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Voyage Home

by [Skye Rutherford](#)

Through the cold, infinite night of space, I slide among the stars, the black, matte finish of my armor-plated hull --- no longer familiar in shades of carbon-scored white and gray --- has so far proven to trick and conceal me from the new enemy, the Yuuzhang Vong. Like a heroic warrior I am scarred from combat and wear those badges proudly. Yet, like a veteran soldier, I am no fool; I know I may not survive the coming battles. There is a plague, which infects this galaxy, but like many, including those I carry now within me, I will at least risk my own destruction in seeing an end to it. My only hope, my only dream is that I am worthy of the task. Worthy of the sacrifices those dear to me have already made. And continue to endure.

Part One: Waiting

Onboard the Millennium Falcon, one compartment was unnaturally quiet.

Jacen Solo held firm his mother's hand. Glancing from her still, blanketed form he checked the drip line that fed life-sustaining fluid into her veins. As he fearfully prayed, again, for the strength she needed to survive, a shadow passed over him and his eyes darted upward, noting the worried, anxious expression on his father's face. Instantly reminded of the grief Han had suffered after Chewbacca's death, Jacen sadly reflected on how powerful and consuming a toll it had taken. It had come too close to self-destruction. Now, knowing how critical his mother's condition was, the boy's eyes tried desperately to belie the fear his heart held for his father. " She won't give up, " he said, feeling the need to lend some optimism to the situation and worried that he'd only succeeded in failing miserably.

The sound of those words cracked the silence and Han caught his son's gaze. Long ago he had acquired talents of his own. They had been cast in a childhood of subjugation, hammered during an adolescence of bondage, and honed in a life of smuggling. Hardship and danger had scored the pattern of his natural talent of hearing the slightest emotions, or lack of, in the words of others, at detecting the tiniest of nuances, or overabundance in body language. It was an instinct that had kept him alive when nothing else would have, a talent that had played a major role in creating a reputation equally respected by friends as well as enemies. That ability served him well now as he heard both the barely controlled tremble in his son's voice and the uneven draw of his breath, saw the hardening in the line of his mouth and tightening in the corners of his eyes. Laying a hand on Jacen's shoulder, he said, "I wouldn't want be the Vong that meets up with her after this. Your mother has a will that won't let go easily."

Still overwhelmed by the sacrifice his mother had made back on Duro, Jacen quietly commented, "Uncle Luke calls it 'spirit'."

Han nodded knowingly, haunted by a memory of long ago:

"What do you think of her, Han?"

"I try not to, Kid."

"Good."

"Still, she's got a lot of spirit..."

Gazing at his wife, Han held the memory close, his will of not letting her go an anchor against the possibility that he could actually lose her. Leia was responsible for everything that sparked his sense of purpose and belonging. If not for her, he'd have never met Luke, the brother he'd never had but gained, nor had his children, the future he'd never dreamed of but had been given. "She's got a lot of spirit, kid." The words were spoken with a kind of reverence that was felt as much as it was heard. "I've never met anyone with more of it."

"Is that what made you fall in love with her?"

A vague, wistful smile tugged at the corners of Han's mouth "I wasn't willing to admit it for a long time." He cocked his head slightly to one side. "Your uncle said I was 'thick-headed' and 'stubborn'." Han's demeanor altered in such a subtle way that it reminded Jacen of that moment just before a tide quietly changed, or daylight became dusk. After a steadying breath, Han reached out, one hand brushing against Leia's cheek, and added, almost as a whisper, "Of course, he said that about you too, didn't he?"

Feeling as though his presence would only intrude on private memories, Jacen gave his mother's hand a gentle squeeze before rising to leave. Words formed on his next breath, but died unspoken as he saw the strain and sadness in the face across from him. Han's attention was focused now entirely on Leia. As he watched him take his place at his mother's side, Jacen witnessed the quiet transformation of father and friend to husband and lover. In Han Solo's eyes was a resolve his eldest son had never seen and for the first time realized the strength of love, the tenacity of will that bound his parents one to the other through so many times over the years. His father would never let go.

Reluctantly, Jacen left his parents alone. Once outside the compartment, he leaned against the bulkhead and closed his eyes. There were so many things he had wanted to say. There were so many things that he wanted to confess. That he was glad his parents had at last reconciled. That he was relieved the rift between his mother and sister had been repaired. That he was sorry he'd ever doubted Anakin's abilities as a Jedi. That he was ashamed of fearing that his family would not survive intact. He had once pessimistically visualized all of them becoming simply the splintered remnants of some indestructible illusion that legend said could not be broken. And above all, that he loved all of them more than life itself and could not now tell them so.

Until recently, Jacen hadn't believed he would survive his own indecision concerning his own path. From that place deep inside where no one could reach, he wondered at the cost of what his newfound convictions would bring to the uncertain future they all faced. Only time would tell the outcome. For now one thing was certain. Lives would be risked and perhaps even be lost. The galaxy would never be the same and might yet fall to the enemy. But Jacen Solo's family would never fail each other.

The hours passed slowly. Jaina sat in the freighter's cockpit. Jacen had gone to the galley to get them some energy bars and something to drink; though no one onboard had much of an appetite, he had reasoned they had to have something. As the time passed, everyone's concern for Leia heightened. Even C-3PO could not escape the worry for his mistress of so many years and eventually had gone to check on her. Surprisingly, Captain Solo had not ordered him to leave. Rather, the usually brash Corellian had been quiet, making no comment save for, " You did okay helping out up front, 3PO."

The droid looked from Leia to the downcast face of her husband. " Thank you, sir. "

Han had merely nodded, completely lost once again to his own thoughts.

Wanting to ask if he could be of any further assistance, the droid had decided that the most he could do was keep a steady, unobtrusive watch on all aboard. Especially on Leia. With that intention a priority, C-3PO had stepped from the small compartment, his destination the cockpit. Pausing for a brief moment, he had looked over his shoulder; Han Solo raised his wife's tiny hand, pressed his lips to it and closed his eyes tightly. If

C-3PO had possessed a heart, it would have gone out to the captain. Upon his return to the cockpit, the droid busied himself for a few moments at the navi-computer, his assigned station on the trip to Coruscant and then asked Jaina if he could be permitted to shut down for awhile. She had easily agreed, assuring the droid that if he were needed they would let him know. To his benefit, Jaina had turned the bright overhead lights off, leaving the compartment bathed in the periodic winking of tiny, colorful instrument tell tales ---it would be very unlikely that anyone would notice that he wasn't really switched off. The droid turned his seat to face the instrument panel before him and, as he'd said he would do, made a routine check and analysis. Unbeknownst to his young companion, he had taken readings from the ship's med-station. A few moments passed quietly. 3PO detected a drop in Leia's temperature. Her pulse and respiration, though weak, showed no change and he therefore decided there was no call to alarm his friends. He would, however, keep a continual vigil on Leia's vital signs. Just as Jacen returned, C-3PO was more profoundly aware that he'd hated the lie he'd told; it went against his ethics as a protocol droid. But the stress suffered by those he had come to consider his own 'family' was enough for him to make such a conscious decision. He feared that eventually they'd become too weary and someone onboard would have to be aware of any change in Leia's condition. In reflection, he supposed he should have mentioned his intentions, but judged that his friends would deny their fatigue and manually switch him off. By performing his own 'deactivation' he could 'power up' instantly should anything out of the ordinary occur.

In the forward seats, the twins were clearly worried not only for their mother but their father as well. Jaina continued to gaze at the myriad of stars visible from the viewport of the cockpit. The subdued atmosphere gave her a sense of privacy but not security. Coruscant seemed too far away and Jaina feared her mother would not survive the journey.

In the co-pilot's seat, Jacen stifled a yawn and rubbed the bridge of his nose between a forefinger and thumb. "How are you doin?" he asked. He glanced at the energy bar he'd given her. Still unwrapped, she held it in one hand. "You ought to eat that," he instructed calmly.

Jaina sighed in exasperation and ripped the top of the wrapping off. Chomping off a bite of the bar, she glared at her sibling. "There! I've eaten. Happy now?"

Her brother twisted in his seat, giving his attention to the panel in front of him. "Dad wasn't hungry either." He suddenly wondered why C-3PO had been so quiet and peering over his shoulder he inquired, "What's with him?"

"He asked if he could switch off for a while. I let him."

Jacen merely shrugged. With the mood his sister was in it was probably just as well the droid remained quiet.

After a few awkward minutes, Jaina asked, "How's Dad?"

Jacen tried to hide the tightness of emotion in his voice but wasn't entirely successful. "Holding on to Mom." The conversation and observation he'd had with his father hours earlier were still very fresh and could not easily be set aside. Nor did he want to. "I'm glad they're together again." He noticed as his sister tucked her chin and blinked back tears. Like him, she had wished their parents had been able to spend more time together. But Jacen was also aware that his sister feared their mother would die and there would be no opportunity for her to change things between them, no time to say she was sorry. No time to say all the things that needed saying. "Don't worry," he told her, "Dad won't let her leave."

But for Jaina the encouragement her brother tried to lend did little to ease her mind and heart; the memory of words she had exchanged with their mother, wished she could rescind and might never have the chance to apologize for, controlled her thoughts.

"You'll never catch up. Not with my help, not with a dozen assistants. That's because you take on everyone else's problems. Well, you weren't there for mine."

"Jaina, I'm trying to help them --- and you."

"I just don't want help anymore. You showed me I had to learn to do without you. So I did."

And might have to do so forever.

She glanced at the deck, wishing for the thousandth time that they were home. In her young life she had traveled most of the galaxy and never felt so far from one destination as now. Duro to Coruscant was a hop and skip by anyone's standards. Why did it have to seem so far away now? Suddenly she remembered the trip their family had taken to Corellia. "Are we there yet?" she and her brothers had asked countless times. A part of her wanted to be that little girl again. The one that could remain riveted to her father's voice as he told stories or squealed with laughter as he playfully tickled her and her brothers in a gentle game before bedtime. The one that her mother had rocked and soothed away

angers and fears upon learning of her father's brutal treatment by the Yevetha, Nil Spaar. The one that would clutch her Wookkiee doll, Elba close to her cheek after being tucked in bed. She even wanted to be that little girl who'd been scolded and excused from the dinner table for calling her father's ship, " the dumb old Falcon". What she wouldn't give now to hear her mother's reprimand for that insult. All those moments, so long ago, now seemed to have occurred only yesterday. And yet they remained out of reach...as far away as home now felt.

Turning toward her brother, she felt more than saw the understanding in his eyes. " How could I have been so wrong about her? About myself?"

" You couldn't help how you felt," Jacen consoled.

" I feel...ashamed."

Nodding, Jacen finally sat in the seat before him. The compartment grew awkwardly silent and he decided it needed to be broken. " You were pretty brave back there."

Jaina Solo shook her head. " I was scared. More than I think I've ever been. Even after I went EV."

" I know. I was too. Mom was," Jacen caught himself, " Is, very proud of you, you know."

" I know." Tears welled in her eyes and once brimming over the lashes ran a course down her cheeks. " That's the worst part."

" It doesn't have to be."

Staring out the stars Jaina answered, "Maybe it needs to be." For a moment she thought she could feel that warmth which had passed between she and her mother, just before Leia had slipped into unconsciousness. Strangely, it seemed to have settled on her once again and Jaina found herself wondering if in some way, her mother was rocking away her anger and fears again. "I wish home wasn't so far away."

C-3PO turned his head, giving away his false state of deactivation. " Jaina! Jacen! Your mother's vital signs are dropping!"

Part Two: Promontory

Leia:

I struggle, desperate to open my eyes but can't overcome their weight ...unlike so many others in my life. Something covers my hands, radiating special, familiar warmth that I feared lost to me forever but as fate would have, found again. Yet, although I finally recognize it, despite how hard I fight to grasp it or allow it to sustain me, I am unable to hold on. There is too much pain here, too much cold. I am so tired...

Nearby, a voice, gentle and caring, calls my name from out of the darkness. It is a voice I know, one that I have missed terribly over the years. Peering into this nothingness I have slipped into, I see a tiny shaft of light. It blossoms and in wonderment I move toward it. Toward the voice. But every step is a battle as I falter against something that refuses to release me, holding me to that other world that is too full of pain. The light beyond grows, and I somehow know that it offers peace from the agony and weariness in my body. The voice beckons still and like a moth to a flame, I let myself fly toward it. Just let it take you, I tell myself. You don't have to fight anymore. I breathe deeply and give myself over. Without warning something pops. It is so loud I have to cover my ears. I realize the line that has kept me anchored elsewhere has begun to unravel one strand at a time. Less hindered now, I move faster and finally the warm light is all around me and there is no darkness, there is no cold. There is no pain.

Suddenly, directly in front of me stands the man who raised me, was my mentor, my teacher, and above all, loved me as if I'd truly been his own daughter.

I reach out and take his hand in one of my own; another foot of rope lets loose but still I am bound to it. If I could discover how to untie it, I would. All I want is to remain here, to bask in this reunion. "" Father, are you going to take me with you?"

"I can," he answers in that kind that I loved so well.

A different voice breaks through from elsewhere. " Mom! Don't."

My father looks at me with questioning eyes " Are you sure you're ready?"

Other voices call to me, begging me to stay with them. I understand the implication of what my father asks but weariness is claiming my thoughts. What would it cost if I just breathed a sigh and let go, let my father put his arm around my shoulders and lead me out of here? Certainly those I leave behind will go on with their lives.

There's that damned rope again, tugging at me. I could swear it has a voice. " Leia, please!"

But the light is so warm here and I as I enter, it bathes me in a sensation that is so exquisite no words can offer a description of it. Everything else is so far away now. Even the other voices are faint. However, the rope still tries to hold me and its voice is something near to a gasp as the length unwinds. I grip my father's hand tighter. "I'm ready." Compelled by the promise of peace, I fall into step beside him, let him guide me onward. The weakness that had encompassed me lifts away completely and I feeling the heaviness that is the rope's slack.

Somewhere, I hear someone crying and from out of nowhere, something like a drop of rain falls on my face. I stop to feel it run down my cheek and as I do so, the rope surprisingly comes to life, suddenly jerking hard enough to toss me off balance. My hand is torn from my father's. I am alone, standing on the edge of a promontory. I cannot see my father anymore and the warm, glowing light is gone. I look behind me and see my past. The faces of those I have known drift by. Moments in my life appear from out of a mist. I see the destruction of my home world, the medal ceremony on Yavin, kissing Han for the very first time, my wedding, the birth of my children, the face of my daughter before I drifted into this place. So many memories...

Turning, I look at the gulf on the opposite side of the narrow ledge. A future of infinite possibilities is shown to me. I see what influence my leaving or remaining might have on them. And on those I still love. There is still too much for me to do and experience. I know where I belong and I desperately search for the frayed and tattered remains of that rope, knowing now what it is --- and who. A sound cracks the barrier between frontiers, like ice breaking on a frozen pond. It is terrible and lonely and it pierces my heart as no physical injury could ever compare to. Something I cannot see but recognize touches my brow, my cheek and I breathe deeper as that special warmth, the one I had allowed myself to drift away from, brushes lightly over my eyes, caresses my lips, igniting it's own light within me. My name, whispered with an intensity only the heart of one's spirit can generate and understand urges me to return, to step from the promontory and into the future. The rope is now not only my anchor but a ladder too and without hesitation I fight against the coming pain and growing cold to make my way to the surface.

My eyes are reluctant to open but my need is too strong; although nothing is quite clear, I realize through the haze that the face before me wears the signs of fatigue brought on by fear and worry. The eyes, however, hold a strength, a belonging, a need that will not let go. No matter what. I think that if I had gone into that realm of warm light, he would have followed and not cared what the price may have been. Again hindered by weakness and pain, I manage to curl my fingers against Han's hands. My voice is less than a whisper,

" You look terrible."

Part Three: No Frontiers

Han:

The hours stretch on endlessly. And I sit here waiting, hoping --- even praying. Just when I think I've lost all track of how long it's been since we left Duro, someone comes by to remind me.

"Get some rest, dad. You look almost worse than mom. She'd have a fit if she could see you now."

" Later."

"You ought to try to eat something."

" Maybe in a while, son. You go ahead. See that Jaina has something too."

" Don't worry, you know Mom, she never gives up."

" No, sweetheart. She never has."

They all mean well but still, I can't afford the time to leave here. I can't afford to let go of her. Not when I might lose her. She's the one thing in my life that's given me the reasons to become who I am or can make me feel this terrified. I see my own fear reflected in the faces of Jaina and Jacen. And I don't have to see Anakin or Luke or Mara to know that same look haunts them too. When I was a smuggler, with no family to worry about, things were so different. More simple in a lot of ways. And a hell of a lot more lonely. In those days, I would have run away from this kind of commitment. In those days I lied a lot to myself. Yeah, in those days...and then along came a princess with a spirit I've never seen matched by anything. And probably never will again. I let that change me, because I wanted her and her everything more than I wanted anything. So all I can do is stay here beside her, hold on to her, hoping she knows I'm here. Suddenly, I find myself thinking again of the last several months, of the frontier of misunderstandings, jealousy and anger Leia and I had allowed to come between us. So often, I wondered if I would ever find my way back to her, afraid I'd said things she could never forgive, that the trip across my own wasteland wouldn't be worth it in the end. After all, I'd said and done some pretty shitty things to her over the past year. I'd done the one thing that wound up doing more damage to myself than all the booze I'd drank after Chewie died. I'd hurt her. When I saw her on Duro she should've slugged the hell outta me. Instead, she kissed me. For someone who's been called smart, I sure was wrong; how can you separate yourself from someone who's a part of your whole?

The monitor above the bed registers another drop in vital signs and I seem to feel her hands, held within my own, grow a degree colder. My voice cracks, "No..."

and leaning forward, I say her name again. I've never seen anyone's skin so pale. For a moment her face is a blur; I wipe away a tear that travels down her neck then look up into the stricken expressions on the faces of my kids. A beeping noise from the monitor sounds an alarm; she's slipping away. Above the voices of our children, I hear my own voice. "Gods, Leia! Your hands are like ice!" I hold them tighter. Touch her face. Kiss her. " Don't do this."

I almost think I imagined feeling a slight movement from her hands, still caught in one of my own. " Leia?" Afraid to breathe, I watch her face, see the vaguest flutter of her lashes. I'm hardly aware, from the pounding of my heart, that I said her name. But I know she heard because she tells me I look terrible. I could almost laugh out loud and even wonder if I just did. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know one thing. There won't be any frontiers between us.

True to my reputation, I carry my charges with speeds that are still legendary, like the bird of prey for which I am named. Alive in ways that only some can fathom and understand I respond to every breath of those I hold dear. I hear the silent prayers. In each and every heartbeat, I feel the resonance of pain. In their eyes, I witness the fear of facing another loss too great to bear. And so, I exceed all measures known to me; I will not fail to bring them home.

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