



# *The long and winding road*

by Deborah M. Walsh

The chill, thick walls were silent, as they often were in the early evenings on Yavin IV. The days were crammed with activity: disconnecting delicate machinery; packing crates; and maintaining the ongoing monitoring of Imperial movements. Operations slowed as the sun set, and the rebels prepared for the evening meal in the great dining hall. It was in the deadly lull of the evening that Luke found himself lost, floating aimlessly toward depression.

He had been assigned to a tiny, sterile cubicle on the level just below the flight hangar. There he'd assembled what little he'd salvaged from his life on Tatooine: an old, dust-ridden poncho; a crumpled, sun-bleached hat; a few things he'd picked up here and there on the rebel base; and the glinting lightsaber handle which bore the slight grooves of his father's hand.

He hefted it in his own hand now, eyes distant and misted over. Only two weeks had passed since the Imperial battle station had been destroyed, and the grief he'd known since then was still all too real to him.

To pass the time in the evenings, he practiced with lightsaber and remote laser ball, always listening for the disembodied voice he believed to be Ben's. There was no sage advice whispered in his ear, but he steadily improved -- his burns healed, and as he dodged the laser blasts, he deftly avoided new injuries.

While Luke practiced at the Jedi's craft, Leia and Han argued, approaching the foot of Solo's ship, the *Millenium Falcon*. As the rebels raised their voices in anger, technicians filed away the registration code from the hull of the freighter.

"Look, Princess," Han was saying, striding toward his ship, "takin' potshots at Imperial cruisers ain't exactly my idea of havin' a good time -- and what the hell are they doing to my ship?" he screeched, violently shooing away the men, who scattered fearfully, shaking their heads in doubt. Han looked up at their handiwork, screaming, "What the hell

are you doing to my ship -- they're filing off the registration -- what's this about, Leia?" he demanded glaringly.

She eyed him coolly, leaning against the gangway. "You don't really think you can go anywhere in Imperial territory without being recognized, do you, Han? It's for your own protection -- new registration, a little facelift, a new name -- we take care of our own." She walked slowly away, and patted the underside of the ship affectionately.

"I thought the name *Centennial Turkey* might be appropriate," she added.

"The hell it is!" he stormed, marching out of the hangar area. "You keep your monkeys away from my ship, Princess. You don't own me, or my ship!"

She trotted after him, saying, "Someone's got to scout a new base, Han -- with these alterations, you're free to go anywhere -- please, Han --"

He stopped suddenly, and turned to face her, a suggestive smile crossing his face. "What's in it for me?"

She grimaced. "You're the scum of the universe, Solo. If you weren't such a good pilot --"

He circled her waist with his arms, pressing her against him. She smiled, sure that she had nothing to fear from the hot-headed Corellian. "You'll do it?"

Shrugging, he answered, "Sure. I have to make a pitstop at Tatooine anyway --"

"Tatooine?" she asked anxiously. "Have you told Luke? He might want to go --"

He drew his hands away from her middle and nodded. "Sure, I'll ask him." He was disappointed that she always managed to work Luke into the conversation, but still wouldn't admit to himself that he was honestly attracted to the young senator from Alderaan. "When will it be ready?" he asked, tossing his head toward his massive ship.

"By morning, if we stay out of their way. C'mon -- let's go find Luke!"

Han found Luke in his quarters, still battling the mechanical exactitude of the remote.

"You oughta find somebody to replace that remote, kid," Solo suggested. "It's no challenge anymore," he admired as Luke's reflexes took on the illusion of finely-honed instinct. In the short time he'd known Skywalker, he'd come to respect the boy's belief in the Force, and had even begun to wonder about it himself.

Luke deactivated the saber, placing it, and the ball, upon the bare dresser **against** the wall. "What can I do for you, Han?" he asked the Corellian, who lounged lazily on the small cot.

"Leia's conned me into scouting a new base. I'll be stopping off on Tatooine -- interested?"

Luke looked up nervously. Tatooine ... home. He frowned painfully. "How long will you be there?" he asked quietly, staring at his hands.

"A few hours -- maybe a day. Got some business to take care of ... Well?"

There were loose ends to resolve, Uncle Owen's farm, Ben's shack -- laying his ghosts to rest. Yes, perhaps a return to his homeworld would do him good. Suddenly, he felt an urgent need to return, and quickly whispered, "Yes, I'll go -- when do we leave?"

"Tomorrow. Get some sleep; you'll be co-piloting."

The jump to hyperspace was smooth, with Luke, in the co-pilot's seat, monitoring the levels of the hyperdrive engines. Out of the

corner of his eye, Han watched the boy, his respect for his piloting ability growing. Handling an X-wing was one thing, but pushing a freighter into hyperspace -- well, it took a *pilot* to do that well.

"I noticed the registration code is changed, Han -- what's up?" Luke asked, pulling off his headset.

Han disengaged himself and made for the passengers' section, with Luke following close behind. "Leia had a friend in the Corell registry office switch it -- the ship's official name is *Falconer*. Close enough to be comfortable, far enough away to fool the Imperials."

Luke shrugged uncomfortably in the linen shirt and dark vest he'd donned for this mission, and sat down opposite Han. In a leather pouch on the seat nestled his lightsaber, to hide it from the prying eyes of Mos Eisley spies and stormtroopers. Each had taken precautions to disguise his identity: Han, through his ship, as it would surely be remembered in the spaceport; Luke through his attire, as farmboys sporting lightsabers were not common on the streets of the metropolis.

"What're you going back for, Han?" Luke asked absently, more concerned with his own half-formed plans than his friend's. His need to return to his homeworld was reaching an inexplicably urgent pitch. He needed to pass through the streets and alleys of Mos Eisley, and travel the arid wastes of the Dune Sea. The insistence of the feeling was so great, he was beginning to question his own grasp of reality.

"Got some debts to pay," Han was saying. "How about you -- Luke? Something wrong?"

Luke shook his head to clear his senses. "Huh? Oh, nothin'. Just wondering ... nothing."

The locator bell sounded, and Luke thanked the Force as he and Han hurried back into the cockpit.

Mos Eisley seethed with life, humanoid, sporoid and more. With the *Falconer* safely berthed in docking bay 81, Luke and Han elbowed their way into the marketplace.

"Hey, Luke, the Princess arranged for a little surprise for you -- c'mon!" Han grabbed his *companion's* arm and dragged him to a vehicle vendor. Suddenly, he stopped, planting his fists on his hips, grinning. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Luke asked, shaking his head. Han smirked and walked over to a shiny, just-off-the-showroom-floor landspeeder.

"An XP-38? Mine?" he squeaked, clambering gleefully into the driver's seat. "How'd she know I wanted one?" he asked suddenly, his face creased with bewilderment.

"Said a little bird told her. It's all paid for -- take her away, kid -- but meet me in the cantina by nightfall."

The Corellian sauntered away before Luke had a chance to question him further, and was soon lost in the bustling crowd that filled the market area. Luke knew he'd have some questions for Leia when he saw her again.

"This ain't no garage," hissed the broad, hairless huckster. "You get your 'speeder out o' here, misser. Ain't got no room for it no more!"

Luke stared at the creature, then shrugged, turning on the ignition. The engines hummed to life, and he slowly nudged the car out through the crowd and toward the outgoing road. No stormtroopers stopped him, to his relief, and soon he was sailing toward Owen Lars' moisture farm.

It was lucky they'd arrived in the early morning, or he'd have been forced to return to the city almost as soon as he got to his destination -- whatever that might be. As it was, the trip took several hours to take him as far as his old home, charred and crumbling, the victim of the

Jawas' scavaging and the Sandpeople's looting.

The building smelled of smoke and stank of death. As he came up on the living area, for a moment, he could almost see the smouldering remains of his aunt and uncle, but blinked back the sight and tears that now stung his eyes. They were buried, not far from the house, at last **at peace from the horror of Imperial muscle.**

Luke found himself wandering through the ruins, regret and sorrow welling up inside, and unable to hold them anymore, the tears streamed down his face. He'd never really cried for them before, and soon he fell against the support of the wall, sinking down onto the soot-stained steps, holding his head in his hands.

So much had happened, so quickly. Uncle Owen had fought so hard against change, had tried to keep himself protected in a womb of stasis. But the outside world had broken in, cruelly, leaving only these few rotted timbers and aching memories. Pressing his hand against his eyes, he got up, and wandered into the area that was Beru's galley.

He could almost hear her singing over the stove in the desert silence. His aunt by marriage, she'd always been the one to give him love and understanding, and had never doubted him in all his twenty years. She was the one who had told him stories about his parents, had kept them alive in him. How he missed her!

The stairs were slippery, worn and coated with charred debris. He followed them up to the doorway, and looked out over the desert. Uncle Owen had devoted his life to the barren farm, and with Luke unable to claim it, it would fall into Imperial hands -- probably end up as some sort of prison camp or something. Owen would not have approved, as he had had no love for the Empire. And as the suns cast wavering curtains of heat over the sand, Luke knew he would miss the old man and woman. But something told him it was time to say goodbye. This was not his destination, and slowly, he trudged off toward their graves.

Ben, Threepio and Artoo had helped him carry the remains of the Lars to a tiny rise to the north of the house. There they'd dug deep into the sand, and laid them to rest. Luke had taken two slabs of stone from the house, and etched their names into them: Beru, wife of Owen, beloved aunt; Owen, husband of Beru, beloved uncle. He dropped to his knees, weeping once more, and he felt the suns baking his back. And he felt something else, a touch, a whisper of sensation, brush his shoulder, as though in sympathy. He rose, wiping away the tears with the back of his hand, and returned to his 'speeder. To Ben's hut, he had to go to Ben's hut.

It was late afternoon already when he arrived in the hills which hid Ben's tiny hovel. He left his 'speeder down the hill, surrounded by high rocks, shielded from the probing eyes of the Sandpeople. As he approached the earthen door of the small building, he heard the slight click, and hum of an activating lightsaber.

Suddenly, his nerve-endings electrified. Vader had survived the destruction of the battle station; there was no reason to assume that he couldn't have returned to Imperial space. And he was the only living Jedi Luke knew. Carefully, he drew his own saber, shifting it in his hand until he had a comfortable grip, and then he nudged the switch with his thumb, igniting the elegant but deadly blade of light.

He pressed his back against the outside of the building, reaching out with what little power he had mastered, trying to see inside the hut. Inching around toward the door, he bit back the frustrations that met him as he could not visualize the intruder. Finally, he jumped in front of the door, and kicked it in with the heel of his boot.

"Ben!" he gulped, dropping his deactivating lightsaber at the sight of the ancient Jedi, who held his own saber before his face,

smiling faintly.

"So, the little one finally returns," he said softly, swinging the blade around to challenge Luke. The boy stumbled, stunned by his friend's aggressive action, leaping for his own weapon. As Kenobi lunged at him, Luke activated the saber, struggling to his feet, and parrying the thrusts of the other.

"Ben, what is it? I don't understand!" Luke stammered, jumping out of the way of another deadly move.

"Defend yourself, Jedi! Prove you are worthy of such a title!"

Luke met the next thrust with rapid surety. *Find somebody to replace the remote, Han had said. It's no challenge anymore.* Yes! Ben was challenging him, instructing him.

Luke lunged at his mentor with vigor, and the old man smiled. "That's it, boy, take the offensive! Keep the situation under *your* control. Let the Force guide you!" Ben sidestepped the sweep of Luke's lightsaber, answering with a swipe of his own, barely missing the Tatooine's ear. Luke returned with a backhanded upswing, catching the other's saber in a downswing, creating a standoff. Suddenly, the old man switched off his saber, sending Luke off balance.

Luke deactivated his own weapon, and returned it to his pouch. He stared grinning at his friend, and suddenly Kenobi hugged him affectionately.

"You're learning, young Luke. I knew there was greatness in you the very day you were born. You move like your father did."

The man seated himself by the wall, and patted the seat next to him as Luke crossed over confusedly.

"But how?" he



sputtered, still keeping his eyes focused tightly on Kenobi, as though he'd dissipate like mist.

"By now, you should have learned that almost anything is possible when one believes in the Force. My work is unfinished -- you are still but a novice in the ways of the Force. I have returned to teach you."

"There's your money, Jabba ... now call off your apes!" Solo swore at the ugly alien sitting behind a rough-hewn desk. Jabba the Hut smiled unpleasantly. Suddenly, he waved the air with his pudgy, blue-tinged hand, and the large, lizard-like guards let go of Han's armpits.

"What's the matter, Solo? Don't you like my friends?" Jabba hissed menacingly. The guards were still too close to Han for comfort.

"What do you want, Jabba?" Han asked, glaring warily over his shoulders.

"I want you to take my cargo, and I want it to make its destination this time, Solo."

Han smiled. Although he'd been relieved of his blaster upon entering Jabba's well-protected fortress, the men at the front gate had missed the Svilian ener-knife he had secreted in his shirt sleeve. He could take both guards easily, using surprise as his ally. He sauntered over to Jabba's desk, planting both fists on its top.

"Shove the cargo, Jabba. My debt is paid. I'm getting off this rock, and I'm never coming back. And there's nothing you can do to stop me."

As Han turned to go, Jabba announced, "Perhaps the Imperials would be interested in knowing your whereabouts, and the whereabouts of a certain young farmboy." Han's back muscles tightened. "What do you want?" he repeated over his shoulder, expecting Jabba to specify his deal.

"The same. Take my shipment of Vralian narco-gems to Tellna."

"How much?"

"How much what?"

"Do I get?"

"Your life. I won't inform the Imperials that you are still alive. And your farmboy friend lives to see his next birthday."

The ener-knife burned against his skin. But no, there was a better way. "I'd rather take my chances with the Imperials. Either way, it's fifty-fifty."

Jabba was silent. He hadn't expected such foolhardy courage from the Corellian. "All right," he said at last, "200,000 credits now, another 200,000 when you deliver. A deal?"

Han let out a low, throaty chuckle. "I'll have to discuss it with my 'farmboy friend'. Meet me in the cantina after dark. You, Jabba -- none of your creeps. If you send them, I'll just have to take care of them like I did Greedo."

Jabba was tapping out a nervous and aggravated rhythm. "All right. After dark." His voice was edged with anger. "Now get out."

"Gladly. Be seein' ya, Jabba!" Han said cheerfully, slipping out the door.

"To reach maturity in the Force, it is necessary to lose oneself in it, to forego the ego and the self. You must practice meditation, carefully nurture the peace within your soul," Ben was explaining, lightly underlining a passage in an ancient, brown-edged volume. "As each Jedi has his own lightsaber, he must also have his own mindcenter, a point on which to concentrate. Choose a word, Luke."

The young Tatooine closed his eyes, a little self-consciously at first, and searched his memory for a word. Home. Yes, home would be

just right. He said it aloud.

"Fine. Now, you must set time aside each day to concentrate on the sound of the word -- not the meaning, the *sound* -- and allow yourself to drift into it, flow with it, give in to it ..." As Ben spoke, Luke focused his mind on the sound of "home." Ben continued to speak, his voice falling off into a soft, wordless drone. Luke found himself basking in the emptiness that was not emptiness, aloneness that was not alone. He felt a presence, something almost recognizable, but suddenly he felt the tug of a hand at his elbow.

"Not bad for a first try. Did you feel anything?"

Luke shook his head confusedly. "Something, yes. But, I don't know --"

"In time you will find contact with the Force in its entirety. And with all those who have accepted its power. You may one day meet even your mother and father." Luke's eyes widened. "But it will take time, discipline. You will need someone to help you."

Ben rose and wandered over to the chest he kept by the wall. Luke followed, his curiosity keenly aroused. "You'll be coming back with me?" he asked anxiously.

The old Jedi shook his head. "I will be with you when you most need me, when your heart will cry out for my aid, but no, I will not go with you to the rebel base. But you will take this," he added, gesturing toward the trunk, "with you. There is much here for you to learn." He lifted the lid and withdrew his own lightsaber, older, more worn than Luke's. "Close to you, there is one who may become strong in the Force. You will know him when the time comes. You must give this to him, and help him to find his way." Luke opened his palm, shaking a bit, and accepted Kenobi's lightsaber. The boy eyed his friend questioningly.

"I cannot tell you more -- it is for you to learn. Together, you will find the True Way."

Luke stared blankly at the saber, holding it lightly as though it would disappear, as a dream. Ben walked over to the door, and nudged it open. Already, the sky was turning lavender, and he shook his head sadly. "It is time you were leaving, young Luke. Solo will be expecting you."

Luke made a protesting noise, but Ben silenced it in his throat. Nodding sullenly, the boy turned to lift the chest, and, assisted by the old man, loaded it, grunting and groaning, down the hill into the XP-38. The body of the car dipped visibly, and Luke watched it doubtfully.

Ben held his hand up to Luke's face, and wiped away a tear. "The Force -- and I -- will always be with you, Luke. Now go."

Luke hauled himself into the driver's seat. He reached out his hand one last time, and the Jedi clutched it tightly. Then he let go, and the landspeeder grumbled into life. It began moving downhill, and Luke paused only once to look back, and see the lights inside the hut dimming, until the last one disappeared. Ahead of him was the desert, lonely and forbidding in the quickening dusk, and the strange future Ben had foretold. He shook his head, and concentrated on avoiding the ruts and gulleys furrowing the terrain.

Luke left the 'speeder and the chest in the loading area of the *Jalconer*. A bay attendant would see that they were loaded safely aboard the freighter, and Skywalker would his way past the myriad inhabitants of Mos Eisley, toward the Imperial cantina.

There he found Han, slowly sipping a drink, off to the far side of the room. Luke placed his pouch carefully on the floor, and dropped unceremoniously into the seat opposite the Corellian.

"How good're you with that saber, Luke?" he asked slyly, his face admitting none of his plan.

"You've seen me -- I'm not bad. Why? You get yourself in trouble already?"

Han hooked his heels on the bar running under the table and leaned back in his chair. "Not exactly. But it could come in handy soon -- right now, as a matter of fact," he added, looking over the oddly shaped heads of the other customers, toward the approaching Jabba. Solo stood, a vision of feigned respect and politeness.

"Cut the crap, Solo. You decide yet?"

Luke looked up at the blue-skinned, grossly exaggerated humanoid who seated himself to the right of him. "Decide what?" Luke managed to choke out.

Jabba glared at Han and turned a pitying smile on Luke. "Seems your friend here doesn't know what's going on, Solo."

"He just got here himself. But I've already made the decision for the both of us. You can take your shipment and stuff it up your plentiful nose, Jabba!"

Skywalker's eyes jerked toward Han. The Corellian was playing some kind of dangerous game, with both their lives. Luke reached for his pouch, which by habit of a left-hander, was on the side furthest from Jabba.

"What's this all about, Solo? What are you trying to pull?"

Han smiled, gingerly lifting his blaster from its holster. He felt a slimy, chill hand close over his. "Not so fast, Solo," hissed another alien in a language Luke failed to understand. Luke felt his hand close over his lightsaber.

A small blaster was aimed at Han's head. Luke wondered at his own agility -- should he risk Han's life? Suddenly the decision was made for him, and he found himself standing with the ignited lightsaber cutting through the arm of the intruder, and the blaster clattered to the floor.

Jabba's men had infiltrated the cantina, and blaster fire scattered the patrons of the bar. A disintegrator freed Han's blaster from his hand, barely missing his flesh, and standing there weaponless, he bellowed, "Throw me a weapon, Luke!"

Luke was busy fending off a tall, six-armed assailant, but found the other lightsaber in his pouch within his grasp. Quickly, he tossed the saber in the direction of Han's voice, and sliced through the air with his own laser. As the attacker fell to the ground, he heard the familiar hum of Ben's saber in action.

A squeal of pain cut through the air, and Luke frowned, working his way toward the door. Jabba's men were falling, and Luke had managed to avoid major injuries, but Jabba had disappeared, lost in the melee. Luke heard Han call to him, "Get to the ship!" and turned to see the Corellian whipping the saber around like a master, downing yet another opponent. With a thumbs-up sign, Luke darted for the door, slipping out into the alleyway before the stormtroopers caught his retreat. Soon, Han was at his side, as the two rebels made for the *Falconer*.

"Not a bad weapon after all," Han admired, tossing the saber back to Luke. "Not as good as a blaster, but safer in hand-to-hand. Got a bad burn on my hand, though."

The ship was just ahead, and it looked like Han's ship would be making another spectacular exit from Mos Eisley Spaceport. The Imperials hadn't connected the ship with them yet, and there were no obstructions prevented their boarding the ship. Quickly, Luke paid off the attendant, and followed Han into the cockpit, sliding into the copilot's seat and affixing the headset.

"This is going to be a good one," Han announced, activating the



engines, cueing in the computer. "Ready?" Luke nodded. "Okay, here she goes --- one more time!" There was a chuckle in his voice, and it helped Luke relax as the ship roared into the atmosphere.

The Imperials hadn't had time to launch the interceptors, and they were soon sailing safely through hyperspace.

"I wonder if Leia's friend can do another number on the *Falcon*? I may end up flying the *Centennial Turkey* yet, if this keeps up!"

Luke laughed, releasing the restraining straps. As he followed Han into the common area, he asked, "You were pretty good with B -- with the lightsaber, weren't you?"

Rubbing the burn spot on his left hand, Han nodded. "Fair. Need a lot of practice, but not bad. Why?"

With a sigh, Luke sat down on the bench. Ben had said someone close to him would join him as a Jedi. Who else could it be? "Would you like to practice with me?" Luke asked innocently, hoping his friend might agree.

"Sure, why not. If you help me explain to Leia why we're not scouting a new base ..."

*The road will never disappear ... I've seen this road before.*

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