'd probably have died...

Luke wondered, feeling cold, how by the suns Vader had not

just muffled the noise of his respirator, but hidden his presence in the Force. He really should have listened to that original warning, listened to his first reaction when that mysterious, masked latecomer had entered.

Too late now.

❖

Chapter 40: In Which Darth Vader Isn't Quite As Had Been Thought

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Sort of a tumblr prompt response, mostly a desire to do mother-daughter reveal stuff. So you know, AU for flipped sex/gender of some people, and AU from the current comics, going off on a rebel success on Vrogas Vas (though one that didn't leave Vader dead).

**due to the changes, there's mention of unsafe and traumatic cesarean.*

“Obi-Wan!”

Screaming.

So much screaming.

“Obi-Wan, don’t you d---” her voice broke, the scream turning into wordless rage and a shriek of hatred which was dashed on the rocks of smoke-damaged vocal cords and a throat swollen from burns and heat. He didn’t turn around; was all too aware her strength, whatever she would have left of it after the battle, her limbs cut off and after the aborted labour, was running out fast.

“Give... give them back...” the whisper, inexplicably heard under the roaring popping of the lava and the crunch of volcanic gravel under his boots, was soft and fluttery, like the heartbeats of the two small, precarious lives in his arms, dry already in the heat from Mustafar, the poisonous volcanic gases undoubtedly not helping their gasping little breaths at all.

He needed to leave, and yet he turned around, just enough to look over his shoulder. He watched boil-red skin that was slowly turning charred and a bare metal arm, blackened from the fire

as well, grasp at the gravel, in the air, after *him* - no, the children. Her burning, yellow eyes were glassy, and Obi-Wan doubted she was aware of much at all besides her own screaming need and rage.

“Give her *back*! Give them all---!” her voice broke again, crushed underneath the song of Mustafar and the sudden, modulated command of a clone trooper calling that he’d been found.

Obi-Wan fled, back to where Padmé lay on the ground, but sat up as he came close. Padmé covered his back as they retreated up the ramp, to escape the troopers Palpatine had brought with him, but he didn’t escape injuries. Obi-Wan could do nothing but let the new father hold his twin children as he died, large brown eyes flicking from the pale, wispy heads of hair up into his own eyes, murmuring insistently that there was still good in his wife, that *Anakin Skywalker* was not lost.

Obi-Wan Kenobi didn’t have the heart to say that Anakin Skywalker had been lost before Mustafar, and that there was nothing left.

Darth Vader betrayed and murdered your mother. I fought him to make sure he didn't take what little was left of Anakin Skywalker and your father from her.

The cry of one of the ones who’d freed the princess echoed in the hangar and echoed in the Force, wavering and fresh.

Darth Vader froze where she was patting her foot on the empty robe in slow, apathetic confusion. Well, either way Obi-Wan was dead, now--- The girl cried out again, rage and desperation in her voice and there was no way to *not* recognise the Force signature, newly awakened, that she’d carried under her heart for almost nine months as it flared.

She couldn’t move for a moment, frozen still, and blaster bolts sang through the air, spattering into the walls, the stormtroopers.

She’d thought the child (surely there had only been one? She

could not remember well, those agonizing minutes, hours, however long it had been, on the bank beside the lava river) lost to death, the Force signature flickering after Obi-Wan had cut her out, that high, baby voice echoing oddly in her ears and mind both.

And yet.

Yet it flared now, bright and livid, so at odds with the unfocused calm it'd carried before, nineteen years and more back, beating away with her own.

She whirled around, only to watch the blast doors close in front of her, and the time it took to get through let the *damnable* crate of a supposed ship escape.

Luca stared, silently, at the pasty, bald woman hooked up to an external oxygenator and behind a rayshield, hands cuffed together. The mask had been removed and the extra medical equipment brought in when it became clear she couldn't breathe regular air on her own.

Luca stared, and felt a fire in her chest.

She quickly looked away when those lambent yellow eyes unerringly cut to her, even past the one-way observation window, and jerked, surprised, at the feeling of a hand squeezing her upper arm. Looking down, Luca met brown eyes that only *just* warmed when she met Leia's gaze - they narrowed and cooled again when her gaze flickered to Vader on the other side of the observation window.

"Not what I expected," Leia said dryly, voice sharp enough to cut through durasteel, and Luca frowned. Turned to look again, and felt her heart skip, because Vader was staring right at her again. Or, rather, staring at whoever she was clearly sensing was on the other side of the observation window of her cell. Which was her.

"Darth Vader... is a woman," Luca murmured, and hardly heard Leia's snort, hardly heard the icy little hiss that escaped

her. Darth Vader was a woman, and Ben had *lied*. She didn't understand why. Why had he lied? What did his story even *mean*, now---

"Not that it *matters*. Woman or not, she's terrorised the Galaxy for nearly twenty years and was there to watch---" Leia's voice caught, just a fraction. Luca reached over to find a small, cold (but dry, always dry, as if Leia had no liquid left in her even to sweat, sometimes), hand and squeezed it. "--- Alderaan be destroyed. I'm not sure what High Command thinks we can get out of her. The longer we keep her, the greater the chance something will happen," Leia snarled, shaking her head, stirring the few wisps of hair around her face that had escaped the practical braid she kept her hair bound up in.

"... Intelligence, I suppose," Luca said slowly, and tried to find the anger she'd carried with her for months now, ever since Ben told her who her mother really was (a *Jedi Knight* who'd been a General in the Clone Wars!) and that Darth Vader had killed her. But how could she hold a grudge when there suddenly was no ground beneath her, when she suddenly didn't know how *anything* might have happened, because *Darth Vader* was a *woman*, and Ben had said *he* had betrayed and murdered her mother.

"As if she'll tell us *anything*," Leia scoffed, the sneer as much grudging acknowledgement as frustration. Leia had wanted Darth Vader dead on Vrogas Vas. Had gone *all in* for it, but in the end, with additional reinforcements, Vader had been taken alive and picked apart, to make sure he - *she* - was neutralised, Force or not.

"I'm going in," Luca said, the decision sudden enough even she wasn't aware of it until she said it out loud. Leia startled, the hand on her arm tightening, but Luca squeezed their joined hands and ducked out of the grip and around Han as he came inside, a flare of confusion on his rugged face.

"Han! Stop her!" Leia called, and Han reached out, but Luca was already past him and half-ran around the corner and down the short corridor to the guard who stood there. The man only

eyed her, but let her inside - probably not because of her rank or because she had destroyed the Death Star. Probably more because she had the Force, and Vader did as well, so maybe *she* could get something useful out of hi--- her?

It was, actually, something Mon Mothma and General Rieekan had asked of her, after the initial furore of their capture had died down. She'd shaken her head and mumbled something about how she wasn't *trained enough* - and now felt she might never be, as they were now far away from Vrogas Vas and its Jedi ruins.

But she was in here now and *was* going to get *something* - she hoped - out of Darth Vader. Not something for the rebels or the Alliance, however. She was going to get something far more personal.

Clarification.

The thought stuttered and died as she stepped inside the cell, the ray shield glimmering between Vader, still mostly in her black, armoured suit, and herself. Vader was staring, eyes locked onto her, and her tongue dried up in her mouth.

Maybe it didn't matter.

She staggered half a step back, groping for the controls that would alert the guard outside to let her out, because maybe it didn't matter - Vader had killed so many anyway, and maybe she *had* been a 'he', before. Ben might not have known what Vader would've decided to do after breaking off from the Jedi, there was no telling---

"Leaving so soon?" Darth Vader whispered, her voice a ruined husk compared to the thundering baritone the mask's vocoder provided, and Luca's hand fell from the button, thumping against her thigh.

"No," she said with a frown, straightening up from her hunch and strode forward, back straight and chin held high. She was aware there was surveillance on the cell, *all too aware* of it suddenly, but asking anyone to turn it off was foolish and folly - she knew it wouldn't be given, and understandably so. But she'd ask what she wanted to know anyway, because this would be the

only chance she had of getting some answers, she was sure.

(She could've sworn she heard Ben's voice telling her to leave the cell, that she wasn't ready, but it was dim and far away.)

"Skywalker," Vader said slowly, head tilting. Something in her voice almost made Luca shiver. She could see, this close, that there was an old scar running down through her right eyebrow and slicing into the cheekbone; it was a wonder she hadn't lost her eye from that. The rest of the scarring - open wounds, more like, were newer, drawing a livid band over her left cheek, festering sores across her skull. Despite this, and despite being robbed of the mask, Darth Vader was straight-backed and loomed even when caught in that awkward-looking hunch the magnetic lock between the cuffs and the floor forced her into.

Her shoulders were broad and she *towered*, and Luca, staring up into her face, wasn't sure what she was looking at. It didn't look like the monster that had interrogated Leia, that had killed Ben. That had run her down in the Death Star trench... She looked like a *person*.

Her chin had a cleft, and Luca found herself inanely thinking that she had one as well.

"Did you have questions, or are you here to stare and gloat before I am executed?" Vader's flat voice hinted at something that Luca wasn't sure if it was disappointment or goading - one was confusing, the other frustrating. They tangled up into a ball in her gut and drove her to speak.

"Ben said you betrayed and murdered my mother, Vader," Luca said, narrowing her eyes, and even with the current confusion she felt dredges of the anger she'd carried for months now dribble back in and drip down into her hands, down her fingers, leaving her to flex them and squeeze her fisted hands tighter.

"You said, yes," Vader snorted, a dry, nearly papery sound, "Obi-Wan always found ways to soothe his own wounded pride." She sneered, then, her mouth twisting cruelly before the expression froze and smoothed out. There was no wince of pain, but Luca was sure it must have hurt nonetheless, pulling at that pale,

thin skin and open wounds both.

“Ben told me he fought Darth Vader to stop him from taking what was left - me, I suppose - of Anakin Skywalker and my father,” she said, her voice trembling just slightly with a little bit of anger at what seemed to have been a lie and remembered anger at being told her mother had been murdered.

She could swear she saw an eyeroll before Darth Vader froze, those yellow eyes widening, then paling like when you looked away from the suns into the sky. The eyes *actually turned blue*, before they suddenly flickered back into yellow again, and Luca felt her heart quail under the sudden flood of cold, angry sense of *death* that flooded the Force in the cell.

Something crunched, somewhere.

“He said *wh---*” Vader’s voice broke, the intended roar turning into a wheeze, and Vader’s whole frame shuddered. Luca stepped forward, uncertain whether she was concerned or alarmed, stopping when the ray shield hummed underneath her fingertips. She yanked her hand away as Vader’s tremors stilled and she turned her head up again, teeth bared and pain etched into the lines around her eyes.

They were blue, now.

So blue it hurt to look at them, and Luca felt like she must already know, whatever it was. Whatever the reason Ben had lied for, whatever the truth was. Darth Vader’s chin was cleft, Ben had told her to run on Vrogas Vas, and still the truth evaded her as she stared into Vader’s livid glare.

“He took--- He thought he could take *everything* and change it to his liking, did he?” the hiss was so quiet, Luca wasn’t sure it was meant to be heard at all.

“What---”

“Skywalker,” Vader interrupted her, voice low and dipping lower, a darkened alto that once would’ve been beautiful, once would’ve commanded thousands with ringing conviction and daring that asked nothing what she wouldn’t give herself. Now it was an ugly rasp, like boots on gravel, thin and snarling. “Your

mother. Is not. Dead.”

Luca’s heart stuttered, and she took a step back without even noticing, her hair flying into her eyes as she shook her head sharply.

No.

“No... You’re...”

She couldn’t finish, because Darth Vader was a woman, her eyes were blue, there was a cleft in her chin, and her aunt and uncle had always said (Ben had too) that she was so much like her mother.

The door swooped open behind her, and suddenly the cell was full of people. The hand on her shoulder made her flinch, and Vader drew herself up as well as she was able.

“Do *not* touch her.”

Possessive rage bled out in an undeniable roaring wave, even as it squeezed her voice even thinner than it already was, and she could do nothing about the hand on her daughter’s shoulder, grip tightening and pulling her further away.

She wouldn’t stand for it!

Who knew what they would do, if the rebels (Mon Mothma was in High Command, if she was listening in even her attempt at being oblique wouldn’t have tricked the woman. Not with what she knew, even if she’d never figured anything out while it was going on) had figured it out, or *did* figure it out.

Maybe they were just removing their precious Hero of Yavin from the oh-so-dangerous presence of Lord Vader, as angry as she was.

Maybe.

She wouldn’t bet on it, especially not when it came to the safety of her *daughter*, and she wished once again Obi-Wan hadn’t *stolen* his death from her, basically impaling himself on her blade as he had. He deserved a far worse fate for this betrayal.

But Obi-Wan was dead and she was not, and these rebels

wouldn't take her daughter now.

(She recognised that she ought to have waited to say anything, but she'd been harbouring a volcano of rage since the Death Star incident had lost her her daughter - *twice!* and had been unable to tease and draw it out.)

"Calm down," there was a sneering quality to the Twi'lek's voice, a smugness to it that burned through her, and all she wanted to do was to squeeze the life out of *every single person* in here aside from her wide-eyed, open-mouthed child, "we're just gonna let everybody take a step back and relax. And put Vader junior here somewhere---"

Luca bristled, Vader did as well.

"I'm not---!"

The denial cut deep, made her heart shudder, made her think of Padmé backing away on Mustafar, eyes wide, hands held up--
- Static crackled over the intercom, and Mon Mothma's voice cut through everything before she had a chance to react.

"Captain, treat Lieutenant Skywalker with the respect she deserves, and escort her to room 2416-B1. Commander Organa, Captain Solo, you're welcome to accompany her, of course."

Vader breathed in harshly, the air burning down her throat and almost making her gag - the additional oxygen was slightly mistimed, giving her the oxygen she *vitaly needed* in addition to the forced breathing help, but without the mask, there was a gap. But she breathed and stared, livid, as Skywalker twisted around, meeting Solo and Organa's gazes where they stood by the door. She needed this ray shield gone, and it needed to be gone *now*, because this---

Static crackled again, loud and sharp, nearly wild. The lights flickered and something small was thrown into the cell over Solo and Organa's heads. It clattered to the ground and static shrieked again, loud electricity smattering through the room, sending everybody to their knees and then slumping to the floor.

The lights went out, and the emergency lighting flickered on instead, washing everything out in yellow.

Darth Vader stared as Skywalker went down with the rest, felt as if her breathing was surely staggering as well, and reached out, desperate in ways she hadn't felt in months (the battle over the Death Star had been an... experience), latching onto the strong, pulsing Force presence of her daughter with the shameful desire of a drowning man to debris in an ocean.

"We can leave now bo---hrrghk!"

Aphra's body slammed into the wall as Vader staggered forward, the ray shield gone. She hung there for a moment, twisting, hands clawing at her throat.

"You are lucky Skywalker isn't dead, Aphra," Vader snarled - wheezed, more like, air squeezed past her ruined throat only grudgingly - letting the doctor crumple to the floor and regain her footing while she knelt by the body of her daughter, for a moment thwarted by the magna cuffs around her hands before she ripped them apart, crumpling the mechanisms with the Force.

They needed to leave.

She should just pick her up and go.

Still, her gloved hands hovered, barely touching the fringe of desert-bleached blonde hair that was starting to darken a little, the curve of a tan-dusted cheek, along the lines of strong, worn hands---

"What about this thing, Lord Vader?" Aphra said from behind her, having made herself marginally useful (the only reason she was still alive) instead of gaping at Vader where she knelt by Skywalker, hands fluttering like hesitant dartwings above the slender frame. Glancing behind her, she saw Aphra holding the external oxygenator.

Scowling, she held her hand out, and after being given the device managed to find a way to attach it to her belt.

The moment had broken her heart-squeezed hesitation, luckily enough, and she could heft Skywalker in her arms, awkwardly tilting the girl's head back to stare at her in the gloom of emergency lighting. Shadows gathered in the deepening cleft in the chin - all from her - and the yellow light slid down the curve of

her nose - all from her *father*, and her heart stuttered again.

Her grip tightened enough Luca winced, letting out a soft, unconscious noise of protest until Vader let up. She shifted the girl to her shoulder, and stormed out before Aphra, snatching the lightsaber her daughter had at her hip; there would be no time to find her own. Vader resolutely didn't think about the fact that she was wielding her own lightsaber, again. That was something else Obi-Wan had stolen, but insignificant and worth nothing more than the defense and offence it'd offer right now, for her daughter, compared to the theft of *her child*.

They passed Organa and Solo out in the hallway, crumpled near the door, and for a wild, angry moment she almost crushed their throats with her own boots - but she stopped herself and waved Aphra off as well. The only reason being the single, burning reminder of the young one's scream when Obi-Wan fell on the Death Star, of Padmé backing off from her... Killing Organa and Solo would be a worse crime, she knew, even if her daughter wouldn't know until it was far, far too late.

It had nothing to do with the curve of Organa's chin or the set of those eyes, closed in unconsciousness, nothing to do with the darkness smothering the vibrant brown; all reminders of someone else short and brown-haired, soft-eyed as Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan had *never* been. Vader felt almost insulted at her mind's comparison between Padmé and Leia Organa, but kept herself from stomping back and killing the girl.

Her daughter would find out, sooner or later, if she did it. This would be difficult enough *without* adding something like that, she could see.

There was a lot of yelling in the dark going on. Confusion, fear, anger and sharp, rapid-fire reports as technicians worked on getting the power back and soldiers attempted to find Darth Vader and whoever hi-- her agent was. And to find Luca Skywalker *with them*. Mon Mothma, hands pressed together, chin and mouth

pressed against her hands, listened to the stream of voices coming from the coms, and stared at the black screen of a datapad that should be flicking through cameras until they found Vader.

When the power came back, it would do exactly that.

In the meantime, Mon felt a familiar sickening twist of regret over sending troops out into a situation like this. The ship might be theirs, but with power down and *Darth Vader* on the loose, it was like throwing tied up victims into a sarlacc's beak. A hand on her shoulder had her opening her eyes and glancing up at Carlist with a small, tight smile.

"We got to the cell - they're long gone, of course, but no one is actually dead. We don't know about Skywalker, however; she wasn't there," Carlist said quietly, and Mon closed her eyes again, a soft, nearly airless sigh escaping her. Then the guards and Leia were all all right. Though why Vader would have left them, she didn't understand...

A flash of blue eyes, bright in sunlight, and a rakish smile that challenged the whole Galaxy flashed through her mind's eye. She shook her head, frowning a little. She'd heard Padmé speak more than once of his Jedi friend, and the flashes of publicity built up around General Skywalker was not entirely consistent with what she'd heard.

The challenge, yes; Skywalker would surely have turned the Galaxy upside down (had been in the process of doing so, in the Republic's service) even back then, but Padmé had spoken of someone that also was quiet and kind--- She had to muffle a snort behind her hands, less she bother Carlist in his own work; how had she not seen it, the Senator and the Jedi Knight that came around to his office quite often?

... she hadn't been looking.

None of them had.

And she hadn't been looking when she'd heard the name 'Skywalker' anew, or when she saw a holo of the young pilot that had destroyed the Death Star with that single, lucky, *impossible* shot.

Soft curves and blue eyes, with a chin that seemed a little bit

too prominent - especially with the cleft in it - to be carried by the young woman when she wasn't at all as tall as her mother. She'd seen the pale hair, but not the slight little curling the hair did at the nape of her neck. She'd seen the blue eyes, but not the shape of the nose. She'd seen the pilot's skill and the lightsaber at her hip, and not the words that rang with the cadence of both parents.

She had---

Lights flickered back on, and Mon snapped her eyes open, yanking the datapad into her lap and starting to flick through security feeds. She honestly didn't know what she would be seeing when she found Vader again - would she have killed her own daughter and be *carrying the corpse with her*? Or, had she just... taken her? If the latter, there was so many possibilities. The worst of them Vader presenting her daughter to the Emperor, Mon was convinced.

The Force as it was wielded by Vader was a nightmare and that further being taught to Skywalker was a concern, yes, but dread glimmered deeper in the darkness of her mind for Skywalker being given over to the Emperor. Would that not be worse?

Scenes of corridors and rooms continued to flicker by, and she was staring to lose hope. Then something black fluttered through one screen, and reappeared on the other.

Her breath caught.

"Level above the aft hangars below command!" she snapped, reflexively, even though Carlist surely had already know that; others were watching the security feeds as well. But she wasn't thinking; she was watching, watching as Vader stormed down the corridor, her agent - slim and seemingly harmless beside her, but obviously she was a danger all her own - hurrying behind and Skywalker...

Lieutenant Luca Skywalker hung limp over an armoured shoulder, bouncing slightly with each long, slightly uneven stride. A few meters down, and Mon frowned; had her fingers twitched..? The groan from the young woman when she stirred

was far too soft for the security feed to pick up on, but there was no mistaking the distracted patting down on Vader's cloak and then Skywalker froze.

Her head shot up, hair hiding possibly-wide eyes, but nothing could've obscured the suddenly-pale face as Skywalker started to struggle. If Mon had had any doubts whether Lieutenant Skywalker had *known* about her parentage or not, they were gone now.

"Wh--- *Let me go!* You can't just---" Skywalker's voice broke, though whether that was from rage or fear, Mon couldn't say.

"I *can*. I have all the right to," Vader said, the feed barely picking up the soft, abused voice. It was such a stark difference from what she remembered of nineteen years back, as infrequently as she'd heard General Skywalker's voice, that she almost, *almost*, might have felt some pity. She didn't. Instead, her heart twisted with frustration and sympathy for the child struggling where she hung over Vader's shoulder, while wondering if they should not make sure Vader couldn't leave with Skywalker.

One way or another---

"*What right?*" Lieutenant Skywalker cried, her voice rising up with her fury, tears behind the rage, and Mon closed her eyes.

Was she that far gone, that she would consider killing someone whose only crime was a parent like Darth Vader? They had other imperial defectors, with parents or siblings who had done unspeakable deeds themselves.

But if they let Vader keep her, what then?

"I'm--"

"YOU WEREN'T THERE!" Skywalker yelled, and Mon watched her punch the armour covering Vader's shoulders and upper back with a meaty crack of flesh against durasteel; desperate denial could be heard under the accusation. She turned her datapad over and looked to Carlist, who was staring at her, a for-the-moment-dark holo receiver in his hands.

"Is there any way we can get Skywalker, if not take Vader back?" she heard her voice, distant and calm - if they could

keep Skywalker, they would have an asset. Lieutenant Skywalker would surely fight all the more determinedly, now, and Vader might hold back simply on the off chance (or if she knew) that Skywalker was present.

"We'll try," Carlist said with a nod, and turned his receiver back on.

Yanking furiously at the wrist cuffed to some bare pipes, Luca felt lightheaded.

She wondered whose freighter (smaller than the *Falcon*, but rustier and even more rundown, if that was possible) they had just stolen and taken into hyperspace. She couldn't believe Vader had been using *her* lightsaber to fight the Alliance soldiers on board! Though... technically it was... was Vader's wasn't it?

She flinched from the thought and from the reality that lay behind it, trying to look for some way that *wasn't* true. Instead she kept hearing Darth Vader's soft, raspy voice whispering that she would have been there, if she had known, and that she *knew* that that was the truth, if she only searched her feelings.

How that had been heard over all the blaster fire going on, Luca didn't know, but heard it she had and she wished she *hadn't*. Because every time she tried to touch the Force now, as precarious as it was, it rang with the truth of that statement.

Her mind refused to cooperate, to turn towards more productive pursuits like trying to use the Force to *get out of these cuffs*, for each time she tried her thoughts echoed with *it can't be true*, and the Force sang back that it *was*.

"Stop that," Vader said, a gloved hand closing about her wrist and holding her hand still, rebuke clear even in a voice pale with old injuries. Luca hissed, scuttling backwards - but got only as far as her arm reached, and instead kicked---

Or would have, if Vader hadn't stepped close enough most of the force of it was nullified and she half stumbled against the tall woman instead. Pressing back against the wall, she stared up into eyes that were still blue, not yellow, but the set of her mouth

wasn't any less terrifying than the glow in her eyes had been earlier.

"Let *go*," she hissed, trying to twist her hand free and stopping with a wince of pain.

"If you insist on injuring yourself, young one, I will not," Vader said, pausing, her other hand flexing at her side, twitching up and then falling back again. Luca's heart was thundering in her ears. "I will not have---" Vader broke off, anger and something uncomfortably soft in her voice, and she turned away, the Force heaving darkly around them, though she didn't move otherwise or let her wrist go.

Luca *almost* huffed about that 'I will not have...' comment, whatever it was Vader *would not* have her do - she didn't care, her life was *hers* and Vader didn't... her--- She shook her head sharply.

"How *couldn't you* know?" she asked instead, snapping as she gathered herself up and tried to ignore the cold sensation of the Force, and the sudden, sharp dive into *raking darkness* it took at her question. She stared, flatly, up at... at Vader, chin thrust out.

"Loosing three limbs and going into labour while injured and having you cut out of me, young one, did not help my state of mind," Vader snarled - as much as she was capable of without the mask's vocoder, her voice rasping soft, aching like acid eating through flesh - her eyes nearly lava red and lambent suddenly. Luca felt like she couldn't *breathe*, and squeezed her eyes shut.

"That... he---" She couldn't believe it.

Ben had lied, but *surely*---

The darkness weighed in, offering itself up, easy and sickly sweet. It would hold her; she could throw her mother away, free herself, could break the neck of the woman who had hurt Han and Leia, could--- She felt sick. Hands, surprisingly gentle, turned her around and pushed her down until she was leaning one hand against the wall, the other against one of her bent knees, and emptying her stomach.

The cold around them dug in, wavered and then lightened,

letting something cool and distant, filling the suddenly lighter air with the soft presence of the *life* on the freighter. Luca didn't know how she was feeling it so clearly, but the agent's signature in the Force was small and soft, barely distinguished from the rest - and Darth Vader was a towering, frozen sun, like a blue giant.

"... your presence in the Force was inconsistent," Vader said slowly, the hand on her back not really rubbing, but a solid weight nonetheless, "and volcanic fumes are toxic. I---" she cut herself off, but Luca could see where the reasoning was going. There had been something pained - and a deep-seated rage - in Vader's voice, her gaze going distant with remembered loss before her expression had iced over. Luca squeezed her eyes closed and focused on breathing, though had to stand up and tried to move as far away as possible from the pool on the floor; it stunk.

"Right," she heard herself say, distant and floaty and against her determination not to, she opened her eyes and looked up at Vader.

The armoured woman towered above her still, shoulders broad under the weight of armour, her skin just as sickly pale as it'd been in the cell, the wounds standing out starkly. Despite the evidence of extensive injury, she seemed more invulnerable than ever, and yet...

"... what do you *want*?" Luca asked, quiet and shamefully soft, even as her back was almost painfully stiff. The hand around her wrist tightened, making the metal of the cuff dig in a little, and the other gloved hand finally rose up, not quite touching her cheek.

Foreboding gathered in her gut as she watched those starkly yellow eyes wash out into bright blue again, watched the harsh twist to Vader's mouth soften a shade.

"My daughter."

—+•—♦—+•—
Chapter 41:
In Which Darth Vader Meets
Another Queen of Naboo
—+•—♦—+•—

Another “Luca instead of Luke” AU which includes... uh, a few other details as well. I haven’t finished anything writing-wise for a few months, so I apologise if this is a little weird and not super-awesome.

Oh angel, angel, vast the night / only your countenance more
aweful bright
Oh angel, angel, guard my way through hyperspace / and back
to your embrace

-- prayer-song from Iego

Sixteen and resplendent in reds and golds, she looked nothing like Padmé Naberrie. Sixteen and resplendent in the royal make-up that turned her face into a vision of severity and ethereal kindness, she did, however, look very similar to Queen Amidala.

Darth Vader hated it.

He hated that sweetly rounded face with an emerging strong chin that, if the make-up didn’t throw him completely off, would develop a cleft - the biggest cue this was *not* Padmé Amidala, when seen in the make-up like this.

She still reminded him of her as she moved, an energetic determination and inability to sit still... though the latter really wasn’t much like Padmé. Padmé could have sat still for hours if it was (and often it had been) required of her, pouring over proposals and suggestions and drafts--

“Lord Vader?”

Focusing back down on the slip of a girl in front of him - Queen Nalathe managed to stand at a perfect distance to allow him to see her without stepping back or attempting to bend his neck just a shade further - who was peering up at him through that faceful of make-up, her blue eyes bright even when the make-up attempted to swallow their colour. He was, almost, thankful her eyes were blue and not that familiar, warm brown. He narrowed his eyes behind the mask and crossed his arms. He did not think on the fact that once they would've been blue like hers.

“We are leaving tomorrow, Your Highness. This is non-negotiable,” Vader said, his voice rolling through the small, nearly intimate, sitting room two corridors back from the throne room, “they are targeting you as the symbol of Naboo and the connection to both your... predecessor and the Empire.” He would wring the useless wretches’ necks with his own hands, for forcing him back here, in the presence of the Queen of Naboo.

She was of a height with Padmé...

The girl turned away from him, the light from the windows sliding along the golden hairpieces that kept up the ridiculous teardrop-shaped concoction of braided hair that swelled down her back, held together at the bottom by a golden cap from which a red tassel fell. He wished her hair had been black, not brown. But brown was the most usual hair colour on Naboo.

“And if they start attacking the populace if they can’t get to *me*?” She walked up to the window, stared out it down at the gardens surrounding the palace for a moment, then whirled around to face him, no fear in her face (nervousness under the surface, yes, but not on her face, though the make-up would’ve smoothed it out into delicate concern), only a frown. “I can’t just--!”

“I suggest you *pack*, Your Highness.” He would stand for this no longer. Not when the cadences of the queen’s voice rang with never-forgotten fervour, with the sort of offended righteousness he would have carried, that Padmé most certainly always held

like a brand before her, especially as Queen of Naboo. Her people to care for and protect. He also didn't care for being reminded of *himself* from a different life by a random girl from Naboo.

Stalking out of the sitting room that was more like a throne room in miniature, Vader stopped further down the corridor, well within the range of feeling the faint glow of lives from within that sitting room - the Queen and her four handmaidens. He was here to protect her, no matter that *protection* was hardly his purview any longer (had it ever been?), and as such could not, would not, go much further.

Of course, he could've walked to the other end of the palace and still picked out the queen's Force signature, as feeble as it was; context helped, and she always had those four other lives around her, but... There was also a faint, glowing tingle, a quality to that trace of life all living beings held that suggested more.

If she had been missed by the Inquisitors, he would not be the one to point them in this direction. Not because he cared. He didn't need to see *more* of her, that was all. What he would do was follow his master's command; crush this petty revenge plot and return to his *real* duties. There might, of course, be an actual rebel cell involved in this, because rebels were as misguided as they came. But most of the backing came from former Trade Federation higher ups who were all very... disgruntled... by Padmé Amidala's old interferences and what Naboo meant in connection to those.

The rebels, as they held a version of Amidala in high regard (contrary to the regard the very dead Queen and Senator held in the Empire, for her... supposed... support of Emperor Palpatine), would, even in their foolish zealousness, not attack Naboo. Even if it was the Emperor's homeworld - it was also Padmé Amidala's---

He didn't feel any pain from his fingers digging into his unpadded palms, only the pressure and the whining protest that warned of future damage. There were cracks in the windowsill's marble, though they were mostly hidden by the natural smoke-

gray veins threaded through the white. Staring out at the greenery far below without seeing it, Darth Vader seethed. He'd been unable to dissuade his master in sending him; surely some other agents to protect Queen Nalathe would be more than enough, since those who were threatening her were no more than your regular Force-blind rats. Surely. But his master had turned that lined face towards him, a small, weighted smile on his face that fell away to heavy-gazed, wounded concern.

"It would be... unfortunate if the Queen's blood was spilled in a place Queen Amidala once walked, wouldn't it, old friend? Why, it makes me think of all the ways the mission to break the invasion of Naboo could've gone wrong... But, ah, it didn't, so you may be right, Lord Vader. Surely it will be enough to send lesser protection." And his master had smiled and he had turned on his heels and gone for the waiting shuttle, with images of Padmé's soft, determined face slack in death on the throne room floor.

The hours crept, and Vader suppressed the urge that built the longer the day went on - the one that said they should leave immediately, that time spent lingering here was a waste. The palace was far too large to easily secure, especially with the Naboo's sensibilities, and thus far too easy to infiltrate. He should have picked the infuriating girl up by her impossible hair, and not let her similarities, her *differences* and her bright, determined voice, argue for a day of finishing up some more necessary affairs. She'd wanted a week at first; that, he hadn't given her.

Of course, most outside Naboo, even a lot on it, wouldn't consider negotiations and renewal of the treaty with the Gungans 'necessary affairs'; to Darth Vader, she could as well have had a meeting with Emperor Palpatine scheduled and she should have gone into hiding still.

Not that it mattered. Not that he *cared*, but the black ensemble she'd been wearing this afternoon had brought memories of years ago, of another life, and he had left her presence, unable to stay on the off-chance that that white face with its red make-up would turn towards him and he would think of another queen,

smiling at him.

Snarling, he slowly unbent his fingers from where they'd locked against his palms, the leather worn thin, now.

He needed to leave. The longer he stayed here, the more Queen Nalathe, even (maybe especially) through her make-up, reminded him of Padmé. Foolishness, and an insult to the woman he'd loved and lost (killed), no matter how there seemed to be a vague curve of the queen's nose that reminded him of Padmé's nose, her height, the angle of her jaw---

Bright alarm pulsed through the Force, stronger than it should be in a Force-blind person, and Darth Vader didn't think. He whirled around and barrelled through the rooms between him and the queen's bedroom, vaguely registering doors breaking.

The blood-red light of his lightsaber shed the only light in the room, not that it did much difference for *his* sight, red-tinted as it was. But it took mere seconds after taking in the scene he'd come upon to raise his hand and close it into a fist, making the queen stumble back from the man she'd been holding at blaster-point on the floor as his neck flopped to an unnatural angle.

"Was that *necessary*? I was going to hand him over to security!" the Queen scowled, her face a pale, slightly square oval in the red-cast darkness of the room, her short hair pale and casting shadows on her forehead... Pale? Vader turned to her from staring at the corpse - no one he recognised, so some hired underling - and realised that yes, Queen Nalathe's hair wasn't brown.

... so why wasn't her ceremonial hairstyles and headdresses made in *blonde* wigs instead of the rich, dark brown he'd been resenting since he first saw her image back on Imperial Center? Blonde was unusual on Naboo, yes, but it did happen, and with the sort of funds thrown around by the Court, why *wouldn't* they match the queen's headdresses to her natural hair, instead of risking a blonde hair peeking forth and ruining the image she presented?

... why was he even *thinking* about this?

"He would have been able to tell you nothing, and *would*

have told you nothing; his survival is inconsequential compared to *your* life, Your Highness,” Vader finally snapped, not liking the stare or the chin thrust out at him, defiance even when the queen was wearing nothing but too-long sleep pants and a silky strappy top of a sort he’d only rarely seen Padmé wear as she had preferred nightgowns, and her short hair looking remarkably... mundane in these richly appointed surroundings.

“And we’ll learn nothing if we don’t even *try*,” she muttered, eyes narrowed and her arms akimbo, a stubborn, mutinous look that seemed rather... unrefined. Which seemed wrong. And this was driving him *mad*, seeing similarities where there ought to be none, feeling offended at the differences that ought to have solved the whole issue; seeing a shadow that meant something when he ought to be seeing nothing but a mission that would be over soon.

Calling her ‘Your Highness’, and having no name but the regnal name given Queen Nalathe when she ascended the throne a year and a half ago, her clothes, the palace, the *threat on her life*--

“Lord Vader!” the handmaiden who’d been kneeling by the corpse stood up, trembling rage and worry in her voice, and Vader stopped, staring down at the Queen from a bare few feet away, just barely seeing her upturned gaze. Her chin still stubbornly challenging him. Sixteen and *nothing* and despite all the differences...

“Your name.”

He needed something to properly differentiate them, though Padmé had never shimmered with the potential in the Force this girl-child, nearly grown, did. Almost, maybe, and he wondered how no Inquisitors had come by. How he hadn’t heard from Palpatine that the Head Inquisitor had asked to remove the Queen of Naboo from her planet and station. Though of course the potential might not be worth to train.

“I’m---”

“Your *Highness*!” the handmaiden snapped now, and when

Vader glanced over, she looked... annoyed; reprimanding, though not afraid. Queen Nalathe turned to her handmaiden with a smile on her face, half annoyed, half patient.

"It's okay, Tané," she said, and there was something in her tone of voice that expected something to happen from this. She turned back to Vader with her head tilted, eyes wide. Challenging. He straightened up in response, looming over her.

"Luca Naberrie-Skywalker," Queen Nalathe said, and Darth Vader's world screeched to a red-tinted stop.

Screeched to a stop and then he surged forward, sweeping the handmaiden aside with a rough wave of his hand, and grabbed the girl by her throat, hauling her up to stare her straight in the face.

"You dare claim that name?!" Which of the last names he meant, Vader wasn't sure, and found some measure of satisfaction in the way those pale eyes widened in fear and the red tint of his vision matched the slowly reddening tone of her face as she clawed for air.

"L-let her--- go."

Darth Vader stared, and Tané dropped to the ground ungentily, her head bouncing on the floor, but she was still breathing. Which was something the queen - Luca and had Padmé not talked about--- No.

Breathing, which was something the queen could currently *not* do... and not answer any questions either. Rage had turned his vision purple-red, but the way she clawed at her throat, at his *hand*, made him think of wide brown eyes, watering from lack of air as much as poisonous fumes and... and he let her down.

Queen Nalathe staggered back, leaning against a chair's armrest and swallowed heavily but didn't massage her throat. Peered up at him sideways, then down at the lightsaber in his hand. Remembering it for the first time since he came into the room, Vader... turned it off. He wasn't entirely sure why. He felt like he couldn't breathe, and rage was still just a shadow of a breath away.

"I was adopted by my aunt a few years ago, Lord Vader. My father's Anakin Skywalker." She stared up at him, unblinking, though her gaze flicked down to the unlit lightsaber in his hand. Clearly expecting to be cut down for admitting relation to a supposed-to-be-dead Jedi Knight. He stared down at her, and remembered the swell of Padmé's stomach under his hands.

"Are you supposed to be using that name?" A pointed question while he stood frozen, didn't (couldn't) make a move to stop... stop Luca from walking over to where Tané lay and feel for her pulse, then move her to a more comfortable position, still clearly expecting to be killed any second now, if the tension in her back told him anything at all.

... it was suddenly hard to not want to find something to cover her up with, but there was no proof... no proof at all, aside from a few words and similarities. Similarities that now seemed even more striking than they'd been over the last day.

"... no," Luca said, admitting it with a guilty little look sideways, "Aunt Sola told me I couldn't use Skywalker now that I was off Tatooine... everyone would know. I didn't understand what she meant at first." Wonder started to creep into the girl's voice as she spoke, and her head tilted to look up at the ceiling - no, the sky beyond, and there was a little smile on her face while Darth Vader felt as if his heart was stuttering to a stop, despite that it couldn't.

Tatooine. The child had been on *Tatooine*!?

And then there was the Aunt she claimed, but of course that made sense if the child *was* his and Padmé's.

"... but it's been my name *forever* and... and I'm proud to be Anakin Skywalker's daughter, even if I know who my mother is now, too," Luca said, straightening up and turning towards him with fierce challenge written in every line of her face. Vader didn't take up the challenge inherent in the tilt of her head, her stance. Didn't move at all, couldn't.

"*Tatooine*?" he snapped instead, his voice low, growling thunder. She eyed him, starting to look confused instead of defiantly

accepting of the fate she'd clearly expected after revealing she was the child of a Jedi Knight.

"... yeah? I had... family there. They... it," she gritted her teeth and scrubbed harshly at her face suddenly, shrugging, "Jabba apparently knew... about who my father was, and found out I was living with my aunt and uncle. His goons came... Ben Kenobi told me to take a speeder bike back home and someone would pick me up..."

Ben Kenobi.

Ben... *Kenobi*.

Red--- and then the bedroom came back into his awareness, starkly shadow-cast as it was, and to the girl standing dry- but wide-eyed facing him, and he had nearly choked her. With his *hand*, but nonetheless. Leather creaked.

"The Twi'lek took me here, to Aunt Sola and everybody... Probably shouldn't have stepped up to serve a term, but I wanted... wanted to do something good," Luca murmured, shrugging, a trace of challenge in her voice still before she looked up at him, "... are you gonna kill me now?"

Kill her?

The voice echoed, drowned out the noise and pain he lived with every second of every day, and suddenly his legs refused to carry him. Darth Vader went one step forward and then was on his knees before the Queen of Naboo, a low, strangled sound escaping him.

"*Child*," it came out in a low rasp as he raised his hand, but stopped before he touched her. He didn't have the right. Even if she hadn't flinched he didn't have the right. What was he even...

He should take her.

He couldn't take her.

Even if she wasn't the Queen of Naboo, where was he even...

Luca was staring, wide-eyed, down at him. He could feel the weight of her confused gaze and the confession of the truth stuck, choking and blood-sticky, in his throat.

"I--" the words got lost again, and he swayed. There was a

tentative, desert-roughened hand laying on his shoulder now, broader than Padmé's, still delicate. Of course he couldn't feel the calluses where her hand lay on his armour, but he'd seen the barely disguised suggestions of them when he first met her. "I could not save her. I could not... And yet you're here. I... She was my wife."

And he needed to protect Padmé's daughter like he hadn't been able to do for *anyone* else. Not his mother, not Ashoka, not Padmé. The conviction, the truth of that, burned through the Darkness and his pain and anger, clearing the red-tinted shadows and turning the startled, pale face above him clear as if they were back in the sun-lit sitting room.

"... Father?" the tentative question lingered in the air, and impossibly she took a step closer, a hesitant hand tracing out the lines of his mask, but not touching it.

What he - they - were supposed to do with this knowledge, Vader didn't know, but he held it close and knew one thing; Darth Sidious could not know until Luca could defend herself, and he couldn't attempt to start to train her in earnest until her term was over. And if Obi-Wan lived, he wouldn't let him have her.

Never.

"... do you want this?" Luca's voice brought him back from his thoughts, and he watched her pull on a thin chain that hung around her neck, pulling out---

That necklace.

His heart shuddered on a bright-hot lance at the sight of it, dangling from his daughter's hand and he shook his head sharply and got back to his feet. He didn't admit to that he had practically recoiled.

"No. Keep it. We leave tomorrow." And he didn't listen to the sputtered protests or his heart that didn't want to leave sight of her. He closed the doors to her bedroom and locked them with a twist of the Force, then remained there for the rest of the night, a hand on the heavy wood.

Completely forgetting the corpse in there with his daughter and her handmaiden, and was given a particularly rancid stare in the morning while palace Security gathered the body which Luca had apparently dragged into the office next to her bedroom, then, after helping Tané back into bed, frustratedly going back to bed herself.

Vader didn't mind her glare. It was safe.

... it was familiar, and he deserved the pain in his heart as much as the pain in his body; he would endure it, for now there was a purpose for it. One which far superseded the pain itself. He would keep her safe.



Chapter 42:

In Which a Flyby Goes Wrong



What starts as two unknowing siblings comforting each other in the wake of the anniversary of the Death Star's destruction turns into a distraction with what should be a short, easy mission to survey for possible future bases.

What trouble can an abandoned mining planet be?

Luke leaned in towards Leia, the brush held carefully in his hands and still not quite believing she'd asked this of him - the *second* time, even, and this time she was definitely less stiff than the first. Her gaze, even if he couldn't see it right now, was distant and soft. Less dull than the first time, when he'd found her standing listlessly in front of the tiny mirror in the attached refresher in her bunk, brush at risk from falling from her hand. He hadn't asked how she *was*, only gently taking the brush from her and asked if she'd wanted help.

He'd been half a second from being tossed out on his *head* at that, he'd realised it even back then as her eyes had flashed to his in the mirror and she'd whirled around, a snarl on her face - and then she'd just... stopped, face twisting and then settling into distant coolness. She'd opened her mouth and the first word out of her mouth would probably have been 'leave', except he got there before her with 'Leia' and she'd snapped her mouth closed and just... stared at him, the seconds growing longer. Long enough he'd started to wonder if he should get a medic, but then she'd grabbed his wrist and dragged him out of the refresher. Pushed him down onto her bed and sat down herself, her voice very, very quiet as she said 'yes'.

This time wasn't like that. She'd had an argument at dinner

(for once not with Han, but rather held in loud Alderano with a squat, square-faced young man a few years older than them), and while there were undoubtedly other people she could've pulled with her, her gaze had landed on him and he'd just... gotten up and followed her.

Let the door close behind them and went to get the brush while she undid her braids (he knew better than to help her with *that*), started going through the thick, lustrous fall of brown with it. The angry tension in her shoulders had slowly eased, but now there were periodic trembles running through them instead.

Another slow, careful pass of the brush, Leia's hair long since gone smooth enough that the brush didn't snag and felt like silk in his hands, and Luke leaned in a little closer, to her but didn't touch her otherwise.

"... Leia?"

Her breath came out in a hot, shuddering huff, and she was silent a few more seconds.

"... We, were on a mission during the anniversary memorial," she said, her voice slow and burning. Too affected to sound flat, just now, but the line of her face that he could just barely see was as flat as her voice wasn't, even if one was as *controlled* as the other. And her hands, tangled in the covers of her bed, were white-knuckled.

"We--- Yeah. We were, weren't we." And he had to swallow down the sudden, tight lump in his throat. He'd forgotten.

He'd... well, not forgotten. Not really. Pushed it aside, more like. He'd been thinking about it a lot going *up* to the anniversary of Alderaan's annihilation and the Death Star's destruction, but the closer it'd gotten to the day he'd lost Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, the more he'd desperately tried to keep himself busy and *not* think. And then he'd missed it completely, not to say anything about being on a mission during the official memorial for Alderaan and the Rogue One crew.

"Yes. Corporal Aldos didn't... agree with my priorities."

Luke didn't know how she managed to say that sounding as

composed as she did when at the same time another shudder, faint and barely visible beyond the tremble of fine, fly-away strands of hair haloing her head, ran through her shoulders. Dropping the brush on the bed, he reached out to grasp her shoulders, squeezing. Almost said one thing, and then hesitated and changed his mind.

“... I forgot as well,” he said after a few seconds of silence, feeling guilty tightness close up his throat for a moment. Long enough, though, for Leia to suck in a breath and awkwardly twist around to face him. One hand on *his* shoulder and the other burying in his hair, not *quite* cupping his face, her own pulled into a grimaced moue somewhere between relief and sympathy.

“Oh, Luke...”

“I guess my priorities are the same as yours.” He had to swallow down the lump again, then, and smiled tightly at her. Lifted one hand off her shoulder to only just brush a few fingertips under her dry, hot cheek. No tears there, even if it might be better if there *were*.

Leia huffed a laughter that wasn't really one and pulled him into a hug. He wrapped his arms around her just as she did the same, the hug tight and nearly *desperate*, Luke leaning his weight on her soft hair while Leia's face was buried against his shoulder. Not for long, no, but the solid warmth of the hug seemed to transfer something far more ephemeral between them, wrapping lightly around some secret core. His nascent and building connection to the Force trembled with something *just* beyond his reach, but for the moment Luke couldn't care less about things he didn't understand, even when they had to do with the Force.

The important thing was Leia, and the easing of the intermittent trembles running through her shoulders. Months ago, he would've been happy for more than one reason for what was happening (unhappy, but still pleased); right now, all that mattered was that he could *help* her in whatever small way.

The sudden chime of *both* their comlinks and not just Leia's alone was even more startling than if it had only been hers. At

least they were already shifting apart, with a last, trailing stroke of her small hand through his hair in a soothing motion that made him smile and feel lucky to have *precisely this*.

"You better take that, Lieutenant Skywalker," Leia said with a small grin as she straightened up, picking up her own comlink and gesturing with it, "and I'll take mine."

"Yes ma'am," grinning at her and giving her a mock salute, Luke slid off the bed, pausing in the doorway as it slid open for him, "thanks for letting me help with your hair."

Their eyes met, and Leia smiled faintly.

"Thank *you*, Luke," she said before she turned to her comlink, and he took that as his cue to step outside for *his* call.

"Lieutenant Skywalker here."

"Briefing room 365, Lieutenant. Command wants to be proactive about checking out prospective base sites, so they've chosen a group of you to perform the first crop of flybys and initial assessments."

Luke wondered if that was what Leia's call was for as well, as her door opened again behind him while he acknowledged the order and turned off his comlink, throwing a look over his shoulder. "Room 365?"

Her eyebrows shooting up as she twisted a quick braid up on her head and pinned it in place, she shook her head.

"Main command. We've got potential new allies, so I'm part of the diplomatic unit we're sending off. I'll come with you as far as I can," Leia said with a smile and stuck her arm in the crook of his elbow and led them off. Chuckling, Luke didn't protest, and instead matched his steps to hers until they parted, a kiss dropped on his cheek as a goodbye.

Giving her a wave right as he ducked into the briefing room, he barely got two steps inside before there was a growled greeting to his left and he was yanked into a hug.

"Chewie!" Laughing, Luke ruffled the fur on the Wookiee's long upper arms when he got his arms free to do so, and looked to Chewie's other side where Han threw a smirk and a little wave

at him. "Han! You guys got dragged into this?" Glancing between them, Chewie's low whuffed chuckle interrupted Han's 'As usual, kid' and Han grunted and settled back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Fine, we *volunteered*, since Her Worship doesn't look to need any help right now, and while I like not straining my ship, just hanging around here ain't my style," he said, then paused, glancing across Chewbacca and only very briefly met Luke's gaze, leaving him to arch an eyebrow in silent question. "Uh. Feeling any better, the both of you? Chewie scared that guy half to death, too, after you'd left."

Questioning expression melting into a wide smile, Luke nodded. Felt better just from that, even if neither he nor Leia really felt *that* much better. But someone - *Han* - caring and *saying* so..? Well, why wouldn't it make him feel better? As did the gentle ruffle of Chewie's large paw through his hair, though he shook it off with a gentle whack.

"*Better*, yeah. I guess it'll... get easier. Maybe." He hadn't intended to sink the mood, especially not as he *had* felt better about it just a second or two ago, and yet here he was, voice dropping.

"Hey, kid..." The hand on his shoulder this time was distinctly *non-furry*, even if Chewie groaned a soft commiseration, and Luke let himself lean into that, is just for a moment. Then he straightened up and shook his head... and had to brush his fringe out of his eyes, after that. Maybe he should consider a haircut, one of these days.

"Leia's got it worse, anyway," he said softly, waving it off and turning towards the front of the room. He didn't recognise the officer that walked up to the holo-projection table, but that was hardly *odd*, both with rotations and people coming and going. Throwing a quick look around, he grinned and waved to Wedge and Hobbie over on the other side of the room, and did the same for three other pilots from other squadrons he recognised, but there were more here he *didn't* recognise than he did, despite

their number being no more than fifteen.

"All right, all of you know why you're here, so I'll cut to the chase," the officer said, a female Twi'lek with one of her lekku cut off halfway and scars covering both the stump and the full one in long, striated lines, pink against her rich red. "We've got about sixty potential sites, and we're doing these assessments in sets of fifteen. You're the first crop, and unfortunately some of you will have slightly more work to do, depending on the planets in question."

Gesturing around her, she turned to the projection table and turned it on, inserting a chip; nine planets and six moons, highlighted against their planets, were brought up.

"Some of these will be planetary flybys, where we have no coordinates for possible base sites at all, so if you get one of those, your job will be to give us not just an idea if the planet *itself* is viable, but any possible sites for further investigation," she glanced up as she spoke, her bright gaze roaming across the room and meeting their eyes, "others, we have enough info to be able to give you potential base-site coordinates, so your job *there* is to simply investigate if those are suitable. If not, if time allows or it's safe, do a wider flyby unless the planet isn't viable at all. We're counting about one to three days for each of you, so report in every day if you're not returning tomorrow. Understood?"

A chorus of 'ayes' later and a round of datapad chips having been distributed, Luke parted with Han and Chewie close to the hangars to go to the one his X-wing was parked in, comming Artoo on the way to let him know they had a mission, as small as it was. They met before either of them had gotten to Red Squadron's hangar, and Luke grinned, dropping a hand to Artoo's dome as the droid rolled up beside him.

"Hey, buddy! Ready for an adventure?"

Artoo's agreeable chirp was cheery, and Luke chuckled as they both got settled in the X-wing as soon as he'd jumped into a flightsuit. It didn't take long for them to start taxiing out of the hangar, and since they wouldn't need to get out of the gravity

well of a planet, they should soon be away... Artoo distracted him with an inquiring whistle and a short question on the screen, though, and Luke shrugged.

"I don't know, some abandoned mining planet? It was apparently used as a Separatist base during the Clone Wars, so Command's probably hoping some of the structures will be usable still and we won't have to build from the ground up... Mustafar, I thi--- *Artoo!*"

Yanking his hand away from the navicomputer to clap both of them over his ears thanks to the *loud* discordant near-shriek Artoo just piped into the cockpit, Luke swore quietly under his breath. Shaking his head and throwing a quick glare over his shoulder, he entered the coordinates to let the navicomputer do its calculations while he glanced back to the screen and the new lines of text there.

"Safe? Why wouldn't it be *safe*? Come on, Artoo, what's the problem? If they didn't think there wouldn't hopefully be *something* usable there, they wouldn't have included it in the list."

Artoo's grumbling whistle was reluctant and the screen stayed blank, so Luke shrugged and simply waited for the chime of the navicomputer to tell him it was ready.

"It'll be *fine*, Artoo."

That's what he'd *said* anyway, but as they skimmed lower and lower towards Mustafar, the scan readings giving him back negligible amounts of lifeforms and some scattered technology and buildings, Luke was growing... uneasy. He wasn't sure *what* it was and had just about convinced himself it was merely the awe-inspiring and dangerous landscape below him that was causing it as they came upon the first collection of... well, those buildings didn't look very promising, but he had to *try*, right?

Artoo's vehement twittering accompanied by the rush comments on-screen about that the place was probably structurally unsafe wasn't very encouraging, but he huffed as he took them down to land on a scorched, half-melted platform anyway. Artoo was probably right, though; the whole place looked liked it'd

been suffering from the spurts of lava and general exposure for *years*, and if there were any shield generators to keep the buildings safe, they'd long since burned out. If this place was salvageable at all, they'd have to replace the shields at minimum...

"I'll just have a look around, Artoo, give me a sec," he said and winced as the cockpit cracked open, hot, ashy air swirling in. There were probably far better places to look for other abandoned structures, and yet here he was... Artoo *blatted* a sharp noise, and Luke chuckled, though he felt weirdly tense, still - that sense of unease was thick, now, but that was *probably* just thanks to the hot, thick air, so dry it felt like it was scorching his lungs.

This place was *not* friendly, but that just meant that if there was some place protected enough to throw up some pre-fab buildings if they couldn't find anything abandoned that'd fit the bill, it would be a really good place for a possible new base.

"All right, let's see..." The metal clanged dully as he jumped down from the X-wing, but two steps away from it, Luke slowed down, growing more hesitant. Then, after another five, he came to a complete stop.

It felt impossible to breathe.

Like the air was taking up all the space in his throat but unable to move any further and now the jangling unease had spread to echo in the Force, a warning with no clear source or reason.

Squinting through the heat waver in the air, Luke frowned. Swallowed heavily, but the sensation of there being something that was *constricting his throat*, was still there, and it was only when he staggered back to the X-wing that the hot pressure seemed to let up. Artoo whistled, rattling against his socket, and Luke waved a warding hand at him.

"No, stay there. I'll get back up. This place doesn't look very useful, so let's see if there's something else 'round here." Maybe he could've just gotten a breathing mask and continued, but as he lifted off the platform and took a turn over the buildings, they *really* didn't look like they would've been all that useful.

Better look elsewhere... and it had nothing at all to do with that while the unease remained, the screaming edge of it was gone as they continued, just high enough to avoid the highest plumes of lava that spouted up from the glowing rivers and lakes. The planet looked like it'd had a few layers of crust scraped off, the inner blood spilling everywhere, or maybe like it'd been turned inside out.

"... This place's giving me the creeps," Luke muttered after a few minutes, veering away from a giant lavafall and steering up along the river. It looked like there was something more building-like poking up further above... Which proved to the right, as they crested the rise and a low 'flood plain' opened up below, a huge, stark spire rising up next to the lava river and up from the black sand and rock of the plain. Artoo made a strange little noise, the screen on translating it as a wordless question, and Luke shrugged.

"Think it's the headquarters of the former mining operation or something?"

Artoo's answering whistle was hesitant, but also hesitantly agreeing, and Luke took them around the tower several times - whatever it was, it had a functioning shield, and when he landed down below on the large stretch of polished rock in front of what seemed to be the entrance and opened the cockpit, the air was... more breathable. Clearly the shield extended out over this 'entrance area' as well, otherwise it certainly wouldn't feel this cool and easy to breathe.

"Stay here Artoo. I'll have a look... I'll keep my comm open, all right?"

Of course, Artoo didn't like that *at all*, but Luke turned around halfway to the entrance, hands on his hips and shaking his head.

"Look, we don't know what the place looks like inside, or if anything works aside from the shield generators! If no elevators work in there, you're gonna have a hell of a time with the stairs!"

Not that Artoo *couldn't* walk up and down stairs. It just took time and effort, and they weren't supposed to stay here for a

week. Grumbling, Artoo settled down and twittered a reprimand over the comm too for good measure. Chuckling, Luke gave him a wave and continued towards the doors - which opened before he got within even a few meters of it, a cloaked and masked guy in red armour and flowing red robes stepping out, a pike of some sort in one hand.

“One single assassin?” the guard, or whatever he was, chuckled, his voice muffled behind his helmet as his pike buzzed to life with plasma charge. Luke stopped and took a step backwards, just staring for a confused moment. Imperial? He didn’t look like he was part of any of the regular army or navy, if so... “Are you rebel scum so hard up fo---”

Luke had barely put a hand to his hip as the masked and armoured guard lowered his pike when Artoo warbled from the comm and the Force jangled - he didn’t need both of them to realise what Artoo was going to do. So what Luke didn’t even bother to yell to Artoo that he was *overreacting*, just dropped to the hard, polished stone and *rolled*. The guard leapt after him, pike swinging down...

And straight into the path of the X-wing’s cannons as the ones on the right wing blazed to life.

Luke kept rolling, cursing quietly as his back felt like it’d *melted*, but as he rolled over the ground, it didn’t hurt. He hadn’t actually been hit, but those cannons weren’t meant to be used on small targets like *that*. Looking up as he got to his knees, Luke groaned quietly, pressing his lips together briefly. It was... quite a sight. Not really enough left to be *ill over*, but...

“Artoo...” Throwing a look over his shoulder at his X-wing and the droid still in the socket on its back, Artoo’s warbled twitter was smugly pleased, then chirped again and Luke huffed. “No, Artoo. I’ll be careful, but I think we need to check this out.”

‘We’ meaning ‘him’, currently, and he crept inside, alert for running into a legion of stormtroopers, workers, anything... but the hall beyond the doors was empty, and the corridors beyond as well. It didn’t... actually seem like anyone lived here at a first

look, and the further he got through the spire, the more he wondered if the red-clad man had been part of something larger *at all*. Though there *had* been that weird comment about him supposedly being ‘an assassin’, though what there was in this place *to assassinate*, Luke wasn’t sure.

Because there didn’t really seem to be anything here, as he wandered, taking turbolifts a few floors at a time as he came across them, following... he wasn’t sure. Something. The creeping unease tingled in the back of his head along with the Force, a tense string plucked to keep him on edge even when, again, there didn’t seem to be a reason or source for it.

At least there didn’t seem to be until he came to the door.

That was a ridiculous way to think of it, because the double doors didn’t look any different from the other doors he’d walked past (though he had, by now, spotted *some* signs of habitation), but he couldn’t call it ‘a’ door. There was a weight to it that suggested more than that, as much as it looked like every other set of doors in the spire.

It was colder, here.

It seemed to seep out from behind the double doors, even if, when he laid his hand on the metal, it was no colder than the wall to the left or the right of it. It was cold in *the Force*, somehow, and he didn’t know what that meant. It felt like like anger, a burn so cold it was acid and hot in the back of his throat. Like *death*, if death would have a feeling beyond what *you yourself* thought about what you were seeing, feeling, in the face of it.

Luke had never considered that such things would be felt through the Force, before. It was also a little bit *familiar*, but he couldn’t put a finger on it. Whatever else he was picking up aside from the very clear darkness that had swaddled the Force and he’d only noticed *now*, it was... muted. Diluted? He shrugged mentally. It didn’t feel *danger*, however, not like the other times he’d gotten warnings through the Force.

“Well, let’s see what this is about, then...” Despite saying that, something told him that Mustafar wouldn’t be a good idea for a

base, and that meant he should leave now. But the door in front of him taunted him with whatever could be inside - maybe this place wasn't *Imperial*, but something to do with the Force? With the *Jedi*? It could explain why he was feeling things in the Force, couldn't it?

With that thought in mind, he took the two steps sideways needed to reach the panel to trigger the door, and it slid open silently, no alarms or anything at all springing to life as he stepped inside.

The room was lit only sparingly, but it was enough to see by. Not that there was much *to see*; all that seemed to be in the room was a bacta tank filled with bacta so stuffed with additives the liquid was *milky* instead of clear. Milky, but not *opaque*.

And where he'd first thought there was nothing inside the tank, the liquid swirled around something and Luke came to a stop, nearly stumbling on his own feet.

"What---"

The guard had wondered why there was only one assassin.

Luke had wondered what there even *was* in this place *to assassinate*.

The answer hung, partially obscured by bacta and muted in the Force, probably due to sleep (he'd never thought you might feel different in the Force while sleeping, but apparently that was so), in front of him. Limbless, pale like bones picked clean by scavengers, scoured by sand and bleached by the suns, and with an awkward-looking panel stuck in his chest, right in front of him.

"*Vader?*" It shouldn't be a question, even hissed as it'd been, because he *knew*. Knew despite that there wasn't really any actual way to tell without the suit - Darth Vader had all limbs though and here there were none, severed at different lengths... prosthetics? - but he did know. He could *feel it*.

Luke crossed the distance before he realised he had, one hand on his lightsaber and the other smacking into cool, solid plexi as he stared, breath caught in his throat and pulse thundering in

his ears.

He could do this.

For Leia, for Biggs, for Ben, and for *so many others*.

He could do this, and his lack of mastery of the Force wouldn't matter, Vader's superior skill with a lightsaber wouldn't matter, *nothing would matter*--- closing his eyes and tightening his trembling hand around the lightsaber where he'd pressed the blade end against the plexi, angled upwards towards the black box on Vader's chest, Luke swallowed down bile.

He could do it, and *then what?*

The man was *asleep*, hanging in a bacta tank - he really *would* be nothing more than an assassin, like this. And maybe that was all Darth Vader deserved. Maybe he deserved even *less* than that, but whenever he'd envisioned killing Vader, it'd been in battle, their blades meeting, or in a dog fight, not like... not like *this*. It would be like walking into a hospital and starting to shoot people.

Luke recoiled at the thought, his anger collapsing in on itself. He couldn't... he couldn't do *that*.

Opening his eyes, Luke almost jumped back, but he was at the same time frozen as he met the blue eyes staring at him, hazy and relaxed. There was even a small smile - it looked painful, even that little smile, the way it must be pulling on the... wound? sores? to the side up along Vader's left cheek - on the pale face, though he couldn't imagine why the man was smiling.

He couldn't move. His hand was still flat against the plexi as he stared at Vader and Vader... stared back at him, *definitely* not awake just yet and he should *move* and get out of here *now*, if he couldn't kill him like this, but he couldn't---

Something brushed through his hair, but he knew there was nothing behind him, and it wasn't even a sudden draft.

It felt like fingers, trailing along the crown of his head and then brushing his fringe aside. Vader's lips moved, slowly---

"*You!*"

Luke ripped himself away and whirled around, falling back

against the bacta tank as his legs responded a second later than his brain wanted. Another red-clad and red-armoured guard. *This* he could do. Smiling grimly, he lit his lightsaber and pulled his blaster out of its holster, but before he got the chance to fire or the guard the chance to lunge forward, *both* of them paused.

The room was *vibrating*, and the guard was no longer looking at him. Luke, despite that he knew it was ill-advised, glanced behind him.

Vader was staring *straight at him*, and his eyes were burning yellow, not blue.

The plexi in the bacta tank cracked.

"Oh, hells---" Firing at the guard mostly seemed to make him start *moving*, because he practically threw himself out of the room instead of attacking him, and Luke followed unthinkingly as metal warped around him, the door shrieking a protest as it slid closed behind him. "Artoo! Start up the ship!"

He hardly heard the answering warble from the comm as he yelped and threw himself sideways into the wall, away from the lit pike that'd almost ripped into his shoulder.

"Going somewhere, rebel scum?" Slightly different voice, still muffled in the same way as the other guard's, and Luke grunted, whipping up his lightsaber between them to meet the pike's next downwards cut. His lightsaber didn't cut through the pike however, but rather met the plasma and *held there*, the pike hissing and spitting against the lightsaber's humming. Behind them there was the noise of metal being rent apart, and Luke *knew* he was living on borrowed time.

"Get out of the way!"

Out out out, he needed *out*.

"Funny, reb---!"

"*Move!*"

The guard staggered back a few steps for no seeming reason, and Luke didn't even question it (though when he'd get time for it later, he'd be frustrated that he still hadn't learned how to do that in a controlled fashion). He leapt forward, past the guard -

and then staggered back a step as the floor in front of him was lit up with laser blasts. Cursing, he turned back around to deflect the shots aimed at him.

Or, well, that was the *theory*, and he *had* done this before, but it wasn't easy and not a single one of the reflected shots ended up where he *wanted* them to; that was, in the guard. The floor and walls, however, were soon littered with sooty burns and Luke was distinctly aware of the only sounds being his own breathing, his lightsaber's humming, and the whine from the guard's blaster as he advanced on him, forcing him to stay put by shooting around his feet every time he started to try and back off towards the turbolift.

The point was, there were no more sounds of tearing metal from within the bacta tank room, however muffled.

No sounds at all, in fact, and Luke glanced away from the guard for a second and toward the doors further down the corridor - just in time to see them open.

"No!" He couldn't take *both* of them. Stars, he couldn't even take *Vader*, and he *knew it*. As the man strode through the doors, once again fully suited, Luke's blaster was ripped out of his holster and went flying into Vader's hand.

Luke decided not to wait around to have his lightsaber likewise stolen and risked it, whirling around to run down the corridor again. There was a strange lack of blasts hitting either the floor *or him*, though, and he looked over his shoulder and stumbled to a stop. The guard lay face-down on the floor, a smoking hole on his back. Luke blinked, gaping down at the corpse.

Slowly looking up from the corpse at Vader, they started at each other, neither of them moving. The stale-mate was broken by the soft thunder of approaching steps from the other end of the corridor behind Vader. A second or two later revealed it to be an old man in a black cloak coming running, and surprisingly quickly too, and Luke watched, dumbstruck, as Vader turned around and shot him, too.

"W-what... what are you *doing?!'*" Levelling his lightsaber up in

front of him as Vader turned around to face him again and tossed his blaster behind him, Luke had no idea if the slight pause - was Vader swaying a little on his feet? - was intentional or not. The cock of the helmet definitely was, though.

"Very tragic, that rebel assassins would penetrate this deeply into the fortress, isn't it," the deep rumble shouldn't be able to sound *sarcastic*, relayed through a vocoder as it was, but somehow it did. Luke shook his head slowly, feeling like a pole-axed dewback.

"But that's..." That's not what happened. Not that it *mattered*. Vader's *reasons* for doing this didn't matter either, and he straightened up, glowering. "You're not in the tank any longer, Vader."

"Astute, young one. Put the weapon down. I do not wish to harm you."

"You don't..." He must be kidding, right? Luke grimaced. His earlier intention to flee was gone, now, and he set his jaw. "I have no idea why you did *that*, but don't expect me to *thank you*!"

He leaped forward again, and their lightsabers - where had Vader's come from, how fast had he *lit it*? - met with a crackling hiss. Vader was an unbending wall for a few, very long seconds, but then he slid half a step backwards, and Luke could feel the slight unsteadiness in his footing. Getting out of the bacta tank like he had had clearly affected him. This would be his chance!

The swing he took was too wild, too *wide*, but while Vader got his blade up only *just* in time, the deflection that followed forced Luke forward, or he'd leave himself open. Vader immediately followed it up with a thrust, but it seemed... far slower than it should be, and he could parry it easily, despite the clumsiness of the move.

"You have promise, Skywalker, but need training."

"Yeah, and whose fault is *that*?!" Angry again now and wondering why he hadn't taken his chance before Vader woke up (he knew why, still, and couldn't regret it), Luke lunged - and Vader stepped *aside* instead. Something push him in the back as he

staggered from the lack of resistance, sending him sprawling onto the floor while his lightsaber was yanked away by nothing but the iron grip of the Force.

“Obi-Wan was an old, failed man and teacher, young one. *I* will finish your training,” Vader rumbled and Luke rolled around, getting to his feet as Vader stepped up in front of him, the red lightsaber casting eerie light and shadow on the floor and up on Vader.

“Wh--- *no you won't!*” Who did Vader think he was? Who did he think *Luke* was, that he'd accept? Just because he was desperate to learn the ways of the Force didn't mean he wanted to learn it from just *anyone*. And *definitely not* from the man who'd killed his father, killed Ben and Biggs and *so many others*.

His blaster should be somewhere around here, shouldn't it? Vader had just tossed it away...

“We will continue this discussion later, Skywalker.”

Luke was, for a crucial second, incredulously staring up at Vader, because that tone, even filtered through the vocoder as it was, sounded like Uncle Owen shutting him down when he thought he was being childish. Though with - somehow - more *humour* underlying the words than his uncle had ever used at that implied point in an argument and he couldn't *believe* he'd just heard those words from *Darth Vader*---

Something brushed his mind. Implacable, gentle.

It whispered *sleep*, and no matter Luke's shocked outrage, he slumped to the floor, out cold.

Darth Vader stood over his unconscious son, and despite the ruin he'd made of the bacta tank room, felt triumphant. He would tell his master his 'sanctuary' on Mustafar was no longer secure, that the rebels had found him, the bodies shot with a blaster more than enough proof, and that he would, for the foreseeable future, establish his base on *Executor*. It was, after all, both mobile, well-armed and well equipped to deal with his needs.

It would also be a good place to hide his son.

He shifted a little unsteadily on his feet as he relaxed, just a little - and then immediately stiffened again as the turbolift chimed. The knowledge that there was no way his master could know what had happened here *just yet* was the only reason he could turn around to face the turbolift calmly, and then stared at the angrily screeching little droid that rolled out with something approaching unreality.

For a second, despite that he could feel the slight resistance of Luke's leg pressing against his heel, he wondered if he was still in the tank. That couldn't...

He *had* heard the boy yell 'Artoo'... but that didn't mean it *meant anything*. Other droids would end up with the same designation, even when they were of the same make and type---

He turned the astromech off at a distance and resolved to examine that *later*. He needed to secure his son, and remove them all to the *Executor*. Turning around, Darth Vader knelt very, very carefully - the interrupted cycle had done him no favours, even less the way he'd practically *broken out* of the bacta tank - and picked his son up. Vaneé's room would do until after he'd had his talk with his master.

Standing up, Darth Vader paused. Stared down at the slack, but still slightly frowning, face of the young man he held, and clutched him a little more firmly, ignoring the murmured protest.

Finally.

Nothing would stop him now.



Chapter 43:

In Which the Force Finally Becomes Proactive



Part 1:

In Which Luke's Grandma Talks About Kitchens

Better late than never, right? This has gone on long enough, and the Son of the Suns need some help to get out of that poisoned swamp he's stuck in. What better help than his own son, and the planet he was born on?

Luke starts out dreaming, first about his father, then about his grandmother. She wants him to help save his father, but his father is dead, isn't he..?

"Ready to go, Co-pilot?" The teasing, self-assured grin was bright, the blue eyes just as sharp, and Luke laughed as he threw himself into the co-pilot's chair.

"Yessir!"

A hand clothed in a heavy black glove reached out to ruffle his hair. Luke groaned and tried to whap it away, all the while he tried to decide if he wanted to stay in here until the dream dissolved or not. He wasn't five, or ten or even twelve anymore. He wasn't a *baby* and he *knew* his father was dead. These dreams were just... The engine rumbled to life beneath and behind them, a dull roar that couldn't be heard and a subtle vibration in the deck plates underneath their feet. Luke glanced to his father where he sat behind him, hands flying over the controls. There seemed to be a dark edge smudging his outline, but Luke didn't care. Hadn't ever cared he could never quite see his father's face. That was familiar - the same thing happened whenever he'd

dream about having a sister.

But he didn't *have* a sister, and he knew it. Just like he knew his father was de---

"Luke?"

Both of them looked up, equally startled; Luke because there *never* was anyone else in these private fantasy dream moments he conjured up, and the voice wasn't even Aunt Beru's, waking him up. It was soft, worn, and unfamiliar, but the expression he could faintly see on his father's face had gone from *surprise* to *dark rage*, and his stomach twisted uneasily, not understanding. Why would he react like that? Why would he react *at all* to something that was apparently just a new quirk of the dream? The dark halo outlining and smudging some of his father's form flickered and seemed to slide further over the dark pilot's uniform he wore as he surged up in his seat.

"Luke, I need you out in the galley. Ani, just stay there. It'll be all right."

His father staggered back, blue eyes pale and wide even as the dark twist swelled further, and Luke took the opportunity to obey. He slid out of the chair and around it, darting towards the door. For a brief moment, right before he dashed through the door out of the cockpit, he was aware of a few things. One; his father hadn't ever called him by his name, in *any* of these dreams, but this unknown woman did. Two; he didn't know his father had been called 'Ani', so how could he use it? Three; it didn't feel like a hand just grabbed his shoulder, just an extension of the dark smudge that usually outlined his father's form, and he didn't want to look to check. Four; he could hear the engine when before he hadn't been able to---

Luke blinked up at the ceiling of his small bedroom, realising the distant, thrumming sound wasn't that of an *engine*, but the worst sandstorm to plague Tatooine's northern hemisphere in... what had Uncle Owen said, thirty seven years? It'd been going on for three days now, and showed no sign of abating, yet. Uncle Owen was darkly predicting an awful lot of work to restore every

single vaporator they owned when the storm finally abated.

He wasn't looking forward to that *at all*, but with his schooling tapering off and now conducted on a half-time, distance-learning plan, both because they didn't have the credits to send him to Bestine or pay for the extra materials that would mean Anchorhead with the others because Aunt Beru certainly couldn't home school him anymore, and because Uncle Owen needed the help, there was nothing he could do about it.

"Luke?"

Startling, Luke scuttled back, pulling the covers with him and his hand patting around for a weapon, *any* weapon - all he found was the model of his T-16, set, as always, on the night stand. Blinking wide, blue eyes, it took several long moments before he could understand what he was looking at, and Luke decided, no matter how real things felt, that he must still be dreaming.

Because his grandmother was *dead*, and shouldn't be standing by his bed with a small, patient smile on her face that seemed similar but fundamentally different to Aunt Beru's.

"... Grandma?" He'd never dreamed of his grandmother before, but it couldn't be anyone else. He'd seen what few holos there were of her and Grandpa Cliegg (even if he wasn't his biological grandfather, just Uncle Owen's dad), and the woman standing there, the shadows in the room not *quite* close enough to turn her colours monochrome, looked like her.

"I need your help, Luke," she said, and even as she smiled a little, again, there was a slight pinch of a frown between her eyebrows. That pinch almost kept Luke from saying the words that came to mind, but only *almost*.

"In the galley?" he asked, arching an eyebrow in the way only teenagers could, slowly letting go of the sharp plastoid angles of the model T-16. His grandmother's smile deepened and she looked away, raising a hand to shield her smile before she sobered up and turned back to him with a nod.

"Kitchens are the heart of a home, Luke, no matter if they're on a planet or in a ship."

That was something Aunt Beru had told him, several times. Well, not the last bit, but the first one, and suddenly he wondered if Aunt Beru had gotten it from his *grandmother*. Maybe? They had known each other a few years before his grandmother had died, after all, and even lived in the homestead together for a few of those.

Looking down at his rumpled sheets, Luke sighed. He didn't *want* to get up, even if it was just in the sense of getting up in his dream. He was warm and comfortable, and the sandstorm's vibrating beat was calling him to sleep - it was kinda funny, actually. Aside from frantically warning Uncle Owen in the afternoon just shortly after he'd left for the vaporators furthest out on the homestead, two hours before the sandstorm rolled in without a single warning from any weather reports, Luke had felt relaxed ever since. His aunt and uncle had been tense since the communications cut out after that last emergency news broadcast about it being the worst seen in *decades*, but Luke... felt pretty safe. They were inside, and no Tusken would be able to attack even isolated farms like theirs in this weather, and the storm... He didn't know what it was, but he just felt relaxed with it beating away outside.

"I *guess*. What do you need help with?" Because why not, honestly? He'd done both weirder and more boring things in his dreams than help his dead grandmother cook a bantha stew, or whatever. He couldn't help a second sigh as he crawled out of bed, running a hand through his sleep-mussed hair, though.

Getting up *really* wasn't tempting. It felt like getting up in the morning, though the sandstorm outside, which he couldn't see in here, threw off any easy way to tell time aside from checking a chrono or guessing on your internal one. The floor was smooth-rough like always underneath his feet, *there* in a way that felt real, but *everything* felt very real at the moment. He supposed it was just one of those dreams.

"First we need to get your father home for dinner," his grandmother said, and Luke stopped in the doorway, blinking. Turn-

ing around to look at the woman's weathered face and gray-shot hair, Luke was torn between the usual childish desire to let dreams be dreams, *especially these* that pretended his father wasn't *dead*, and calling them out. Biting his lip and looking away as he hesitated for a few more moments, Luke stares out into the short corridor. The only light outside was the sandstorm emergency lighting, painting soft, yellow blotches along the floor and walls.

"But... Grandma, you know he's---"

"Not quite, Luke."

Head snapping up at the hand suddenly on his shoulder, Luke battled with a scowl and finally just frowned, feeling it fall into a slightly sullen pout. He'd been reprimanded by Uncle Owen *so many times* for pretending his father wasn't dead, while growing up and he was old enough now - *fourteen*, for stars' sake - to stop being childish about pretending that he wasn't dead.

"We just need to get him home, and then make sure he can eat to drive out the poison," his grandmother said, and Luke frowned. Glancing up into those warm, brown eyes, it was like the dream wavered for a moment, infinity and stars--- Sucking in a breath, Luke blinked into the yellow-lit darkness of the corridor, feeling unsettled and... and like he was on the edge of something important. Something which shifted within him, stirring something that had been sleeping up until now. Shaking his head, Luke grimaced.

"I'll help if you need it, but I don't..." he shrugged, uncertain what to say, and just set off down the corridor. He relaxed the longer they walked; out the short corridor, into the stairwell, down into the main pit... and by that point, the gentle squeeze on his shoulder redirecting him towards the stairwell that'd lead to the entrance dome seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Luke forgot he was barefoot, even with the rock underneath his feet and the feeling of sand caught between his toes. Not even the sandstorm was of any concern, even as he stepped out from the protected dome (a forcefield keeping the main pit

from being drowned in sand) and into the roaring storm.

This was a dream, after all, and with the expectation of the safety of a dream, Luke didn't fear the harsh winds or the sand.

The vicious sandstorm didn't touch him, as expected. It beat around him in flowing veils of dust and sand and even rock, electric charge discharging into weirdly-coloured lightning in the distance, but he was safe. There was a pool of stillness around him, and he just... walked.

The sand underneath his feet conformed to his feet, cradling them instead of ripping at or burning - or chilling - his skin and toes, and thus walking was easy. The wind that seemed to create the little bubble he walked in made sure no sand blew into his face or mouth, even better than during the day normally, so it was even *easier* to walk and breathe than normal. Luke wasn't sure how long they walked, or how far, but the night gentled into dawn and then aged into a late-burning afternoon. The sandstorm was still there, shielding him from the heat that should've been beating down on him and sucking him dry.

"Here we are," Grandma said, and Luke stopped, startled to realise he'd forgotten she was there - *had* she even been there, for most of the walk? He couldn't remember... But the thought was forgotten in favour of looking around, from his grandmother to his surroundings. The sandstorm thrumming around them kept the blue sky and the suns from view, turning the air into yellow-dusted rose, beating against the vast collection of rocks they were standing by. No, not rocks. Looking longer, it looked, vaguely, like pieces of a building. A ruin?

"... *Where* are we?" Luke turned back to his grandmother, who smiled that soft, patient smile again, shaking her head.

"Our kitchen, of course. I just need you to open the door, Luke."

"The *door*?" Turning around, just to confirm what he'd seen before, Luke frowned. "There's no *door*, Grandma, it's just... rock."

The laughter behind him didn't sound *quite right*, and Luke

almost whirled around to face her. His hand was caught before he could, though, and gently stretched out so his palm was laid against wind-smoothed rock.

"It is a door; these are ruins, aren't they? Even if this doesn't look like a door, there's something inside we need, and then, that makes this a door, doesn't it?"

Biting his lip and scowling, Luke thought that over. It both sounded right and not, but he couldn't figure out in what way. Maybe it didn't matter, because dreams didn't have to make sense, right? The sand under his feet was warm, too warm, and yet didn't burn.

"... Okay. I guess so. What--- I mean, how do we open it?"

He could feel the smile more than he saw it, and the sand-storm pulsed around him.

"It's a door, isn't it? Just focus on *opening it*, Luke. Doors, locked or not, if they're closed, can be opened. That's all there is to it. Just *open* it."

"But it's *huge* and I'm just---"

"Luke."

He stilled, the sound of his name like a thunderclap through him, and the sand should be burning, shouldn't it?

"Shh. Focus on the rock, how it feels. On the sand underneath and around you, and ignore it all. Focus on *you*, and that you want to open the door." The words thrummed, sang. Filled him up and he couldn't not listen to them, his protests dying, forgotten.

The sand was hot, too hot, but cradled his feet. The air was *also* too hot, a burning flame turned into air - nothing like the heat of noon or the slowly cooling afternoon, not on the *north-ern* hemisphere anyway - and yet he could breathe. The sand-storm roared around him, a thunderous weight of impossible proportion; it was easier to focus on the smooth, but rough, stone beneath his hand, the calluses of his hand against the rock, the blood rushing in his ears...

Open the door?

He didn't understand... well, okay, he sort of did, because the rock, if it hid a tunnel or something, was a door, after a fashion anyway. But it was just *rock*, and he was short and slim and what muscles he was building from working on the farm wouldn't help him push the stone aside. *Open* the door? How was he supposed to open it when he couldn't move the rock? You moved doors, after all, even if it was just by motion detecting sensors...

Frowning, Luke thought about that. This was a rock, but it was also a *dream*, right? So maybe it could just be like his hand was triggering a motion detector... The stone underneath his hand was thrumming, like the sandstorm. Luke frowned harder, focused on the thought of *motion detectors* opening doors, on his hand, on---

Something shivered within him again, and for a moment there wasn't sand and rock around him, but light, and something that felt like a tingle, something that strove and grew and *aged*. Something like life. A door wasn't alive, of course, and despite the fascinating, tingling warmth, Luke focused on the distant weight underneath his hand, because it wasn't alive in that way, and remembered *open the door*.

Staggering forward, gasping and feeling tired suddenly, Luke blinked sweat out of his eyes and stared at the shadows beyond the doorway. It even looked like a corridor, if very weathered. The rock under his feet hummed, and Luke remembered the tingling light, and suddenly realised something.

He was very, very thirsty.

Whirling around and almost falling, heart thundering in his ears, he stared wide-eyed at the woman a few steps behind him, standing by the rock that was now to the side of the 'doorway'. He swallowed, barely generating any saliva, and fisted his trembling hands.

"You're not my grandmother."

Shmi Skywalker tilted her head, and for the first time Luke could see, against the backdrop of the sandstorm, the smudged edge of light around her form.

“Technically...” A pause in which Luke opened his mouth to yell a demand about being taken back to the homestead, but the words caught in his throat, because there was infinity and stars and a gentle, tingling light again. He couldn’t breathe, felt like he was falling - if you could fall through space - like he was held suspended in something vaguely familiar along with something blazing blue, half cradled around him.

Then reality snapped back, and Luke jumped back from the burning sand, onto rock that merely pulsed with warmth instead of threatened to melt the soles of his feet. Felt very, very alone suddenly, missing the vaguely remembered blaze of blue. Like he was missing something. Somehow, he could still breathe the unforgivably hot air.

The woman in front of him didn’t look like Shmi Skywalker anymore. She still had her smile, but that was all. She was wrapped in the sandstorm and her eyes were like the suns, but what she actually looked like was impossible to tell. Luke looked away, down at his dusty, sand-caked feet and pressed his trembling hands to his thighs. Felt tiny and afraid and a little angry, but also awed. He wanted a hug from Aunt Beru.

“I am. But Luke, it doesn’t matter. You can still help your father.”

Head snapping up against his better judgement, Luke stared for a moment, then just felt angry. Why was she *mocking him*!?

“My father’s---!”

“Alive, Luke Skywalker, and you can help him. Do you want to?”

Breath catching in his throat, Luke stared. The woman’s eyes burned like the hidden suns, jewels that glowed with power about to birth something terrible and great. It was the truth. He didn’t know how he knew, why he was *trusting her*, but... it was the truth.

“I...” His eyes burned, but he wasn’t a *baby*, and he wasn’t going to cry. He didn’t know what to do, though. Why, *how* was his father alive, and why would he need *him* to save him? Luke was

just...

"Chains hold even adults, Luke, and sickness requires doctors to help heal," the woman said, whoever, *whatever* she was (he was shying away from the stories Aunt Beru had told him, the stories heard from the old women in Anchorhead, that revealed possibilities), and she sounded softer now, kinder. Her words just made him shudder, made him aware that he was *trembling*, though, because what could *he* do..?

Scrubbing his eyes, Luke straightened, and despite the trembling awe inside, frowned up at the woman.

"What about my aunt and uncle?"

She smiled, and like her words before, it was a softer, kind one. Exactly the one she'd had when looking like Shmi. "Are perfectly safe back at the homestead. We have a few hours before it's dawn, at the least."

That was the truth as well. Biting his lip and crossing his arms, Luke stared down at the rock he was standing on; smooth flagstones roughened by trails of sand that had blown in.

"... I... I don't know what *I* can do, but if I can do something, I'll do it," Luke said, finally looking back up, feeling... he wasn't sure. Like something was about to happen, more than it *already* had, whatever was going on, "if my father's alive and need help, I'll help him."

She smiled at him, bright and heavy and like *forever*, and then the weight was gone.

"This way, then."

The woman led the way inside, and only a few steps in the hot air turned cool, and there was a tingle to it like the glow of light he'd felt when trying to move the stone. Which Luke still wasn't sure *how* he'd done it, actually. Or why she'd said they had a few hours before it was dawn when it was *late afternoon* he---

Luke stopped, then hurried after her. Didn't quite run up beside her, but ended up much closer than before.

"How--- How did we get to the *southern hemisphere*!?" And how was he *still alive*? The southern hemisphere was only mar-

ginally more safe during the night, due to how hot it was. Tatooine didn't have the sort of resources that'd make it worth it to try and live down south, or even temporarily work there, and yet here he was. The woman turned her head, a shawl of shadows framing her face and falling down over her back and arms now, instead of sand.

"We walked, Luke."

Sputtering, he almost fell down the stairs that were suddenly there, but caught himself on the wall and continued down carefully.

"I know it's harder to accept now that you no longer think you're dreaming, but the Force can do many things. Some seemingly impossible," she said as she glanced over to him with her noon-bright eyes, smiling in a way that was teasing and reassuring at once. Any protest fell away for confusion.

"The Force?"

"The Force is life, *comes from* life, ties life together. A *connection*, from beginning to end and the space in-between," the woman said, her gaze turning distant and the whole of her form briefly seeming to almost smudge away into the shadows around them. Then she was *there* properly again, glancing at him with that kind of... conspirational smile from earlier. "You just used the Force the open the door, Luke."

"*Me?*" gaping at her, Luke couldn't wrap his head around it. He'd just--- moved a rock.

Moved a *much too large rock*, which he shouldn't have been able to move. Eyes wide again, Luke blinked and looked around. Found nothing much on the steps but some tiny rocks, but that was enough, wasn't it? He just... needed... Gritting his teeth, finally closing his eyes, Luke tried. And tried. And *tried*, but *nothing happened* and he didn't *understand*---

"Slow down, Luke," she said beside him, and Luke twitched, twisted back and stumbled against the wall again, "you're starting in the right direction, but your frame of mind isn't correct right now. And you need to pace yourself anyway, if you want to

save your father. Patience, you'll learn."

Patience. Luke almost bristled, but the comment about needing to pace himself if he wanted to save his father made him slump a little and start walking again. He still didn't know how he was supposed to do *that*, but *if* he was, she was probably right. It wasn't like he knew what he needed to do, or what sort of effort it'd take.

How long it took to walk the stairs, Luke wasn't sure. His toes were getting cold, though, and it wasn't any better when they finally came to the bottom. He couldn't see *anything* - well, anything aside from himself, the woman, and the patch of smooth flagstones they stood on, because now she was wrapped in soft dawn, like clouds and the sky lit from the suns that were still underneath the horizon. Following her carefully across the floor and through an archway, her light started to spread and catch, and, amazingly, there was a sound of falling water. There was an odd smell here, too, like in the greenhouses before harvest...

The woman's light caught in crystals that hung from the ceiling and grew, revealing a polished dome of a room with trailing vines and small bushes, water running down the curved ceiling and into channels by the walls and---

"Krayt---" Luke staggered back, heart in his throat, then stopped abruptly, overbalanced, and fell on his behind. A carving. A *life-sized statue* of a Greater Krayt Dragon, with two larger crystals - the suns, he realised - and three smaller ones - the *moons* - hanging above it, catching the woman's light and spreading it throughout the room. In the statue's huge, wickedly clawed front paws, an actual, not *carved* krayt dragon pearl was cradled. "Wh-where are we?"

Looking up at the woman, he realised she was waiting for him to get back to his feet. Luke did so, feeling foolish as he dusted his sleeping pants off and, slowly, unable to help himself, crossed the room towards the statue and the pearl.

"Many have used the Force throughout the years, Luke, even here on Tatooine," the woman said, then paused. She reached

the statue with him, and knelt down, stretched a hand out to brush a finger down the pearl's opalescent curve, "*especially* here on Tatooine. This place, and this room in particular... consider it a sort of amplifier."

Frowning, Luke snatched his fingers away from the still-polished surface of the dragon pearl and looked up at the woman. "What?"

"Your father is far, far away from here, Luke, and while you're strong, you aren't trained," she said slowly, something in her voice that reminded him of the way Uncle Owen would murmur a '*good job*' and squeeze his shoulder, or Aunt Beru would smile at him and say he'd done great, "so you'll need help to reach him and yet go nowhere, because actually *going* anywhere would take far more work... and worry your family."

Okay, put like that Luke's annoyance over not getting to *choose* how to help his father dwindled, even if getting to leave Tatooine would be *awesome* and one day he *would* do just that. Maybe even soon. Taking a breath and looking from the pearl, small in the giant statue's front pair of paws, to the woman, Luke bit his lip.

"Okay... so what do I do?"

"Sit down, and put one of your hands on the pearl. Close your eyes."

Hesitating for a few more moments, his heartbeats counting out the passing seconds, Luke finally did as she told him to, crossing his legs and shifting until he was comfortable, letting his left hand dangle off his thigh and reaching out to curve his right over and around the krayt dragon pearl. His knees and bare toes pressed up against the statue's rough stone, scales carved into the rock, though the palms of the paws were smooth. The claws looked sharp enough to cut yourself on, but Luke wasn't about to try it.

Tilting his head back, he looked up along the curved neck of the krayt until he met its huge head, wicked teeth just barely bared by the gap in its snout. The eyes, he realised after a star-

tled moment, were krayt dragon pearls as well, black and shimmering, compared to the milky rainbow iridescence of the one resting in the dragon's paws. Above the head and along the body, the two suns and the three moons hung, and Luke suddenly realised that this meant that either the pearl in the dragon's paws was supposed to be Tatooine, or the statue of the greater krayt dragon itself was. Well... maybe? It seemed silly when he thought about it...

"Ready?" The murmur thrummed around him, and Luke didn't look to the woman, rather he looked down, away from the shimmering-abyss eyes of the dragon, and to the pearl hidden underneath his hand.

His eyes slipped closed without any conscious intent or thought. What he needed to do now, though, he didn't understand, but---

"Shh. Listen to yourself, Luke. To the flow. The light; *your life*, is inside of you. Reach for it. You have already done it once, you can do it again."

The words didn't come from a single point of location any longer, the sound gently beating around him, sounding like the rustle of sand driven by wind, feeling like the first glimmer of dawnlight, the steady tramp of a herd of bantha on sand and rock, the hum of a generator.

It could've taken a second, hours, *years*, Luke didn't know.

All he knew was that every time he got frustrated or distracted, that same voice murmured something, redirected his attention, and slowly, gently... everything sharpened until there was *light*, and he could feel...

Something light and stretching - the vines - tiny little darting flickers - the fish that apparently were swimming in the channels following the edge of the room - the pulse under his hand from the pearl, and the inexorable, yawning abyss of light underneath him.

He almost fell right in, into the bright center of Tatooine - or the Galaxy itself, maybe? - before something touched him, burn-

ing. He almost was tossed right out, then, back into his body from that simple, light touch, but the voice, her voice, whispered again, and he suddenly hung, undisturbed, in the middle of...

Luke couldn't feel anything *but* himself here. Was that what she'd wanted? It was actually scary, almost as scary as what had almost happened earlier, because he couldn't... he was *alone*---

*No, Luke. You're not. I am right here, I always will be, I always **have been** and you only need to **look**. You know what you're looking for. Remember your dreams?*

He did, of course, but what did she *mean*? What was he supposed to take from them? They were just *dreams*, no matter what he might want...

Sitting there, Luke thought back on his most recent one, the cockpit, his father beside him, the black smudge around his form, his voice and eyes and... presence? Memory turned into something that seemed *familiar*, and Luke turned, however he did that here, and stared at a pulsing, dark spot, forbidding and distant.

That... felt somewhat like the one in his dream. But he *didn't want to touch it*. The sense of it got more distant as his unwillingness to get close grew. It was... similar and yet so very different from what he felt (didn't *realise* he'd felt) in his dreams. There was anger and violence and *poison* in that direction and he'd rather, much rather, never go close to it. Luke realised he was hovering close to that bright blue flame he vaguely remembered from earlier, something which felt familiar in the same way his father's presence did. Looking at it, Luke started to reach for it. Because this one felt much nicer, and he wanted to find out why it was here, why he could *almost* touch it. Why did this feel so much *cleaner* than his...

His...

Shuddering, Luke felt like crying but didn't (could he, even, like this?), though the whole of him here rang with his upset, and again he wanted one of Aunt Beru's hugs, even if he'd turned fourteen a few months ago.

The woman had said he needed to help his father. Had mentioned something about chains and disease and that meant... The blue little blaze drifted away, and Luke finally, reluctantly, turned away from it and let it grow distant again. He was closer to that dark spot again, pulsing with... maybe, the faintest bit of light. Though maybe that was just a false impression from the frozen, dark sun that spot seemed to be.

Staring at it, Luke realised that this wasn't what it was *supposed* to feel or look like, his connection to his father, *or* his father. *That* was why he had to help. Still, he didn't get closer.

Couldn't quite understand the fact that *apparently his father was alive*, and needed his help. Why hadn't his aunt and uncle *told him*? Well... maybe they didn't know. If it wasn't his father or his mother who'd handed him over to them, they'd... only know what they'd been told, wouldn't they? Hovering there in hesitation, still not understanding what he should do, what he *could do*, since she *had* pointed out that he was untrained (but strong, apparently), Luke finally steeled himself and reached out for the pulsing, frozen dark.

Part 2:

In Which the Son of the Suns Gets a Few Surprises

As the changes in the Force are felt across the galaxy, Darth Vader feels them more directly... and gets told off.

Luke, shielded from it by his current actions, his location, and being untrained, did not feel the sudden, single shudder of unconstrained *anticipation* that went through the Force. But relatively close to Luke, old Ben Kenobi woke up from a restless sleep and rolled out of bed. Wincing at the way his prematurely-aged joints complained, he almost stormed right out into the sandstorm still battering away around his hut.

Something was wrong.

Something was about to happen, and that *something* included Luke Skywalker. Staring out the single window and at the furiously wind-driven sand outside, Obi-Wan knew he couldn't fight this weather. Hopefully Luke would be safe until the storm abated.

The shockwave of anticipation didn't dissipate.

Far, far away, close to the densely glittering core of the Galaxy, His Imperial Highness Sheev Palpatine, looked up from the datapad he was reading and narrowed his eyes. Every single muscle and tendon tight with tension, Darth Sidious gently laid the datapad down, quickly made sure he wouldn't be disturbed, and descended into meditation. Something had happened, and it would affect *everything*. He needed to find out *what* it was, how it'd change things, and then put a stop to it. He would tolerate no changes.

The anticipation hummed, and didn't yet dissipate.

On Dagobah, former Jedi Grand Master Yoda looked to the cloud-covered sky and harrumphed. Tapping his gimer stick against a rock and sending a small lizard scuttling away, he closed his eyes. The Force whirled around him with anticipa-

tion and intent, tight and expectant. The cave, kilometers away, thrummed with not-yet-thwarted retaliation. Something was going to happen, and the outcome wasn't yet clear. But it would change things... oh, it would change them, and Yoda's mind brought up scenarios tainted dark from memories and history.

The anticipation pulsed, and *refused* to dissipate.

On a ship hovering in the shadow of Nar Shaddaa, Ahsoka Tano trembled over her holoreciever, clutching the edge of the table and simply *breathed*. On the other side of the connection, she heard Hera ask if Kanan was all right, but she didn't listen to that much. She was far more focused on the Force making itself known in a way she hadn't felt since--- since the Temple burned, shrieking with echoes of *so many deaths*. But there was no death in this tremble, merely... anticipation.

Something... something about to happen.

Knuckles aching where she was holding onto the table, she wished she had *someone to ask*, but pushed it away as Hera asked for the rest of the information, presumably feeling like Kanan was all right. She'd either try to figure this out later, or ignore it. Right now, she had a job to do.

The anticipation spiralled down into expectant waiting, hovering over a primeval horror scene of a world, collecting above the dark obelisk that rose above the lava and black plains and cliffs.

Inside, Darth Vader floated almost peacefully inside a bacta tube cloudy with additional elements, and didn't wake up from what could only barely be called sleep. Indeed, while his light coasting on the currents of the Dark Side had been shattered by the shudder in the Force, something else entirely had dragged him *down*, deeper. Mustafar trembled, but the Dark Side turning like a beached whale, *clawing*, did not disturb the Sith apprentice.

He had been... resting, slowly drawing closer to the end of this

necessary frustration that he preferred happen as little as possible, for as short an amount of time as possible. Darth Vader was no longer resting. But he was also not *awake*.

Neither was he dreaming, and some tiny part of him resented this fact. For as much as those dreams hurt and made this necessary maintenance downtime even *less* pleasant, plaguing him with impossibilities as they did, he also... treasured them. Used the disgusted rage the dreams brought when he woke up, but treasured them, deep down where nothing would touch this fact. Though, he was thankful the earlier dream had been interrupted, because as painful as they normally were upon waking, this one had been *worse*.

Never before had he had to hear his *mother's* voice echo through them, or hear *that* nickname, long, long discarded. The only thing that rescued that particular dream was a possible name for the child – one that he could remember Padmé murmur once while she considered options.

He shuddered at the thought, flexing in rage, but didn't wake up. That... gave Vader pause enough to actually pay some attention. The surroundings were familiar and unwanted, but nothing special or particularly aggravating. It was simply his mind, deep in meditation. The only thing standing out was... in the distance, a tiny, glowing light.

It shouldn't be there.

Just like his mother's voice shouldn't have been in the dream. The realisation stirred a glacial rage, and Vader reached for it, preparing to snuff that light out, to make it *leave him alone*. He reached, and at that moment, it apparently reached out for him and touched him as well. Darth Vader reared back, blinded and burned, furious now. He reached again, simmering with rage but without seeing.

WAIT!

Why he stopped at the cry, he wasn't sure. Intent left hanging, and no longer unseeing in the face of the light, Vader actually looked a little closer at his intruder. It was small, so small,

but burned like a young sun or a supernova. Force sensitive, of course, but that wasn't what was strange. What was *strange* was that it couldn't be one of the Inquisitors, not as pure as it was, and it had an... untrained quality to it that left him wondering *how* it was even here. It was unfamiliar to him (something tugged, vaguely, at his attention, but he ignored it), and there was no connection, so it *shouldn't* be able to be here.

Who are you? Speak quickly. Reaching out to keep it in place, now, Vader *towered* over the tiny, but oh-so-bright light. Getting too close almost hurt, but he could destroy it if need be. It wouldn't even be *difficult*, because this... this *child* (must be, so untrained and light) wouldn't know how to defend itself.

I... It trailed off, hesitation rising in reluctant waves from it, unhindered and nearly *forced* on him in its untrained openness. They were far too close, but he couldn't retreat. He drew himself closer in lieu of putting some space between them, pulled on the Force more firmly, and the aching light quavered, stuttering in fear and angry regret.

It almost seemed to decide to not say anything out of sullen *stubbornness* before it flared, rising up. He *almost* got a fleeting imagine of blond hair and blue eyes, achingly familiar from all those dreams. Darth Vader snarled, infuriated at being reminded, at having this *pulled up again*, and again almost struck.

I'm--- Wait! Wait, do you... um, do you remember... the dreams?

How, by the Force, did this child *know*?!

No.

He didn't need to listen to this.

He *would not* listen to this.

Darth Vader reached out with the intent to *crush*, and the Force trembled. The Dark sang something sickly and triumphant in his ears, but he couldn't hear it. Before he could do what he wanted to do however, his hand, his intent, his *power*, was caught. Vader stared down at the child, sun-bright in his mind, clumsily trying to ward off the blow. That wouldn't have stopped him. It *shouldn't* have stopped him, but the intent of 'stop' held

an incomprehensible weight behind it.

Darth Vader looked up from the light, and met brown eyes.

He reared back from Padmé Amidala, from his mother, from a woman that was yellow-white light with bright eyes and green hair, and from a being that carried sand in her robes and Tatooine's twin suns as her eyes.

*Anakin, I need to you take a moment and actually **pay attention**.* It wasn't a woman's voice, not really. The words carried a dreadful presence and held a Galaxy's weight in every single syllable; too great to be expressed by any single mortal voice. Too great to be comprehended as anything but *intent*. His hand was no longer caught (as much as 'hand' was a thing that existed here), but the blow he'd intended didn't fall. Staggering back, Vader *almost* managed to break back into awareness, the memory of women long dead giving him strength, the rage of their image being *used against him* filling him up---

Wait... Soft and small, the word caught him anyway, just as much as the sliver of an attempt at keeping their connection still there did. It felt like a thin wire, live with current, sparking feeling in limbs he no longer had. Vader turned back to face the presence, and was faced with the fear the child was trying to hide, an incomprehensible determination, and a creeping exhaustion.

Once again, he was struck by the confusing realisation that the presence *felt familiar*, something that just didn't make sense.

Why are you still here?

There were seas of blood on his hands, what was one child more? Especially a Force sensitive one, which would be brought to the Inquisitorus or killed anyway? Yet, he waited, feeling that sensation of familiarity that clung to the presence bearing down on him, impossible to ignore now. It shuddered and dimmed, *almost* left, angry and upset. Then it stilled again.

I promised... A shivering little pause and he could almost *see* the determination squaring the soft mouth and hardening the sand-edged lines of a teenager's face, darkening the bright blue-- Vader shook that thought away, only barely keeping a leash on

his anger. That child was a *dream*, a figment of the past, of past hopes and dreams and future things that were *dead*.

I promised I'd help my father. I'm Luke Skywalker.

Luke wasn't sure why he was still here, now. He understood that clearly his father didn't know who he was. He also understood that *whoever* he was now, he wasn't... a kind man. There was some vague awareness that he'd *almost* just gotten killed in a more complete way than just dying from a lethal injury inflicted on his body, but he didn't understand more than that.

He was here still, however, because she'd helped him. He knew he'd *helped himself*, because he'd *tried* to defend himself, but without that help, without all that terrible weight of power being halted, he'd be dead. That was obvious. This was *not* a kind man, and yet... yet Luke couldn't help but hope.

She'd mentioned chains, said that disease needed a doctor to be healed, and while Luke still knew *he* wasn't a healer, he...

Staring up at the silent darkness, frozen in more ways than one, now, Luke still hoped. He was scared, and tired and *angry*, but some part of him just really wanted for the woman to be right, for that truth to actually *be right*. For those dreams to not just be dumb, childish hopes. The frozen sun heaved, yet didn't move at all.

When it was still again, Luke could pick up on that pervading sensation of *wrongness* from the presence, like a sticky film in the back of his mouth, cold that refused to leave his fingertips, *rotten death*.

And still, the presence that felt like his father hadn't moved. Looking up, he reached out - and froze, as the black sun suddenly went supernova. He'd die now. What had been *before* was *nothing to this*, and he was *going to die*, unable to move, go back, *leave*. His aunt and uncle wouldn't even know where he'd *gone*---

The black flared out.

Curled around him, tendrils spearing out and gently, so very gently he couldn't even pick up on the sensation of wrongness and death clinging to them, they wrapped around him. Luke still

couldn't move, but suddenly the weight of hanging here was... a little less exhausting. He hadn't even *noticed* how tired he was until it was easier again.

No. She... the baby--- you died. It trembled, that voice, and now it sounded almost entirely like what he usually heard in his dreams. Softer, more human. It was *startling*, but it cemented Luke's resolve. Even if he could still also easily remember the threatening weight of the intent to kill him hovering above him. Impossible to forget *that*.

I'm right here.

Well, for a given measure of *here*, anyway, considering he was on Tatooine, and he had no idea where his father was.

The darkness tilted towards him and pulled him closer. There wasn't a single flicker of suggestion of the features he usually saw in his dreams, but Luke, despite having been looking for them since he ended up here, didn't care any more. He stared into the black sun and thought he saw, distantly, a little flicker of light within it, nearly choked by something that looked very much like chains, trailing off, *away*, from his father.

That seemed important.

And... where is here... The hesitation was weighty, and dragged on into something that, for a very brief moment trembled with uncertainty, and then was squashed. Only flat anger and determination remained, but the frozen fire around him remained gentle. *Luke..?*

He almost answered without hesitation, but then stopped. Squirmed and tried to back off, but the tendrils around him tightened in response to that. Not in a way that *hurt*, but he couldn't *move*. Luke stilled, and after hesitating only briefly, drew himself up as much as he could.

I'm only telling you if you aren't going to hurt my aunt and uncle.

The black sun flinched, then swelled in rage.

*I'll do what **deserves** to be---*

Then I'm not telling you. The distance between them meant

his father wouldn't be able to get it out of him, not like this, unless he *told him*. Even him being untrained wouldn't help the man get it out of him.

Something shivered in the distance, all too real, physical light, and the darkness tightened around him, trying to anchor itself, to pull him closer - and then just as soon to *throw him back*. Startled, Luke clung on out of pure surprised stubbornness.

*You **need** to tell me, young one. I--- will not hurt them. They... have clearly taken care of you.*

It'd be funny if this situation wasn't what it was, because that admission came out of his father like when Luke had to confess something he'd done to Uncle Owen. Like confessing hurt and was the single last thing he wanted to do (it usually was, in a situation like that).

*They're my **family**, so you better not!* he said fiercely, pretending not to feel the flinch and the following flush of anger. Pretended that he wasn't feeling the least bit guilty about this, because he wasn't *stupid*. Through all this, he kept staring at that little flicker of chained-up light, chains which, Luke realised, were threaded through the rest of the frozen black flames as well.

But the little, bright flame was the key. Somehow he knew that. Luke shifted his attention back to his father more properly, and slowly, a little hesitant, reached out to touch one of the tendrils curling around him. Felt, as he did so, the pressure of disappearing time, suddenly. That slowly broadening flicker of actual, real light meant his father would be waking up soon.

You are too, of course. Since you're my father.

Another flinch, this time more like a *convulsion*, and Luke wasn't sure how to take this. Couldn't read the emotions that flared up around him, and then were ruthlessly yanked back, and again that conflicting attempt to throw him back out into the real world and pull him closer. That crack of very real light, hard and weird, was even wider now.

Luke took a decision and *dove*.

Dove and slid right through the tendrils and the looming pres-

ence since he was going *closer* instead of trying to retreat, and reached out for the chained little light. He had no idea how to *fix this*, but he would try.

Young one---

The warning rang through him, but his father was too slow. Whatever he did do needed to happen *now*, because he could feel the connection start to stretch out due to wakefulness. Not *his*, but his *father's*, and his time was running out. Luke reached the last little distance and *pushed* against the chains.

Tatooine.

The chains cracked.

Links flew around them and disintegrated in the mottled gray around them as they were yanked apart, and while most of the chains seemed to linger, the little light was no longer choked by the black metal. A shockwave rolled through him, and suddenly he was alone again. Staring into the nothing around him, Luke didn't know how he'd--- he was so *tired...*

It's all right. This way, Luke, the whisper sounded a little like the woman, but yet nothing like the voice she'd used when she appeared to be his grandmother or the sand- or shadow-veiled being. A brown cascade of curls cushioned his head against a narrow shoulder, and a sweep of blue fabric, heavy and soft, was draped over his shoulders, along with an arm. She led him, and suddenly there was the warmth of Tatooine's air, even cooled by the cave, around him. *Sleep, baby. Remember I love you. And thank you. Thank you so much.*

Luke could swear, as he curled up on the floor and struggled to keep his eyes open but was losing, that he felt lips press against his forehead.

Choking on the bacta fluid for a moment, there was an undeniable, instinctive attempt to *get up and move* the second the fluid was gone. Except he couldn't. The arms came down, catching him before he fell to the grating on the floor, and *then* his

limbs were attached. Too slow, too slow, too slow. The awareness burned him, like those few words did.

'I'm Luke Skywalker',

'Tatooine'.

Because *of course* it was Tatooine.

The child had survived. His *master had lied to him*. And Obi-Wan... Obi-Wan had--- Something cracked, very loudly. Vaneé's fingers twitched where he was assisting with the suit, bent by his left leg, but otherwise showed no reaction. That was the single positive with enduring this 'assistance', instead of using droids and other simpler, automated systems like the arms that reattached his limbs; any reactions were kept to the minimum and nothing would be asked of him directly.

It had been good enough for years. Now, though...

A child. The knowledge burned and what was he supposed to do? Bring the boy to *Mustafar*?

Aside from the visceral urge to recoil at that thought, it *wasn't safe*. Not just because the planet basically was a *pool of lava*, but because of the Dark Side here and his master's agents, masquerading as his 'attendants' and 'security' to make sure no one attacked him while he was in the bacta. But what then? If not here, where, then?

He could not, *would not*, leave the boy on *Tatooine*. And his master would know. Sooner or later, he would know (might already know, and the slow process that was 'dressing' compounded every passing second), and both he and Luke needed to be ready for that. Though how the child, as much potential as he had, could ever stand against his master...

How old was Luke, anyway?

That thought made Vader pause, and suddenly all he could remember was the swell of her... of Padmé's stomach under his hand, the life pulsing brightly away within, echoing a little oddly and making it impossible to get very close in the Force. That was...

Fourteen years ago.

Empire Day had been a few months ago, the fourteenth time it had happened. Fourteen years. Fourteen years missed, and his master would make him lose more if (when) he found out. But how was he supposed to *hide* the child, hide that knowledge from his master when he was *always*---

There was an emptiness in the choking spot where a vague but undeniable connection to his master should be.

Flexing his hands as he pulled on his gloves, Vader stared at nothing. There. Was an emptiness there. For fourteen years - no. With its sudden absence, Darth Vader could tell that some variation of it had been there long before he swore himself to his master.

The realisation made the floor under him tremble, and the Force quavered around him as another long, deep crack appeared in the transparisteel of the bacta tank. The Dark wailed, flickered, and came to him. The Force... the Force hummed of treachery, far older than he'd already thought. Far more *extensive*, beyond the realisation that his master had orchestrated both sides of the war. That, of course, had been in the pursuit of ordering the Galaxy, but some part of Vader still snarled about how *ineffective* that method had been.

And now that connection was gone, an empty hole where there'd been something he hadn't even noticed was there. Almost, *almost* he reached out for it out of a dizzying sense of *wrongness*. Almost he turned around to stalk to the comm center to contact his master and correct this.

Almost.

The faint, bright flicker of the new connection to *his son* stopped him. That bright, overflowing presence had, somehow, reached out.

And now the immediate tie to his master was gone. This... might give him some time. Some time to figure out what to do (his master must die, and the boy would do better for the Galaxy in his master's stead, if nothing else. The child deserved nothing less.), *how* to do it, and not concern himself with his master find-

ing out, as long as he acted *now*.

His master might still know *something*, but if he acted now, he could protect the child. He wouldn't have an infinite amount of time either way, because when it came to his maintenance, there were not many options... But he would have *more time*.

His course of action, then, was crystal clear, and Darth Vader left the bacta tank chamber, striding away from the guards and Vaneé. Halfway out, a comlink beeped, and Vader ignored it. On the shuttle, it chimed for attention again, and he crushed it in his hand. Three hours later, the shuttle crashed and himself seated in a familiar pilot's seat, Vader... hesitated. Turning his head towards the co-pilot's seat, he remembered the dream. Remembered the appearance of the blazing presence. Remembered---

Almost killing the boy. More than once. And yet the child had *persisted*. With help, yes (help he couldn't, *wouldn't*, acknowledge more than that), but persisted. Incomprehension and confused dread washed through him at the understanding of the amount of willing goodwill that had taken, and Vader closed his eyes and *reached*.

The connection was there; a fine thread of light, pulsing brightly, thin and pale with distance, but *there*. And at the other end of it... he didn't dare disturb the quiescent glow. It was enough to know the boy was alive, and that he would pick him up soon. He hadn't imagined it, it hadn't disappeared in the time between he left Mustafar and came here, but then... if it had, he'd have noticed earlier because he'd been checking *constantly*.

He had had to check constantly, because it seemed like he *must* have imagined the whole thing. For no matter the bright, blinding *brilliance* of his son's presence, the light had been small. Fourteen. Luke was only fourteen.

And his master had tried to contact him. His master knew *something* had happened. How much? Impossible to know without opening a comm, without *wasting time*.

No longer hesitating, Vader quickly took the *Amidala* into the air, and, minutes later, into hyperspace. The goal might be a

place he would rather never set foot on again, but he'd do it for this thing only (he would've done it if his master commanded, out of whatever imagined or supposed need).

The boy was worth more than the pain.

Part 3:

In Which Father and Son Meet

... in the flesh, that is, and consequences of these events start to become clear. To some, it'll seem be a tragedy, and for some others, merely an annoyance. The Force, on the other hand, is quite pleased.

Luke dreamed of Tatooine covered in green, though extensive deserts still stretched over large parts of the southern hemisphere. Luke dreamed of walking along the edge of the desert and a forest full of slender, needle-leaved trees of some sort, swaying in the wind and shuddering slightly from every step of the huge, black greater krayt dragon walking beside him. Luke... woke up, blinking into a shadow cast by the light from the suns-and-moons crystals above. A shadow which *wasn't* cast by the statue of the krayt dragon, but rather a huge, black form and a hand hovering over his head.

Letting out a yelp, Luke jerked and rolled away, thumping into the paws cradling the pearl and then staggering to his feet, staring wide-eyed up at the veritable giant of a black-armoured and -suited man that rose to his feet as well, staring down at him. Well. Presumably he was staring down at him, anyway, considering the masked helmet that covered his whole face, even his eyes.

"W-who--?"

There was no change in the body language (still and stiff and *guarded*), nothing to look for in the face, but Luke could *swear* he felt something like a flinch before the figure straightened up, and, somehow, became even *taller*.

It felt familiar, somehow, in a very unfamiliar way.

There was a lingering warmth about his shoulders, something which let him straighten up himself and stare whoever this was in the... um. mask. The silence stretched, a few seconds into half

a minute into a *minute*, and Luke glanced around, then back at the figure. Both unwilling and unable to take his eyes off of them.

“... We talked. In a less than conventional fashion, a few hours ago.” The voice rumbled through the huge space like an echo yelled into a canyon, coming back, vibrating and amplified. There wasn’t anything *human* in that baritone, but Luke blinked and took a cautious step closer, then stopped.

“You’re...” His throat closed up, and he couldn’t, quite, finish that sentence. Felt something like dread, confused disappointment and quiet awe warring inside of him. This wasn’t what he’d imagined. Even when he’d first had that presence - connection? - inside of him pointed out, and when he’d hovered in front of the blazing cold fire that was Anakin Skywalker, this was not what he’d imagined. Luke wasn’t sure what he was looking at, or how it had happened.

As if in response, the man, his *father*, no matter what he looked like, because Luke could tell, now, that the presence was the same as he felt before, took a step back and then stilled. His frame stiffened even further, if that was possible. It was the retreat more than anything that did it. Confused disappointment or not, Luke... wanted to know this man.

It still took the hum of encouragement invisibly vibrating around him - the *Force*, he supposed, vaguely - to finally make him switch his weight forward. But having *done that*, it wasn’t so hard to continue walking.

He was still afraid, just a little, and maybe a little angry too - he’d felt what the man was capable of, what he’d intended to do before he knew who Luke was, after all, and he was *so much bigger* and more dangerous than Luke was - but he was also *curious* now. And wanted that stiffness in the armoured frame to go away. He didn’t like that he’d put it there, and wanted to do something to fix it. The only thing he could figure was that since his hesitation had made the man... had made his father, retreat and stiffen further, maybe... this would help?

This, being Luke approaching slowly, mostly for himself, keeping close, nervous attention on the towering figure in black, but also for the man *himself*, who seemed to *somehow* stiffen *again* as he approached, one hand twitching as if about to reach out, then closed into a fist at his side.

Stopping in front of him, Luke looked up.

The lenses in the mask's eyes were tinted red, and were opaque. There was, *maybe*, a barest hint of something behind them, but Luke couldn't swear it wasn't a trick of shadows and light. It was closed tight with the helmet, and the rhythmic, even noise of regulated breathing was loud in the silence. Armour covered the chest, shoulders, down below the belt and the shins, over the boots. The thick, long fall of the cloak seemed to absorb the light as much as the armour and leather reflected it. This didn't much look like a *navigator on a spice freighter*, which made Luke wonder what had happened since his aunt and uncle heard from his father last, assuming he was dead, and *this*.

Still staring, Luke slowly reached out.

His arm cast a shadow over the smooth flagstone underneath them, and then it disappeared into the shadow cast by the other. His fingers brushed heavy, textured leather, and for a very brief moment, he could swear the hand under his trembled.

"You're..." a breath. He wasn't stopping this time, but while the presence was right, and while the figure in front of him in some ways seemed to correspond with the overwhelming black sun he could feel, vaguely, burning at the edge of his awareness, filling up the space, Luke still... wanted some sort of confirmation. Something more tangible, despite having had the truth spoken in the Force, feeling the rightness of the words that had thrummed in his head. "You're Anakin Skywalker?"

The frozen fire he could just *barely* pick up on suddenly swelled and *flared*, but he didn't get the chance to flinch, because it all seemed to rush *past him*.

"*That name----* means nothing, anymore," the man snarled, and all that poisoned darkness was reeled back in, seemed to

pool in his shadow and darken the room as a whole, bringing a rotten chill that *clung*.

This time, it didn't make Luke *afraid*, though. Instead it left him staring for a moment, utterly incredulous, and then he straightened up, feeling angry without being quite able to put a finger on *why*. There'd been no denial of actually *being* Anakin Skywalker, just that the name didn't *mean anything*, and that was just *wrong*, because it was a claim to something very, very important.

"You---!"

Luke. The woman's voice from earlier whispered through him, and there was suddenly a bright weight at his back that lightened the deadening chill that seemed to be creeping up his bare feet and hands. It made it a little easier to think, and while he was still angry, it didn't seem as immediate anymore. Maybe it was more like feeling offended rather than angry. *Remember where your father comes from, and have patience. Chains take time to unwind.*

And Luke Skywalker didn't know Darth Vader - knew *of* him, yes, as something in passing; a very, very distant idea and a name, not as a figure attached to a look, meaning or duty. Didn't know of the years of terror and bloodshed. Didn't know of Mustafar. Didn't know of Order 66, or the Jedi padawans, or the war and the anger, the exhaustion; the bright, anchoring *love*. Didn't know of the years before that, spent alongside a teacher who tried but didn't understand or see what needed to be, and the time spent at the hand of a mentor who *saw*, but needed to not see. Luke Skywalker knew only of the nine years *before* all that, and spottily at best. But he knew *enough* of it, and remembered her words about chains, both now and earlier.

Didn't know if that meant anything here and now, but very, very carefully and quickly squeezed the wrist he'd apparently grasped without realising it, and then let go, taking a breath.

"... Okay," he said, and maybe that was a little *less* than graceful, but it wasn't the accusation he'd been about to yell, "*what*,

then?”

Staring down at the child, who he knew to have blond hair and blue eyes, though of course the colours were currently rendered in various shades of red, Darth Vader could do nothing about his simmering anger. Anyone else challenging him like this would be dead, but he had *already* almost killed the boy, and *would not* let such a thing happen again. Still, it took longer to reply than it probably should; it was a simple question with a simple answer, burned into his core for fourteen years.

And yet.

Completely aside from the fact that he would rather snarl that he was the boy's father and *should be addressed* as such (what right did he have to it, though? What right *didn't* he have to it, fourteen years behind, when the boy *was his son?*), Luke Skywalker didn't belong to Darth Vader. Darth Vader was his master's apprentice and the fist of the Empire, had been for fourteen years.

Where was the space for a child in that?

Yet, he'd left Mustafar and an implicit summons by his master to claim what was his. He could still feel the lingering pressure where Luke had squeezed his wrist. The long-gone, light brush of fingertips against the leather that now seemed branded into it, body-heat lingering despite that that was impossible.

That touch couldn't be felt like the barely-remembered touches from more than a decade back. Skin and flesh reacted differently than stark metal prosthetics cushioned by leather - there were more life-like prosthetics, but they were inadequate for his purposes. Yet the touch *burned*, as much as the occurrence of that touch did.

He didn't care. He didn't care that he could remember the last willing, kind touch to a hand he no longer *had*.

He didn't care.

It didn't matter.

The child was still staring up at him, chin raised, pale eyes narrowed and a fierce set to his face - the boy felt like determina-

tion, was a veritable *flame* of it, and not fear, however. Not much of it, anyway. There was some, underneath there, and no wonder. He'd almost *killed* his own son, and yet---

The touch burned like the leather didn't exist and like the metal underneath, only capable of registering pressure and temperature, was bone, flesh, and skin.

"Darth Vader," he finally said, his title floating like ashes between them, weightless despite the baritone he spoke with, and the statue of the krayt dragon seemed to stare accusingly, judging him for a lie.

But he *was* Darth Vader, and if he had a son, then that meant that was, also, what Darth Vader was. Luke Skywalker's father, and he would give him *precisely* what he deserved. The boy *was* his (the proof hurt), and more than that, he was... clearly... Padmé's child (that *more* than hurt). He'd *almost*, again, killed the child. Killed *her*.

Almost killed the only thing that was left of her.

"Okay..." Luke's narrow shoulders slumped, then he shifted to look around the huge, round room, gaze lingering on the pearl cradled in the first pair of stony paws of the statue before he looked back at him. It was... a curious place, this ruin, and the Light Side lingered here, its presence colouring the Force at every twitch and shift, but it was *old*. Older than the Empire, far older than just a few thousand years. The crystals that represented Tatooine's suns and moons were kyber crystals. It was curious, because either Tatooine had a cache of kyber crystals somewhere, or they'd been imported. It didn't matter. This place didn't *exist*.

"Um... what now?" Luke looked back up at him, head tilted, and Vader straightened.

"Now, we leave," he said, gesturing sharply towards the doorway. The boy frowned, crossing his arms instead and didn't move.

"What about my aunt and uncle? What about *Biggs*? I can't just---

"We are *leaving*," he growled, grabbing the thin arm - gently,

moving slow enough it should be obvious he didn't intend to *hurt* the child - and strode out of there.

Somehow, Luke had picked up on the finality in his statement, and implicitly understood what he'd unintentionally revealed. And the boy wasn't even *trained*. That, at least, was obvious; the only reason he really had been able to tell where the child was as he flew in was the tug of their connection, not the bright flame of a presence that belonged to a trained Force sensitive. Luke's awareness of the Force was, if obviously there, not enough to make much of any splash, yet, despite his monumental potential.

"I don't even have---" Luke cut himself off with a curse, and Vader looked down, frowning. Realising *why* the boy was muttering Huttese swearwords under his breath; he was barefoot and had hit his toes on one of the stair's steps. The boy was... wasn't actually *dressed* his brain finally informed him, as he put together the pieces of the thin, worn-threadbare but obviously comfortable singlet and almost-too-short pants, along with the bare feet. "How'd you fly through the sandstorm?"

"It was abating as I approached. It was of no issue." Even if the worst sandstorm in a *century* had been ravaging Tatooine, he wouldn't have let that stop him. "Why aren't you dressed?" The question felt ridiculous, but Luke made a grimace, a faint flush on his cheeks, and looked away. He'd stopped trying to get his arm back, at least.

"... thought I was dreaming, at first. Why would I get *dressed*?" That answer was patently ridiculous, but then, Luke being in some sort of long-abandoned ruin of a temple to the Force of some kind, on Tatooine's *southern* hemisphere, was *also* patently ridiculous. And impossible, because there was no ship outside the entrance but his own. And somehow, Luke had ended up here *anyway*.

"*How* did you get here?" Vader regretted the question the second he asked it, as Luke glanced up at him, then looked away, something complicated on his face and uncertainty blindingly

strong in their connection.

“... Grandmother walked me here,” Luke said, his voice soft and confused but *certain*, and Darth Vader regretted asking even more, angrily about to shake the boy because his *mother was dead*, when he just. Stopped. Because he remembered well hearing his mother’s voice in the dream, seeing her image flash by among those who’d stopped him from harming the child, and, last in the row, the being with the suns as her eyes.

He pushed those thoughts away, relieved to find an excuse by stepping out of the cave-like entrance and into a hot evening, and a soft, worried ‘*Blast!*’ from Luke, which continued into; “... Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru must be worried--- *Wow.*” Glancing down, Vader knew what Luke had reacted to, but some undefinable warmth still curled around something within him to see the boy stare, wide-eyed, at the *Amidala*, moonlight setting the silvered plating alight. And then...

“... What’s my Skyhopper doing here?”

Rage and dread immediately shot through him, and he tightened his grip on Luke’s arm over the boy’s protests, and whirled around, lightsaber in hand. Some part of the rocks that were the top of the ruined temple turned into a man wearing an old, ratty robe, and Vader snarled.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan, older, hair white and skin wrinkled, aged by the suns, but *Obi-Wan*.

“*Ben?!*” Luke stared at Obi-Wan, then up at him, and back.

“Your aunt and uncle *are* worried, Luke. I apologise for taking your Skyhopper without asking, but it was necessary. Darth... let the boy go,” Obi-Wan said, his voice hardening from the softer tone he’d directed towards Luke, and in his hand was his lightsaber, still unlit.

“You will die, now, my old master---”

NO!

He jerked, startled as the small, but sun-bright light of Luke flared up, angry, desperate, and above all *determined* as it ham-

mered against him. It forced him to divide his attention between his old master and his son to try and ward the boy off. At least Obi-Wan had seemed equally startled, though he'd undoubtedly not heard Luke, just felt him in the Force.

"Leave him *alone*! You better not hurt *anyone*," Luke snapped, barefoot and with sand clinging to his toes, thin and small and *glowering* up at him. His hands, though, despite the fierce tone of voice, fisted at his sides, were trembling just a shade.

In the corner of his vision, where his red-tinted HUD insisted there was *nothing*, a vague figure that was veiled in a twirl of sand hovered beyond Obi-Wan. The eyes blinded him with sunlight and power both. Waiting. The gaze not on *him*, but on *Luke*. Gritting his teeth, Darth Vader hesitated.

Heart hammering from the sudden rush of pure, untainted *power* from Luke, an untrained shock wave in the Force, Obi-Wan stared from the boy, his arm caught in a tight, cruel grip, to Darth Vader, towering above the teenager and holding said arm.

He was too late, but... maybe this could still be salvaged. If he could just get Vader to let the boy go, then he could distract him enough to urge Luke to take the Skyhopper. (He was trying not to look at the ship standing further away, shining in the moonlight, and awkwardly familiar.) It wouldn't take much, he hoped. But that he hadn't been able to tell Vader was on the planet at all before he came in distant view of the ship unsettled him.

And if he hadn't left his hut for the Lars homestead while the sandstorm still raged, if a little calmed, he wouldn't have been here in time *at all*. At some points it had felt like the sandstorm was specifically out after choking *him* in sand and burying him, as the storm somehow always seemed the worst around him as he walked. It'd taken hours upon hours to get to the farmstead, and then he'd been assaulted by accusations and deluged by entreaties both. Because of course he would have something to do with Luke's disappearance. Of course he'd be able to *do something about it*.

The fact that it seemed like he couldn't, the storm closing be-

hind his back as he entered the homestead, had eaten him up. Hours had passed, the day inching on... And then the storm had, slowly, kind of, abated.

He'd taken a chance, having spent hours in meditation and very focused on Luke's distant presence, which he knew only from the fourteen long years of having spent looking after the child and making sure he was safe even when he got into trouble. If he hadn't been attuned to that vague, twitching sense that told him Luke was in *trouble*, he wouldn't have found him at all. The strangest thing was, he'd had the hardest time pinpointing Luke's presence, even the closer he got to it...

No matter. He was here, now, and all he needed to do was make sure Vader didn't leave with Luke. Nothing else mattered, here.

"Darth..."

Vader shifted and his presence, poison-slick and deathly chill, so at odds with Anakin's, shivered and then reared up, and his grip on the lightsaber changed. Luke was pulled back, and Obi-Wan very carefully smiled tightly at the armour wearing a dead man's body. Darth Vader snarled and slashed his hand, and despite that this was a simple thing to counter, that he'd been *ready*, Obi-Wan went flying.

He still heard Luke's cry over the crack of his body hitting the rock, and he fell with a thump into the sand, turning his head in time not to choke on it. He couldn't move. He could feel everything, could even twitch his fingers and toes, but he couldn't move. The Force thrummed like a live thing around, *over* him, and he couldn't move. He had a headache.

"My son would rather I didn't kill you, Obi-Wan. Mercy you do not deserve, but you'll have to live with this failure as well," Vader rumbled, his voice growing as he came closer, ending with black boots filling Obi-Wan's vision. He frowned, trying not to feel the growing despair. He had failed. They had *lost*.

"... Ben? Are you okay?" Luke's bright, earnestly concerned question and the following, quiet hiss at Vader that he '*better be*'

was only a slight comfort. That concern and light would soon be snuffed out. But. That was no reason not to reassure the boy *right now*. He tried to shift himself, to *push*, but despite that the Force heeded him, nothing could move him. For some reason, he was reminded of some lesson or other Qui-Gon had taught him, so very long ago, but he couldn't remember it exactly.

"I'm... fine, young Luke. Just---"

"The Emperor will know something has happened. Make sure Owen and Beru are and remain alive and unharmed, Obi-Wan." The black boots in his vision turned around, and the cloak Vader wore snapped over his face and sent sand whirling around him. He couldn't turn his head enough to follow them all the way to the ship, but he listened to Luke's attempted protests to let him go back to talk to his aunt and uncle, and, something he must have imagined for as quiet as it was, Vader saying he could comm them later. Engines filled the silence, and suddenly he could move again.

Rolling to his hands and knees, Obi-Wan coughed up sand and felt very, very old.

They had failed. It was all over now. There was...

One other. Closing his eyes, hands clutching uselessly at the sand, Obi-Wan Kenobi listened to the Force, and there was no sense of impending doom.

He didn't understand. It felt like there ought to be *some* trace of grief for the loss of something as bright as Luke Skywalker, but... the Force was vast, of course. And there was still Leia Organa. Pushing down fear and grief, letting it run off him with practised weariness, Obi-Wan finally stood up and realised that, if nothing else and for whatever reason Vader had to warn him of the Emperor's possible attention, that was correct. Owen and Beru would need to be moved, and *he* needed to move as well.

And there was one more child that could still save them.

Walking to the Skyhopper to fly back to the homestead and try to deliver the news of his failure *and* get two very rooted, practical, and self-sufficient people to leave the only life they'd

ever known, Obi-Wan still couldn't help but glance up at the now-empty and star-twinkling night sky. The J-type Nubian ship was long gone, of course, and the Force hummed around him. Perhaps that was just for the traces of Light Side power that lingered in this place, however.

Obi-Wan Kenobi left the ruins behind, and never noticed the pattern in the sand where he'd fallen, which wasn't in the shape of a Human man, but the paw of a greater krayt dragon.

Little over a month later, the Emperor sat, eyes closed, and listened to the murmur of his Ruling Council, before a datapad was put on the throne's armrest and left there. Minutes later, drifting in the whisper of the Dark that had revealed *nothing* useful for weeks, Sidious opened his eyes. The details were there; the Death Star, his goals, Darth Vader... but none of them were connected any longer, ships floating in the dark without tractor beams to keep them locked to the planetary docking ring.

It was... unsettling. With a soft, annoyed huff, he picked up the datapad. Nothing interesting, truly, but a scattering of news that would linger in the back of his head, form connections and lines and finally, perhaps, a pattern to use.

His eyes froze on a single line of seized communications within Hutt space, however.

Jabba Desilijic Tiure was dead.

The very same Jabba whose stronghold outside Hutt space was Tatooine. The insignificant, *frustrating* speck of dust that his wayward apprentice had come from. The very same planet the very same *infuriating* apprentice had travelled to over a month ago and then promptly disappeared with no trace.

Despite this annoyance, Sidious wasn't particularly concerned. Sooner or later, Vader would resurface - to crawl back to him, realising his place as he had no other way to turn, to give him the power he needed, to *keep his wreck* of a body alive and in nominally functioning condition. Or come back to confront

him in proper Sith fashion, to attempt to usurp him.

Sooner or later, Vader would need maintenance.

And yet here was something that spoke of a path not considered. Jabba Desilijic Tiure was dead, his palace destroyed, and a 100% loss of property reported, specifically in live cargo, to 'attrition'. Which would mean that every single slave on Tatooine had somehow escaped or been set free, their transmitters not working. Or just not taking a single slave with them when they were engaged.

Staring at the few short lines of aurebesh, Darth Sidious frowned, not comprehending what he was reading at all, aside from the words' literal meaning, and yet understanding this single thing; Darth Vader was making his move, whatever it was meant to lead to.

In the Sith's mind, he was suddenly blinded by the glare from two suns. Slowly, he shook his head and turned the datapad off. He merely had to wait. His apprentice would, sooner or later, *one way or another*, come to him, and he?

Darth Sidious had survived more than one apprentice attempting to usurp him. Nothing would come in his way. Not even the Jedi's Chosen One, broken as he already was.

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