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Taking the Long Way Round

by [Alison Glover](#)

Wedge Antilles brushed his hair out of his eyes, blew on his half-frozen fingers and pulled his sodden gloves back on. At least the gloves worked as they were supposed to, which was more than most Alliance equipment did on Hoth. Although damp, they were still warm.

Unfortunately, they were also too bulky to wear while performing delicate tasks. Tasks such as replacing the dozens of hydraulic tubes on this speeder that had cracked when the fluid inside had frozen and expanded.

Aloupis, one of the ground crew, hurried past, dumping a container in the slush at Wedge's feet. "Hang to on that one, " he said. "This oil is actually the grade it says on the label."

"How much isn't?"

"Most of it." Aloupis looked down at the pile of cans he was carrying. As he did so, a lump of ice slid off his beard. "Of the fifty we've tested, so far these six are the only ones we can use here."

"Shit." No point in asking why no one had checked the consignment earlier - there hadn't been time.

There never was time to do anything properly.

Wedge's fingers had thawed enough to tingle painfully, so it was time to freeze them again. Sighing, he hauled the gloves off, and tried to coax another frozen circlip off without breaking it.

As usual, the cavern which was serving as a makeshift hangar was noisy. The rock and ice walls were better at reflecting sound than keeping out the cold, one reason Luke's advance party had dubbed the place Echo Base.

Wedge glanced at the com-link on his wrist. There was no point calling the medical unit. The staff there were as over-worked as everyone else, and either the hastily assembled bacta tank would work, or it wouldn't.

It will work, he told himself. Luke is not supposed to die here.

Hopefully his certainty about that was one of the instincts that had kept him alive longer than so many other pilots, not mere wishful thinking.

He pulled out an in-line connector and blew the slushy remains of frozen fluid out of it. Above the general racket, he heard a droid trundle up behind him. *Great. Now what's not working and needs fixed instantly?* Determined to ignore as long as possible whatever this latest crisis was, he carried on replacing the connector.

The droid bumped his leg. That did make him turn round. There were plenty of astromech droids on the base, but most of them weren't so forward, so he'd guessed before he looked round that it was Luke's. A lot of R2 units didn't have much personality, either, but this one did. It was practically bouncing on its treads.

Wedge let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. It misted in the cold air. "Luke's going to be okay?" he repeated, to reassure himself, not because he was unsure about translating the droid's enthusiastic beeps. He dropped down on one knee, partly from politeness, to look at Artoo from eye-level with its optical sensor. And partly from relief, as he listened to another flurry of beeps. "Thanks for letting me know, Artoo."

He stood up, raising his voice. "Hey, Dack, Davo, Jensen - I'm going to check on Luke. Artoo says he's finally woken up from that protracted nap. I won't be long."

Dack, Luke's young gunner, just gave a relieved smile. Davo, another of the ground crew, emerged from the belly of an x-wing long enough to say, "Tell him he didn't have to go to these lengths to get a day off."

Jensen, Wedge's gunner, started to say something, but whatever it was lost in a fit of coughing and sneezing. Ruefully wiping his red nose, he muttered, "So much for those new anti-viral shots. I still can't shake this cold." He waved at Wedge to go, and grabbed the can that Aloupis had left. "I'll keep an eye on this until you get back."

Originally, Echo Base had been an astronomical observation station, set up because the composition of the abundant meteors in the Hoth system didn't

agree with accepted theories on the evolution of solar systems. Like many other such stations, it had been abandoned nearly twenty years ago, in the aftermath of the Empire replacing the Old Republic. The plan had been that the advance party commanded by Luke would get the base up and running again, and expand it through the natural cave system, so that the Alliance could use it as a weapons and sensor testing lab.

Like so many of the Rebellion's plans recently, it hadn't worked out like that.

A badly-damaged Alliance cruiser had escaped an Imperial ambush and limped into the Hoth system. Most of its personnel and major equipment had been ferried down before life support had failed completely.

Having the uncompleted base crowded with an regiment of stranded ground troops should, theoretically, have made the place warmer. In practice, it just seemed that there was always someone or something to trip over. And they couldn't ship the troops back off again. Half of the transports had battle damage, and it had been agreed that it was best for everyone to lie low for a while. The cruiser had made one last jump out of the system, hoping to draw away any Imperial attention, but her failing engines had been leaking badly. The Imperials were unlikely to deploy probe droids in so remote and inhospitable a system, but if a probe had been within long-range sensor range before the plasma discharge from the damaged ship had dissipated, it would have reason investigate the Hoth system.

There not being enough cold-weather clothing for everyone, nor heated places to sleep, even in shifts, wasn't helping morale much either. Wedge wondered if Luke had gone to check out the meteorite he'd mentioned to Han partly as an excuse to stay out of the pandemonium a little longer. Luke had been joking that there were now more people in Echo Base that he'd seen in his entire life before he'd left Tatooine.

So Wedge was dodging people, droids and packing cases all the way to the medical unit.

Chewbacca hurried past him, clutching a portable plasma welder.

"Hey," Wedge yelled, "Where did you find that? I've been looking everywhere for the spare since Dack burned ours out."

He wasn't sure if Chewie had heard him; the Wookiee was sporting a large pair of furry ear muffs. It really must be cold in here if the temperature was getting to Chewie, whose fur had so far seemed proof against even the icy winds outside.

But Chewie stopped, pulled the ear-muffs off, and explained, via a mixture of speech and pantomime, that this was Rogue Squadron's welder; now he'd fixed it, could he borrow it?

"Sure, just bring it back when you're finished."

Wedge skidded round a particularly slushy corner.

"Hey," someone was yelling. "Will you two cut it out? All that hot air is melting the walls."

A shivering trooper rearranged multiple layers of clothing and picked a crate back up, muttering, "Or give us a hand, if you've got nothing better to do than stand around bickering."

Wedge was therefore not all surprised to find Han Solo and Leia Organa standing glowering at each other in the corridor outside the medical unit. Presumably they, rather than the cold, were why Chewie had resorted to the ear-muffs.

Inside the medical unit, it was actually warm. And quiet, after the door slid shut behind Wedge.

Luke was propped up on a stack of pillows, but his eyes were closed. If he'd been awake, he must have drifted off again. At least he seemed to be breathing regularly. There being nowhere else, Wedge perched himself on the end of the bed, and sneaked a look at the diagnostic monitor.

Most of the readings were green, which was a welcome change from when Luke had been brought here.

Wedge ignored the monitor's suggestion that its previous readings were for authorised medical personnel only and scrolled back to look at them. The trouble with medical droids was that they had no expressions to hint at information they'd decided that their patients, or friends of patients, didn't need to know.

Luke's eyes flickered open. "Hi." He smiled. Carefully; his face must still hurt.

"Welcome back to the land of the living. Sorry, but you're not getting out of cleaning out your speeder's hydraulics this easily."

Wedge had been trying to keep his expression cheerful, but Luke was studying him and frowning. "Do I look that bad?"

"You look a lot better than when Han brought you in." *Just not the same as you did before.* Considering the mess Luke's face had been in, the base's one 2-1B

droid had done a good job. But it was a military field model, not a cosmetic surgeon. Luke wasn't ever going to look the way he used to, unless he could be evacuated out to a better-equipped hospital ship. With no transports allowed to leave until the defensive energy field was set up, and the shortage of experienced pilots, that wasn't likely.

"I feel a lot better." Luke started to yawn, but winced and stifled it. "Just tired, still."

The 2-1B droid scuttled up. "Commander Skywalker, you are supposed to be resting. You've already exceeded your visitor quota for today."

"Want left in peace?" Wedge offered.

"No." Luke waved the droid away. "It's okay. I need to talk to Commander Antilles."

Even without a facial expression, the droid was clearly dubious. Luke grinned at it. "I promise not to overexert myself."

"Han and Leia were here, I take it?"

"Yeah. And Chewie, Artoo and Threepio."

Wedge glanced at 2-1B's retreating metal back, which was radiating disapproval. "Were Han and Leia here to see you or to argue in front of an audience?"

Luke rolled his eyes. "Both, I guess. If they stopped trying to be so smart with each other, they might get round to working out how they feel."

"Maybe." They evidently hadn't worked out how fed up Luke was of hearing their incessant arguments. Or that it might have been considerate to wait until Luke was a little more recovered before subjecting him to another one.

Luke shifted, pulling the sheet off one bare foot.

"I see you got to keep all your toes."

"Yeah." Luke grinned. "I guess if I had to be hung up by an ice monster, upside down was good - that way snow couldn't fall into my boots." He touched his face. "It was nice to find that I still have a nose, too. It mustn't have been as frost-bitten as I thought." He tilted his head and frowned at Wedge again. "Stop looking at me like that. I really do feel okay."

Luke, if you were okay, you wouldn't just be lying there. "Sorry. It must be those pyjamas. That med unit grey really isn't your colour."

"Han said I didn't look that bad. Hey, that reminds me - Wedge, what's a gundark?"

"A gundark? It's an animal. Native to Sullust originally, I think, but they breed prolifically and eat most vegetation, so they've spread all over. Tatooine must be one of the few planets they're not common on."

"What sort of an animal?"

"Small. Furry. Cute. My wee sister had a pink toy one she took everywhere when she was a child. They have these big long silky ears, which·"

Luke was staring at him, repeating slowly, "Small. Furry. Cute." He shook his head and rolled his eyes again. "Threepio's right. He is impossible. Wait 'til I get him for that one."

"Luke?" If the monitors hadn't all been showing green, Wedge would have been worried. Exposure could lead to permanent brain damage, although Wedge had never heard of it being delayed, and Luke had seemed perfectly rational earlier.

Now Luke seemed to be trying to not laugh, as he said, "And what about gundark ears?"

Wedge decided to humour him. "Okay, let me think how to explain. There are lots of lizards on Tatooine, right?"

Luke nodded.

"Do some of them have an escape mechanism that if they're caught by the tail, the tail will break off without hurting the lizard too much, and regrow later?"

"Yeah. There's a couple of species like that. In one the tail wriggles around on its own, to make the predator think it's the live bit. Why?"

"Gundarks are sort of like that. They live in burrows, and when they come out the first part of them that shows above ground is the ears. So their ears are like the lizards' tails - they come off easily, so that if the gundark is grabbed as it comes out of its burrow, it sheds its ears and ducks back down to safety. I think people have tried farming them for the ears - there was a fashion at one point of making them into little pouches. I used to tease my sister by threatening to cut off the ears of her toy one, because they wouldn't grow back."

Luke made a muffled noise that sounded like "Aargh," grimaced, and added, "Ow. Stop making me laugh. It hurts."

"Can you tell me without laughing why this sudden interest in small furry animals?"

The corners of Luke's mouth twitched, but he kept his voice very serious as he said, "Han informed me that I looked strong enough to pull the ears off a gundark."

"Oh." Since it didn't hurt him, Wedge did laugh.

The medical droid was back, commenting, "An uninformed, but nevertheless accurate assessment, in my opinion." It had a hypo in one pincer, and took hold of Luke's arm with the other. Evidently it had decided on action, rather than more discussion, on the subject of Luke getting more rest.

Luke pulled away from it, but he didn't get very far. *Sorry, Luke, but Han's right. I don't think you are up to tackling anything much bigger than a gundark yet.*

"Hey, wait. Wedge, there's something I have to tell you·"

"Which can wait until tomorrow, Commanders," the droid announced as the hypo hissed against Luke's arm. It turned to Wedge. "Why are you humans so frequently such illogical patients? Surely he understands that he will not recover without adequate rest?"

Wedge smiled. "Understands, yes. Accepts, probably not."

Luke made a grab for Wedge's hand, and he was desperately trying to keep his eyes open, muttering something Wedge didn't quite catch. 'Day go bah', or something like that.

Wedge squeezed Luke's hand and leaned over to ruffle his hair. "It's okay, Luke. You can tell me tomorrow. Hopefully we won't have any more disasters round here before then."

* * * * *

Ignoring the dull ache in his back and legs, Luke Skywalker trudged over one last snowdrift, filing a mental note to, in future, avoid crash-landing a speeder, jumping off an Imperial Walker and hiking several miles through deep snow all on the same morning. Especially the same morning as being discharged from the medical unit.

Above the drone of the nearby transport and the whine of x-wing engines warming up, he heard another familiar rumble. The *Millennium Falcon* shot out of Echo Base and streaked low across the grey sky.

Luke smiled with relief, the new skin on his face pulling tight. *At least Han and Chewie are out of here.*

And Leia. Somehow, he was sure of that.

He looked around at the pilots and crew readying the x-wings. There was no point in asking, 'How many Walkers did we get?' The answer was obvious. Not enough.

For once, Davo of the ground crew wasn't looking happy as he settled into a cockpit and closed the canopy. Normally, Davo was delighted to have any opportunity to fly, not just ground-run, an x-wing.

Another question Luke didn't need to ask; 'How many did we lose?'

Too many.

Wedge was waving at him and yelling something. Luke didn't catch all of it over the engine noise. Something about the rendezvous point.

The compulsion that had been driving him ever since he'd seen the image of Ben Kenobi, out there on the glacier, was still pulling at him. *Get your ship ready. Go to Dagobah. Find Yoda.* If Luke had given into it, he'd have simply waved back and got into his x-wing.

And left Wedge and the others wondering what the hell had happened to him when he didn't turn up. And maybe risking their lives trying to find out.

However much the demanding inner voice prompted, he wasn't going to do that. Not after all he and Wedge had been through together since Yavin.

Struggling to keep his balance in the churned-up snow, he ran toward the other x-wing. "Wedge! Wait!"

"Luke?" One foot on the ladder up to his cockpit, Wedge stopped.

"I've been trying to tell you - " Luke fought down frustration. He'd been trying to explain to Wedge what he had to do since he'd come out of the bacta tank. Only it seemed like all the medical staff and now the entire Imperial Army had been conspiring to prevent him. "I can't meet you at the rendezvous. I have to - " He paused. There had to be some way to say this to make Wedge understand why he had to do it, say it so it didn't sound completely cowardly and self-centred.

But Wedge didn't seem surprised. "You have to go to some obscure planet called Dagobah and find Yoda, the Jedi master who supposedly trained Kenobi."

"Yes." Luke caught his breath as Wedge swung back down from the ladder.
"How did you know?"

"Han told me what you said while you were delirious in the survival tent. He'd never heard of Dagobah either, so we were trying to locate it. He was going to come after you, once he'd sorted Jabba out. Wanted to make sure that you weren't going to fly straight into a trap." Wedge looked up, but the *Falcon* was long gone. "Though now - "

Luke grinned. Typical of Han not to have said so to him.

Wedge's gaze had slid to the scars on Luke's face. "The last time you took the long way didn't work out so well."

No, it hadn't. But that supposed meteor strike was an Imperial probe. I was right to feel it needed checking out. And if there was a Jedi Master on Dagobah, the Alliance could sure use his - or her - help.

"Want me to come with you?" Wedge added.

Yes. Yes, but. Luke glanced behind Wedge, at the other pilots and ground crew.
"No. I feel bad enough about running out on my own. They'll need you."

"Well, don't be too long on this Dagobah. You know much Dodonna hates the idea of me being in left charge of anything."

Luke snorted. It was also typical that General Dodonna, who had the nerve to call Wedge a coward, was light-years away from Hoth, safe on a hospital frigate, while Reeikan had been out in the trenches with the troops.

"And Luke - "

"Yeah?"

Wedge shrugged. "Be careful. Just because it was a vision doesn't necessarily mean it was Kenobi's spirit, or whatever. It could be the Emperor setting a trap for you."

But not Vader. Vader is here, on Hoth. Luke shivered, and not because of the cold. Perhaps getting clobbered by an ice monster and half-dying of exposure had been a blessing in disguise. He might be capable of more than pulling the ears of gundark today, but he still wasn't in any state to take on a Sith Lord.

"It's strange that there are so few records about the Jedi left anywhere in what was the Republic," Wedge was saying.

"The records from planets outside the Republic, and from those that seceded before it fell, do agree that there was a Jedi Master called Yoda. The last of those are only about twenty years old," Luke pointed out. "He could still be alive."

"But on Alba and Tir," - normally Wedge spoke with his father's Corellian accent, but Luke could hear his mother's Alban lilt coming through in his voice now - "the story is that a Tirian Jedi Master named Qui-Gon Jinn trained the General Kenobi who fought in the Clone Wars."

"But why should Ben lie to me?" Luke shivered, although the wind wasn't any icier than usual. Maybe the hike back had tired him more than he'd realised.

Wedge had looked round. Carrying their wounded, a final few survivors from the trenches were boarding the remaining transport. General Reeikan was one of the last, helping to support a staggering trooper. Behind them, the slush was stained red.

Wedge shook his head. "I don't know. But Kenobi was a general, and generals don't have the luxury of telling all the truth all the time." He shrugged. "And if Vader's snow-troopers get here before we all take off, it'll all be very academic."

Wedge was right; there were more immediate concerns than Jedi history. Luke said, "With the ion cannon down, we'll need to provide cover for that transport until she can make her first jump."

Theoretically, ships couldn't be tracked through hyperspace, but there was no point in taking chances. Each of the transports and x-wings would approach the rendezvous via a different set of intermediate jumps. Hopefully Luke's heading off the opposite direction would further confuse the Imperials.

"Take care, Wedge." Luke hugged him quickly, and nodded to the other pilots climbing into their fighters, and the ground crew who were scrambling towards the transport. "Of them and yourself."

Wedge patted him on the back. "Don't worry. I'm the sensible, non-heroic, survivor type, remember?"

"Just make sure you keep being one." Luke turned toward his own x-wing. "Okay, Artoo. Fire her up."

"Hey! Luke - "

"Yeah?"

"If you do find a Jedi Master on this Dagobah, ask him why the Jedi's famed powers of prediction didn't foresee Alderaan." From his cockpit, Wedge gestured

back towards the trenches. "Or this. And why he or she has remained hidden all these years, when they might have been helping us."

* * * * *

"Target the fighters before the transport," Admiral Piett directed, as a last cluster of Alliance ships exited Hoth's atmosphere. "The Rebels have always had more difficulty replacing their x-wings than replacing personnel."

"Admiral - " A lieutenant looked up anxiously from his comms board. "There's a signal from Lord Vader on the surface, ordering the fleet not to fire on the fighters. He wants them captured, not destroyed. He gave no explanation."

Of course not. The only person to whom Vader had to justify his actions was the Emperor himself.

A rumour had started that Admiral Ozzel had been a Rebel sympathiser, and that was why he'd tried to dissuade Vader from further investigation of the Hoth system. Piett didn't know if that was true. He did know that he would not argue with a Sith Lord. "Hold your fire. Activate tractor beams."

"Re-routing power from ion shield to tractors·"

But it was too late. The x-wings and the transport had cleared Hoth's gravity well and jumped to hyperspace.

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