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Point of No Return

by [Skye Rutherford](#)

(with creative input by co-conspirator and friend, Sandy Williams)

Chapter Four

" Fortune and glory."

The next days were, for Luke Skywalker, filled with hours upon hours of everything the Falcon's data banks could supply on spacecraft and piloting. Han even allowed him to take the controls and stand watches in the cockpit a few times. He not only practiced his aim in the turret guns but the forward lasers as well, all under Solo's tutelage.

In the time he wasn't spending with those things or sleeping, he listened to Han talk about places in the galaxy: where to go for fun, where to stay clear of and where to make money. This last, of course, was much to the chagrin of the princess. But since Luke seemed to be enjoying having something to learn and concentrate on, she kept her opinions private. She feared that he was becoming infatuated with the seemingly free and easy life the Corellian presented. Would he decide to remain with the smuggler after the trip was over? It was a question she didn't want to ask but nonetheless felt compelled to gain an answer to.

On one occasion, after Solo had finally told Luke to give him a break and ordered him to get some rest, Leia sought the captain out. He'd been in the galley, brewing a fresh pot of kaffe and preparing something to eat.

" That kaffe smells good," she remarked, a pleasant smile forming on her lips. " Mind if I have some?"

Solo indicated the hot kaffe with a nod of his chin and shoved a heating tray of food into a small oven. " Help yourself." _Hell, you would anyway._

A vague notion of uncertainty played across her delicate features so quickly that most people would never have noticed it. But Han had a talent for just such things; he had lived by noticing the subtle things as well as the demonstrative-- and did not take either of them lightly. He had to wonder if she'd heard his last thought. Clearly, she wasn't here to just socialize. She had a reason for coming. A reason, he guessed, called Luke. He'd seen the look she had tried to hide whenever Luke was asking about places he and Chewie had been or listened to some of the lighter versions of some of their escapades. She hadn't been impressed by any of it.

But then, Han had figured, she didn't have to be. Luke could make his own decisions. If he wanted to come along with he and Chewie, the kid was more than welcome. They'd cut him for a fair share of their profits. Once they reached Yavin Four, he fully intended asking him to stay on. The more time he spent with Luke, the more Han worried he would join the rebels--and die too young for a cause that had too many things going against it to succeed.

The princess poured the steaming kaffe into a mug and commented lightly on the flavor. "Strong."

Absently he rubbed the point on his face she had slapped two nights ago. " Yeah."

Leia ducked her chin, took a small sip of the dark liquid and quietly chuckled; for all his irritating ways and overblown ego, Solo had a natural knack for making light of a situation. She suspected it was his way of showing grace under pressure, something Leia understood and respected. After what she'd been through at the hands of Moff Tarkin and Darth Vader, she was grateful for the smile the smuggler's humor elicited from her. " I'm sorry if I hit you too hard," she remarked with quiet sincerity.

" Forget it. I've had worse."

She raised an eyebrow. " No doubt." He laughed lightly; a sound that she was hard put to ignore because she liked it. _Time to change the subject--quickly._ Helping herself, she reached for a second mug and filled it.

Accepting it, Solo took a swallow. " So," he began curiously, "did you just want to apologize for nearly taking my face off or is there something else you wanted to know about? Luke for instance?" His suspicion proved right and he noticed the

set of her expression and the way her fingers tightened, every so slightly, about the mug between her hands. There was concern in the depths of her liquid brown eyes. " You're worried about him."

Her gaze didn't waver as she answered. " Yes."

" Worried," Han offered with complete confidence, " that I'm teaching him all the wrong things." She started to agree but wasn't given the chance. " He's gotta learn how things are in the real world. Could you do that?"

Her eyes turned hard. " I'm not trying to."

" But," he analyzed in an easy tone and an equally knowing smile, "if you were, you'd do a better job than a simple, low-life smuggler with no high class bearing or fancy titles."

" That's uncalled for," she retorted matter-of-factly. Why was he being this way, she wondered? She hadn't come here to spar with him again in a battle of wills or judgement. How could he be so--nice--one minute and so aggravating the next? In all her life, she had never met anyone who could make her feel so completely vexed. Or so comfortably secure. He was a challenge and a mystery all at once and she hated that it threw her off balance.

Would she ever understand this man? Time would only tell. _Careful Leia. You and Luke are cargo. Plain and simple. Once he's dropped you at your destination, he'll be gone._ That thought surprisingly made her sad; clearly Solo was a skilled and talented pilot, a natural leader who could offer so much to the rebel forces. Perhaps, once they reached Yavin Four, he too could be persuaded to stay on? Surely a steady income running supplies for the rebels would appeal to him. What would he have to lose? She'd even see that he got an officers rank if it would help.

He was laughing softly, clearly amused at himself for causing her anger to surface. "Maybe it is 'uncalled for'," he told her, " but what could you teach him that would keep him alive? How to wipe his mouth properly at high tea on a sunny afternoon? How to move around the dance floor at a formal ball and use the flatware correctly at a dinner party without embarrassing himself? Luke isn't cut out for that. He wants to be a flier and he wants to see the galaxy." He paused and sighed. " He also wants to join up with your precious freedom fighters. No amount of royal, upper crust etiquette is going to keep him alive, Princess. Whatever I can teach him till we get to your base the better chance he has of staying alive. If I'm lucky, I can convince him to come with me and Chewie. With us he's got a chance to live longer."

" He won't go with you." She smiled with total assurance. " Luke needs purpose, something to believe in. What the rebels are fighting for is that something."

The smuggler gazed into his hot kaffe. " It's the something that'll get him killed." His words were flat and his eyes held hers over the rim of the mug.

" I don't want him to get killed," she replied defensively.

Solo casually turned from her and set the mug down on the counter. " Then leave 'im alone. Stop filling his head with ridiculous notions of triumph and honor. Let him live."

" I want him to do whatever he thinks is right for him."

" By getting killed for your cause? Don't you think he oughtta have a chance at something else?" " Something else? Something else like your life?" She shook her head. " I'm not so blind as to know something about the kind of life you lead, Captain."

" Oh really? Tell me then. What's my life like--Princess?"

" Dangerous. Uncertain. It's no secret that most people who try your kind of life don't live more than a few weeks or months at best. They wind up dead or in an Imperial prison. If they make it to middle age, they die penniless, addicted to bad liquor and drugs. "

" Can't argue with you there. But you're not talking to a run of the mill smuggler. I drink hard on rare occasions and I don't use spice, glitterstem or any other substance. If I did, I'd be dead. I stay out of other people's business, present company and situation aside. I know how to watch my back and I'm good with a more than one kind of weapon. Very good. I keep my eyes and ears open all the time and so does my partner. Most folks don't bother us. Those that do are lucky to tell otherwise." His mouth lifted into the familiar lopsided grin that was as disarming as it could be lethal. " Yeah, it's dangerous and uncertain. But then, life usually is. Most of the time my life's not so bad."

Leia read the fleeting, barely discernable flicker of something in his eyes. Anger? Or loss? Being the astute student she was at reading beyond surfaces, she detected both were definitely present and for some odd, completely surprising reason she could not pinpoint, she hurt for him. Covering her own inner thoughts, she raised an eyebrow quizzically. " Not so bad? Really? Until you run into bounty hunters, cartel king pins or Imperial customs police. What happens when one day you aren't as wily or as fast as someone else? I could go on but then I don't have to. You know more about your kind of life than I do and more than Luke ever should."

" At least I'm honest about it. What kind of fortune and glory is he gonna find with your war? Luke doesn't--"

" There's no glory in your world either, Captain. In fact, I'd be willing to venture that there's just as little fortune as well. The war against the Empire," she added, " is already here. Sooner or later Luke and everyone else, including you, will be caught up in it. You aren't so nearsighted you don't already know that. Why else would you _really_ be teaching him skills he'll need to stay alive?"

"Maybe if he's smart enough he won't join up with either of us."

She nodded and smiled wistfully. " Maybe. I will say this, Solo, you obviously care what happens to him. I had wondered if you had it in you, what with your financial priorities taking up the better part of your attention."

His features turned hard, eyes hooded. " What's that to you?"

" Nothing. Except that Luke is beginning to look to you as a friend, an older brother--"

Han pointed to his chest. "Me?" He had to stifle a laugh. " You better open your eyes sweetheart, he's got a crush on you that's as big as the Perlemian Trade Route is long."

The princess' eyes widened, not only in disbelief at Solo's accusation but at the faint, almost unnoticeable scent of something burning. " What are you talking about?"

Rolling his eyes, Solo shook his head. " A big part of him is doing all of this, the training, the leaning, just for you. Do you know what it's like for a kid his age to have a first love?" _Is something burning or is it just her self-righteous attitude?_

" How would you know?" _I could swear I smell something burning. Must be his inflated ego!_ Again there was the barest trace of a memory that darkened the Corellian's expression; again he covered it. Again, Leia read it and a part of her was all the more curious about this man, about what events had molded him into who he was and why. It was undiscovered territory as much as it was private. And again, she would not intrude. Instead, she kept to the subject at hand. " Luke respects you, he likes you and chances are, you'll take off, leave him, all for the sake of a quick credit."

" He can come with me or not. If not, well, I have places to get to, business to take care of. Luke'll understand. It's not like he's got an obligation to me or anyone else. Besides, if this trip had gone as planned, he, Kenobi and the droids would've parted company with Chewie and me days ago."

" But things didn't go as planned, did they?" His comment, intended or not, brought to mind the destruction of her home world.

He felt like a jerk for having reminded her of what happened to Alderann. " Look," he began uncomfortably, " I'm sor--"

And then Luke was there. "What's going on? Or do either of you really care that whatever is in that oven is burning?" he said.

Solo whirled to look at the oven; dark wisps of smoke had just begun to seep out of it. Quickly turning the controls off, he opened the door and coughed as the scent of charred traladon steak assaulted the air. Hitting the vent to cycle the smoke into the filters, he sneered at the snickering princess. " This is your fault."

" Really?" she asked in a tone dripping with innocence. " And here I was, convinced that you could handle anything."

Solo glared dangerously.

Not knowing exactly what had taken place, Luke asked, " Did I come in at a bad time?"

Leia's " No" was simultaneously answered by Han's "Yes." The two looked at one another with knit brows.

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