

Star Wars

Adventure Journal

N 11

Spare Parts

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"You tell him!"

Despite being somewhat ineffective through his thick gloves, Lhojugg wrung his hands to accompany his pacing. Fortuna's nonchalance was beginning to eat away at his patience.

"It was you, Lhojugg, who was responsible for the Master's townhouse during our guest's stay," said the Twi'lek. His head-tails twitched in synch to the smile spreading across his pale face.

The two passed the carved archway into the smoke, dank and criminal bustle of Jabba the Hutt's Townhouse throne room. The room was filled, alcove to alcove, with all manner of seedy bounty hunters. It was posting time, an annual event as recorded on the Tatooine calendar. For two days straight the Hutt crime lord had been handing out bounty notices to hunters new and old.

Bib Fortuna and Lhojugg the Nimbanel cautiously parted their way between two large armored Trandoshans, moving closer to the center of affairs: the raised dais of the Hutt crime lord.

"Ahh Bib, Lhojugg... tee hyatt. Bo shuda," prompted the gristly slug-like gangster, curling his words around the smoking end of his hookah. Jabba pushed aside a datapad and gave a number of deeds to his silvery protocol droid standing behind him.

A slight silence followed, although Lhojugg was certain the entire galaxy could hear the collision of his knees. He cleared his throat, hand-groomed the red tufts of hair growing from the sides of his snout, and stepped forward.

"Most masterful sire, I'm afraid I must announce a discrepancy in my last inventory of the townhouse."

Jabba's large slit-pupilled eyes glanced to the translator droid for a moment, and then paused for the Nimbanel to spit it out. Obfuscation, he mused, the language of bureaucrats and Nimbanese.

"It appears that our guests may have made themselves too much at home on their last stay," piped in Fortuna.

"Hmm, it took you two days to determine that Mcgrrrrr stole something?" rumbled the Hutt.

"Yes, Master. Of course, as you know, the damage deposits do cover the standard party requirements, replacement of wall-hangings, veterinarian checks on your kayven whistlers, replacement of walls... But I'm afraid something somewhat irreplaceable is missing," said Lhojugg. "One of your droids, Master. From accounting, reference number CZ-3, I'm afraid."

It was all Fortuna could do to suppress a tentacle giggle-wiggle. Not 20 minutes ago Lhojugg was hollering at the top of his lung about the missing droid, and now he was reporting the event with the ferocity of a sand-mouse. He could be so spineless at times. Of course, Fortuna's own bracing of himself was a matter of protocol, not fear. Of course.

There was an awed silence, aside from the rustling of modern armor as the roomful of bounty hunters shifted position to watch the mighty Hutt chew out his lackeys.

"Hawr hawr hawr hawr," the Hutt's chuckle echoed in the hall. "Well, this most important matter must be handled immediately." The Hutt's massive smiling head turned on what passed as a neck, scanning the assembled hunters. "Takeel, closs niat lie!"

A gasp worked its way around the room, followed by the clatter of metallic spheres and the shuffle of footfalls as a Sniwian pulled himself out of the crowd, chasing after the ammunition for his primitive weapon. "Yes, your... uh, Hutttness?"

Jabba looked over the hunched, overweight Snivvian with unkempt hair. "Congratulations, you have pulled the first bounty of the day. You are to find a most valuable piece of property, starting at Docking Bay 83. Mcgrrrr's ship should still be in port. Of course, you realize the importance of being inconspicuous, don't you, Takeel?"

"Uhh... i-inconspicuous?" Takeel stuttered as the protocol droid handed him a fresh warrant.

"I'm counting on you, Takeel."

"Yes, of course, sir. I not fail you!" shouted Takeel, as he rushed out of the throne room, barely managing the exit.

For a moment, a silence crystallized over the room, followed immediately by a resounding guffaw initiated by Jabba, seconded by his Kowakian jester Salacious Crumb, and carried out by all in the room.

Lhojugg and Fortuna stood stunned, staring at each other. Jabba's massive belly-laugh subsided enough for him to shout to the assembled bounty hunters, "Snaggletooth, look after your brother."

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The suns beat down with their relentless regularity on Mos Eisley's center, causing the sandstone structures to shimmer with the haze of heat. Despite this, Macemillian Winduartu walked with a skip in his step and a catchy tune in his head. He skipped out of the cantina, heading to his shop in the shade of the wreckage in the center of Mos Eisley.

Mace threw a small restraining bolt from hand to hand, admiring its shine as it twirled. Mace, a Squib, always had an attraction for the shinier things in life. It was for this reason he abandoned his position in the Squib Reclamation Fleet and became a droid dealer on Tatooine. At times, his partner, the Jawa Aquilae, could be a spoiler to his fun, but the two managed to barely pull a profit each season.

He walked into the small structure nearly concealed by a pile of refuse and scrap, into the relative coolness of his shop/room. His sensitive smell receptors on his arms picked up on the stench that Aquilae was in here recently. He had since grown used to the scent of Jawa. It wasn't that bad, to his thinking. It was much better than that of an Ugor.

Mace placed the restraining bolt in a worn and pitted spice rack barely hanging on his wall. He hoisted himself to his bed, which was actually a bantha-skin comforter spread over the rusted ring of a chandelier. He closed his large doe-eyes, dreaming pleasant nikta-inspired dreams.

His tipsy reverie was interrupted as Aquilae entered his room, rifling through a bin for coolant tubing. An unwritten rule at the Jawa Trader's shop is if you can't find it, look in Mace's room.

"I sold that droid you picked up," squawked Aquilae's hand-held transliterator. She hadn't mastered Basic, and the salvaged translator unit sufficed, when it worked.

"Snnzzleggg..." replied Mace.

"Asleep again?" Aquilae shook her head, fine layers of dust shaking off her hood. "I swear Mace, I don't know how you get anything done." She kept rifling through Mace's stuff, opening the spice rack. The restraining bolt fell onto the floor.

"Mace..." Aquilae called. "Great Jawenko, Mace, where did you get this? Mace, wake up. "

Mace half-opened his eyes, slowly bringing the Jawa and the restraining bolt into focus. "Hmm... what? Oh, the bolt. It was from the koovy white-type standing-upright droid I found for you."

"The business droid? The droid I just sold? Mace get down, this is imported-" Aguilae stopped, banged the transliterator against a table. "Mace, this is important."

"What, what is it, Aggy?" asked Mace, rubbing his eyes, plopping down from the chandelier.

"This," said Aguilae, shoving the bolt in the Squib's snout. She nodded at the raised lettering on the bolt's rim. In aurebesh it read "Jabba the Hutt."

"Aggy..." grinned Mace, "You know I can't read."

\* \* \*

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir," said the long-snouted Jenet lackey with a shiny borgbrace wrapped around the base of his skull.

Opun Mcgrrrr hoisted up the belt on his shaggy tunic, twisting his face in a visage of anger and incredulity.

"When did we lose the blasted droid? The thing had mighty important files in it."

"Well, sir," the Jenet reported. "It would seem that yesterday, while you were making certain arrangements with Lady Valarian, the droid went missing from your rented garage. I've questioned the locals, but they couldn't seem to care less."

"You did mention my name, didn't you," questioned Mcgrrrr. The burly Coreellian had an ego well supported by his ample frame.

"Yes, sir" sighed the Jenet, again wondering how and why he was in this current position. "Much to my incredible amazement, it seemed to have no effect."

"Strange... that droid must be found. Retrieve it, and do not rest until you find it." Mcgrrrr spun around, taking a belt of whatever liquid he kept in his silver flask.

Ten thousand kilo-trems of data storage capacity, and I'm playing lost and found. "Yes, sir," the Jenet said aloud. "May I add, sir, that looking for droids appears to a popular past-time on Tatooine at this moment?"

"The Imperials... that's right." Opun's single eyebrow bent in pondering. A team of stormtroopers was spotted in Mos Eisley this week. Everyone knew that stormtroopers were rarely seen in Mos Eisley, but this past week was strange. "Best to avoid them."

"Unerring strategy, sir," the Jenet said as part of his amplified brain worked on hyperspace algorithms in order to inject some amusement in his dismal day.

\* \* \*

The dim conference room in the townhouse echoed with the clacking and blipping of Lhojugg's datapad. He pondered the situation over and again. Fortuna poked his head and one of his head-tails into the room.

"It doesn't make sense, Fortuna. According to the inventory, CZ-3 is supposed to hold class-red information. It's listed here as one of Master's principal business droids. I can't figure it out." Lhojugg nibbled on the stylus for a moment. "Why did the Jabba leave it out in the open?"

"Then don't figure it out." The wheels of Fortuna's mind clicked. To make a Nimbanel solve a puzzle, be sure to give him the right incentive. "I don't think Jabba expects you to."

The sneer that crossed Lhojugg's face caused the stylus to clatter on the desk. "This is business, Fortuna. And our Master's business is my business. You do little more than announce those who come before him."

"Of course, Lhojugg," said Bib, bowing out the door. The current storm has almost passed, and the patient Twi'lek reaps the rewards, as the saying went. The palace was soon to have a vacancy.

\* \* \*

"Okay, okay, it'll be okay... we'll just explain to Jabba... that we accidentally..." Aguilae was pacing as she and Mace wandered through the sandy streets of Mos Eisley. Aguilae stopped and turned, realizing the Squib was not there.

"Mace... hkeek nkulla!" She cursed, a particularly nasty Jawa disparagement alien to the transliterator's database. She tiptoed a few meters, in a futile attempt to peek past the relative giants wandering the streets.

"All right," she heard, "let's say you gave the Quarren half of my order, but he must give me the money he was to pay you, yet you still retain the interest, but you allow me to have the topping of my choice." Through the woven hood, Aguilae's accurate ears were able to trace the Squib to where her nose told her dewback ribs were roasting.

There, in the shade of a striped awning, stood the tiny Squib before a two-meter tall Whiphid. The betusked shaggy mountain of muscle did not seem amused, and the squid-faced Quarren behind him seemed remarkably confused. The Whiphid's nostrils twitched, and he looked in Aguilae's direction.

"Jawa, tell your partner that we don't serve him anymore," growled the tooth face. His clawed hand grasped the sauce brush with a cluster of clenched tendons.

"My apologies, Fillin... my partner, of course, enjoys your wares so..."

The jittery Jawa pushed the Squib aside. "Mace, we are leaves..." a slight adjustment, "we are leaving." She bowed away from the Whiphid, while Mace hollered something about renegotiation.

"Mace," she said, spinning the Squib to face her. "We don't have time for this. That trader can be anywhere. We have to find him."

"Aggy, Aggy, Aggy," Mace shook his short muzzle, "I was going to ask for information as part of a sidebar bargain concerning the amount of napkins. You have to understand the rules of the street."

"No. You have to understand that the Bloated One has a thousand eyes, and twice as many hkedds-" twist a dial here, "-twice as many ears. If he finds out it was us who caused one of his droids to disappear, we're Sarlacc-stoppers. And Jabba's not the type to negotiate."

"Not negotiate?" the Squib's eyes widened, "and Hutts are civilized? Bizarre."

The two small droid dealers crossed from the busy marketplace to the speeder rentals shop. It was Aguilae's hope that the trader she sold the droid to rented the speeder she saw him use, and that the Arcona dealer at the shop would recognize the description.

"Hmmm..." the Arcona carefully scratched his leathery brow with one of his massive claws. Wrinkles formed on the corner of his aged, glittery green eyes as he probed his memory. "Yeah, I think the fella you're describing was Corellian. Right. He rented the Mobquet, he did. I'll look it up in the records, but only if you can fix those brath bearing brackets."

"Not a problem, Unut. Tomorrow morning, you'll get them." Visions of a happy twin sunset were dancing in Aguilae's head. They were going to get through this. "Mace, get off of there."

The Squib sat in the worn saddle of a sleek Starhawk speeder bike, leaning back, pretending to be riding a bucking bantha. The speeder rocked on its support blocks, its repulsor field inactive due to faulty brath brackets. As usual, Mace's own little world precluded Aggy's nagging.

"Mace..." the Jawa straightened as the Arcona returned, plugging away at a large-button datapad.

"Here we go," said the old-timer. "Yep, I've got his name, and his docking bay, too." He turned the datapad to face Aguilae, and she stood on her toes as her eyes gobbled the data.

"A many tanks-" better to flick the transliterator switch on and off real quick, "thanks, Unut. You'll have that speeder up and running by next midday."

\* \* \*

The last of the bounty postings had been delivered, and now Jabba relaxed to a recorded piece from the Modal Nodes. His tail swayed to the slow, Wroonian blues rhythm of Talcharaim Mist-Night in 4/4 time. Even Salacious was remarkably somber in the dim townhouse throne room.

And then the moment was ruined.

"Your eminence," called Lhojugg, walking briskly into the room. The two Gamorreans at the door, who had been soothed by the music, snorted in his direction, their hands moving to their axes.

"Huuooaa..." grunted the Hutt, his eyes opening wide, and then reducing to slits. "What is it, Lhojugg? This had better be good."

"Y-yes, sir." Lhojugg swallowed, his mouth impossibly dry. He consulted the datapad in his hand. "Sir, I've found evidence of conspiracy. Here, in this very townhouse."

"Oh? How so?" the Hutt's tubby hands clenched into impatient fists.

"Upon further investigation of the whole CZ-3 matter, I discovered that the droid, which has a class-red security designation, was transferred just prior to Mcgrrrrr's visit. Through some sort of incredibly inept clerical error, outside of my department, the droid was left in the open storage receptacle in the townhouse when potentially hostile visitors, Mcgrrrrr and company, were present. I tried to track to the error back to the source, and discovered that whoever changed the placement order used your clearance. Someone used your pass-codes, sire!" Lhojugg finished, with more than a small sense of pride. His dramatic lecture-style pacing brought him into the center of Jabba's throne room.

There was a hiss of air as Jabba exhaled forcefully through his large nostrils. "Lhojugg, you have erred. I did not ask you for this investigation." The Hutt's greasy fingers danced over the controls on his armrest. The Talcharaim Mist-Night had since increased in tempo, to symbolize the tempestuous mist-gales that inspired the song. The Gamorreans each took a step back, and Salacious' gaze was fixated on the dark ceiling.

"Sir, I... I was merely concerned about the security of-" Lhojugg stuttered.

"Your investigation is over." Jabba pressed a small ultrasonic squelch button on his armrest. A rust-encrusted cage crashed down over the Nimbanel, and the Hutt helped himself to a fat toad as creaky chains lifted the cage up to the ceiling.

As the song reached its hurricane-crescendo, the cage lifted past the wire-mesh screen keeping back the hungry kayven whistlers. The strong blasts of kloo horns and Dorenian Beshniquel created a cacophony of flats to Lhojugg's sharp screaming. By the time the music settled back to its quietly introspective coda, the whistlers had eaten, and the rustling of the mesh had ended. The drops of blood that fell from the ceiling created a syncopated rhythm the Bith musicians would have most likely enjoyed.

\* \* \*

The trip to Docking Bay 87 had proven to be a partial success. The Corellian trader that the Arconan speeder dealer had directed them to did indeed recognize Aquilae, if not Mace. While the trader forcibly complained about the quality of the business droid Aquilae had sold him, the Squib entertained himself by studying the shinier parts of the trader's freighter.

"Its processors must have been sun-fried," the trader had said, peppering his speech with a few Socorran curses. "The thing didn't even have enough sense to follow me."

After demanding a full refund, which Mace managed to bargain down to a half-refund, a new transponder coupler, and the recipe to his mother's almond-kwewu crisp-munchies, the trader conceded, and said he sold the droid back to another group of Jawas. By the description of the cloak patterns and merchandise, Aquilae was able to figure out it was

Jek Nkik's group.

The two dealers returned to Unut's shop, and rented a speeder to go into the patch of wastes where Nkik's sandcrawler was known to patrol. The two dealers not only had to pay the Arcona for the speeder, but they also promised to replace the entire control/interface units on the Starhawk speeder.

This is getting expensive, Aguilae thought, wiping a patch of grime from the inside of the Mobquet speeder's windscreen. Mace was, as always, maddeningly oblivious, sticking his head away from the windscreen, his gray fur bristling in the wind. His eyes glinted behind the mismatched goggle lenses.

"Mace, you'll get sandflies in your teeth," said Aguilae.

"I haven't eaten yet, Aggy." the Squib whined.

"You ate all my snit-spore snacks!"

"That's snacking, not eating."

She shook her head, and instead concentrated on what approach she would take with Jek. She adjusted the trim on the speeder's control, smoothing out the travel over the rocky terrain.

Jek and Aguilae were passing acquaintances, but most Jawas who operated around Mos Eisley knew of her from her shop. Despite this, Aguilae was quite uneasy. She never got along with other Jawas, and was an outcast among her people. She preferred mechanical company to those of her species. She stomached Mace because he managed to show some profit, but the competitive nature among Jawas often bothered her. She knew Nkik would only take hard cash, and their reserves were dwindling.

"Aggy, big-Jawa metal-thing-ship! Over at there-o'clock!" Mace squeaked.

Aguilae squinted her shining eyes, seeing the hulking vehicle as a mere speck on the horizon. This was Nkik's territory, all right. She fired the Mobquet's overdrive, leaning into a hard turn, and kicking a spew of gravel and sand behind them.

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It had taken nearly three hours for Takeel to find Docking Bay 63, and another hour for him to walk there. Of course, behind him he left a trail of passersby clued into his search as he asked them for directions. The hunch-backed Snivvian wandered past the small tapcafe built out of a small adobe hut, looking for last minute visual clues, such as a number 83, when his memory failed him.

"Excuse me," he stammered to a trader walking by.

"Don't touch me."

"Uhh... pardon me," he stuttered to a militia man.

"I have no change."

"One moment, if I could..." he faltered to a moisture farmer.

"Blasted street scum, out of my way."

"I was wondering..." he fumbled to a white droid.

"Bzz-nkk, bzz-nkk."

Takeel looked at the malfunctioning droid - - a tall, battered white droid. It shook its head as if its seals were not tightened around its neck. At the very least, it seemed to acknowledge the Snivvian in its near-empty photoreceptor.

"Do you know where docking bay 83 is?" he asked.

The droid stopped in its tracks. For a moment, it seemed as if it were to fall over, but instead, it prodded its arm toward the direction from where it had wandered.

"A thousand thank-yous, sir," said the Snivvian, leaving a trail of pellet-style ammunition behind in his path.

\* \* \*

Aguilae slowed the Mobquet to come parallel with the lumbering crawler. The din of ancient metal, poorly lubricated servos, and shuddering steel overcame the whine of the repulsorlifts. She pulled out a small, scratched comlink from one of her pockets, and keyed a standard Jawa channel.

"Nkkek, hkkeuika, obvioaga," she hissed, her transliterator not picking up from its place on Mace's seat. Mace, in the meantime, was leaning out the speeder, waving like a windmill.

For a few moments, it seemed as if the sandcrawler was to continue, but a sharp squeal of angry engines brought the crawler to a halt. Mace, of course, thought his waving did the job. Aguilae brought the speeder tight to the crawler's ramp, and rehearsed her monologue in her head one more time.

With a veritable shriek, the lethargic crawler lowered the ramp, and several pairs of sickly glowing eyes peered from the darkness. "Hkekk, Aguilae," a voice croaked out from above, with an unmistakable contempt applied to the name.

Traders and humans often joked that Jawas were nothing to be afraid of, but now, the mob of five or so, looking down the ramp, blasters drawn, were enough to make Aguilae's stomach quiver. Mace, predictably, was still waving.

The Jawas parted, and Jek stepped out, his arms open. "Aguilae, you spoke of a deal?" he croaked in his native tongue. The Jawa, with a tan and brown cloak stitched together, walked down the ramp. He had his tooled blaster tucked in his belt, but there was no mistaking its presence, and the swagger that accompanied it. The four other Jawas followed, several steps behind Jek. Their eyes never left the speeder.

Aguilae, the name humans gave her, inhaled, steeling her pride. With it, she caught a whiff of the disgust and disdain the Jawas were emitting. She had discarded her Jawa name, to live and sell among the humans, and they had not forgotten. She made sure to tuck away the transliterator; no need to goad these five on any more than necessary.

Show no fear, show no fear, show no fear.

"Yes, Jek," she spoke in her tongue, "a deal that you shall find quite profitable."

"Truly. Now, you understand that this is our territory," Jek hissed, his hand caressing the clay handle of his blaster. "This makes your presence even less welcome."

He must have smelled the fear, Aguilae thought. She instead concentrated on her hunger. Hunger and fear smelled very similar to Jawas, so she thought hard on the empty stomach and the snitspore snacks that Mace had eaten. A touch of loathing wouldn't be too bad right now, either.

"So even you must understand the magnitude of the deal that would bring me out this far." Aguilae responded coolly. One of the Jawas behind Jek whistled a laugh.

"Aguilae, or Khea Nkuul, have you forgotten what this double sunrise brought today?"

"Today?" she paused. The use of her name had thrown her, but today... Her birthday? The start of the storm season? The end of the growing season? No. That wasn't it.

Then she pieced it together, a tribute to her skills as a scavenger. The crawler, following its course past Mos Eisley, to these parts, on its way to the swap: the annual meeting of all the Jawa sandcrawlers in the area to exchange goods.

Then she placed the scent the Jawas exuded. Avarice, stronger than usual. Her eyes followed the gaze of the four Jawas behind Jek, and they all were staring at the shiny speeder.

Jek drew his blaster, as the quartet of Jawas each brandished hydrospanners like clubs. "It's time you came home."

\* \* \*

The shaking of the sandcrawler made Aguilae's work even harder. She was tucked into a cramped sleeping compartment in the uppermost of the crawler's 15 levels. The dented metal door was locked shut. Twin worn plastic straps dug into her shoulders, and this particular sleeping module was designed for a taller Jawa since her feet failed to touch the floor. She rocked back and forth, making her almost drop the delicate piece she was working on. She twisted small screws free with her thumbnail, and used what little light her eyes generated to work on the wiring. A few more touches, and she'd be done.

A trail of scent, this time of curiosity and something else, wafted to her nostrils. She tucked away her tinkering as the door opened, shedding the dim corridor light into Aguilae's eyes. Jek cast a shadow over her, undoing the braces that kept her slung to the wall.

"Were these accommodations really necessary?" she hissed, rubbing her shoulder.

"There's wisdom in precautions; it's what the elders teach us." Jek lowered her to the deck. "But, that's right - - you haven't heard the words of the elders in, what, eight seasons?"

"Seven and a half, actually." She pushed Jek's arms back, brushing the sand from her tunic. She took a look around. Without the blindfold they forced her to wear before they placed her in the sleeping closet, she could finally see the crowded, oxidized compartments in the upper level. The sunlight spilling in from the left showed her that the bridge was nearby. A group of Jawas stood clustered on the right. Their stench showed significant annoyance. She looked a moment longer and saw the gray-furred Squib among them, staring at the ceiling of the compartment.

"I'm surprised you noticed." Aguilae added, her eyes darting from corner to corner.

"I've been keeping an eye on you, Khea." Jek paced, holding a droid caller in his hand, supposedly examining it with interest. "You know what they say about you, don't you? You know what your tribe is going through?"

"No," she said, wondering how long she would have to humor him, "but I'm sure you'll tell me."

"I won't have to. They're certain to be at the swap, and we'll finally put you where you belong. You must follow our ways, Khea. A female just cannot abandon her role in the tribe and the meets. It's dangerous."

Somewhere in the dark folds of her hood, Aguilae grimaced. So, this is how it's going to be. She paused, letting Jek savor his last glottal syllable, all the while trying to dredge up those holovids that Mace had gotten from a Dorcin traveler. How did they go...

"Is that it?" she said, louder than she intended. "Is that it, really?" The other Jawas moved closer, their scents betraying their curiosity. Again, Aguilae concentrated on her hunger so that her excitement would not come through in her scent.

"What do you mean?" asked Jek.

"Oh, come on, Jek. You expect me to believe that you're taking me all the way back to the swap with you just to teach me an elder lesson?" She walked closer to him, an action he obviously was not expecting. "That you would remotely jeopardize your claim to that speeder by having me along? Why not be honest for a change. I'm not some farmer you're trying to hoodwink."

For a brief moment, while quoting the dialogue some Ho'Din floozy had recorded on another world untold years ago, before undoubtedly going on to a multi-holo contract, Aguilae regretted concentrating on her stomach. These words were making her queasy.

"There are those fire-eyes I've missed," Jek smiled, reaching his grubby little hands to touch her shoulders.

"Just try it, Jek. I don't care. Take me back to my father. Even if he decrees it, I will not bond with you." She let the last word hiss off her lips, with all the intensity she could muster. Inside, a part of her giggled. Jawas, she mused, they may know droids, but they're strangers to grade-b holomelodrama.

Jek stomped his foot on the ground. "It is the way, Khea!"

"NJeko! It's your way. Not mine."

For a moment or two, all that was heard was the ubiquitous rumbling of sandcrawler treads. Jek fumed, filling the compartment with his stench of impotent rage. He turned, looking at the Jawas peering in from the corner.

"Put her away," croaked Jek. "We'll let her father deal with her." Jek stormed out of the chamber as the other Jawas grabbed Aguilae and forced her into the compartment. She did her best to feign a struggle, all the while peering past the Jawas.

Her cue had been received. Mace was not there.

\* \* \*

It was as if it was Haggleday morning, and Mace was but a fuzzling again. The hairs on his arms bristled as he looked around the room into which he had squeezed his tiny frame.

There, in the corner, was a canted R1 unit. Tucked away under a pile of optical cabling was the pot-belly shape of a BM-B unit. A charred WED 15 unit had become little more than a hodgepodge of manipulators, but it was still enough to make Mace's heart soar. He tried to run in seven directions at once, and ended up sitting down, catching his breath.

He collected his flighty mind and got a better sense of his environs. It was quite ingenious, actually. The room was a hidden compartment of sorts, its angles lined with heavy steam venting pipes. If any competing Jawa tribes had a hold of sensor technology, this room would read as a hot spot, but no details within could be gleaned.

In this case, it was the repulsorlift signature of their speeder that would be concealed. Mace jumped behind the controls, taking a cursory look at the dash. The readouts looked positive; it seems the Jawas hadn't had a chance to give it the once-over, yet. A little voice inside his head brought him back to the situation at hand. Aguilae had given him a chance, and he couldn't miss it. But he wouldn't leave without her.

He reached into one of his hidden pockets, plucking out a handful of chronometers. He quickly found the one that worked. Fifteen minutes. He'd give her fifteen minutes.

In the meantime, he thought, as his gaze came across a slightly carbonized red R5 unit and a power droid, he'd best find a way to keep himself busy.

\* \* \*

About five hours ago the Jenet had immediately determined a search radius based on the average foot speed of a Delban Serv-O-Droid CZ unit, with about 15 or 20 years' worth of wear on a pelvic servomotor.

Of course, the outside odds of probability always had a way of presenting themselves to the Jenet, and it wasn't until the last 200 meters of his search that he spotted something.

The Jenet toggled down the throttle switch on his small repulsorscooter and came to a hover as he pulled out a pair of macrobinoculars. He was about 10 kilometers from the town center now, where the domed buildings were fading away into the sands like some desert mirage. He allowed a quick grimace as the image intensifiers brought his quarry into view.

Tucked away, on the sunlit side of a small adobe garage, between a vaporator and a garbage bin, was a white humanoid droid, attempting to walk through the wall. The amount of sand it had kicked up behind it indicated that it had been there for, oh, 15 minutes, according to the Jenet's calculations. The droid seemed to pay very little attention to the fact it kept walking into the wall, and it carried on, following its distorted programming.

The Jenet looked around, eyeing no scavengers, and parked his speeder. He walked toward the garage, stowing away his macros. With the droid on the sun-side, and most of the vagrant Jawa scavengers clustered in the shadows of the buildings, it was spared.

Giving the droid a visual inspection, the Jenet surmised that either the droid had simply had its logic reactors burned out from the heat, or was loaded with so much extra software that its primary processors were slowing down to the state of mechanical senility. This

almost evoked a chuckle from the Jenet. Why anyone would load such a faulty, outdated model with any software was beyond his computing.

He paused when he saw that the restraining bolt that should have been on the droid's chest was gone. He quickly dismissed it, applied a fresh bolt imprinted to Opun "The Black Hole" Mcgrrrrr, led the droid back to his scooter, and while he secured it with some syntherope, ran through his long memory of other Jenets who had considerably better careers than he did.

\* \* \*

The sandcrawler had stopped. There was some commotion coming from the bridge, but Aguilae instead concentrated on closing the small hatch on her transliterator. They couldn't have arrived at the swap yet. It was too soon.

The small plastic piece clicked into place, and she turned her attention to what was happening beyond the metal door of her compartment. From the smell of things, Jek and the Chief were gone. There was only one other Jawa, either tired or bored, probably in the control room.

Aguilae closed her eyes, made a silent promise to her gods, and hit the switch on the jury-rigged transliterator. "Quickly, get the prisoner out, now!" the small device squawked in Jawa, in a near approximation of Jek's voice.

She tucked the device away and grabbed onto the straps supporting her shoulders. She pulled herself up on them, bending her legs and placing them against the door. She smelled the lone Jawa come closer and fiddle with the locking mechanism. She listened for the final click.

She then kicked with all her strength. There was a dull thud as the door flew open, sending the Jawa reeling. The hapless hooded scavenger flew into a discarded pile of oxidized cowlings, crumpling into an unconscious heap.

Aguilae used the sharpened end of a conductor strip she had pulled out of the transliterator, and cut the shoulder straps. She dropped down on all fours, taking a quick look around. No one was there, save for the incapacitated guard. She skittered to him, gave his equipment pouches a quick inspection, pocketed a few pieces, and scooted to the bridge.

The controls, as would be expected, were a mess of sand-encrusted screens, levers and toggle-switches either taped down or held in place with flexor cord. Entire banks of displays had burned out and had since been transformed into makeshift storage bays, full of droid heads and useless electronics. She peered out the viewport and immediately ducked down.

Imperials! she thought. Had they seen me?

She dared a second look. There, outside, in front of the crawler, several white-armored stormtroopers with colored shoulder guards stood over a group of Jawas. The chief, Jek, and three others were there, gesticulating wildly about something. The troopers were all armed. Heavily armed.

Off to the north, barely visible behind a ridge, was a vehicle almost as large as a sandcrawler itself. Vaguely cylindrical in shape, with a pair of deadly-looking turret-mounted cannons on its dorsal side. It was just pulling up. Those fools on the ground can't even see it, she thought.

Time was running out. She ducked out of the bridge, moving to one of the access crawl-tubes that crisscrossed the interior of the crawler.

\* \* \*

"Ten twenty-three reporting. They're not in the repair bay, sir."

The stormtrooper spoke into his comlink, while Mace squeezed himself tighter into the corner. He was obviously green, Mace reasoned, since he didn't even take any of the great bits littering the bay. The trooper left, and Mace emerged. He looked at the R5 unit he had claimed, again wondering how the trooper could leave such a fine specimen behind. He would never understand Imperials.

Mace was halfway through loading the power droid onto the speeder when a clank behind him caught his ear. Maybe the trooper had returned. He grabbed a pair of arms off the nearest WED 15 unit, and stood perfectly still.

"Mace, nice try. Do you do any celebrity impressions?" Aguilae snickered, pulling herself out of the covered crawltube opening. Without her transliterator, she knew Mace wouldn't understand her, even more so than usual.

"Aggy!" Mace shouted, running to give the Jawa an embrace. With the robot arms still in hand, Mace succeeded in wrapping the hug around her twice. "Aggy, there's Imperials-type-trooper-guys right here in crawler-ship-thing!"

"We've got to get out of here before-" A sudden shriek of stressed metal cut her off. There was a horrible shudder, and the room began vibrating, resonating through all the little loose pieces of droid anatomy in the chamber.

"We're moving. Odd, what with the stormtroopers-" she was cut off again, this time by the squeal of a blaster bolt, then a sudden roar of an explosion.

"Mace... we... go now!" Aguilae croaked in Basic. She looked at the steam vent piping that lined the chamber, and hoped that the Imperial sensors weren't looking too closely at the chamber to notice the sudden flare of a repulsor signature. That they didn't even touch the speeder struck her as odd. What did they want in the first place?

"Coming, Aggy." Mace crouched next to the main servo of the door-gate for the chamber. Fastened to the servo with syntherope, bonding gel, and what looked like the rubber tread from a LIN droid, was a cluster of vac-tubes, power cells, liquid vials, and wiring. "You've been busy," she commented.

Mace struck a small flamer he kept tucked away in a hidden pocket, and lit an oily rag-wick. He jumped into the speeder, and covered his head.

There was a sharp crack as Mace's impromptu bomb turned into a thousand sparking filaments, and the servo split in two. With a heavy creak, the ramp lowered. Halfway.

"Crit..." Aguilae cursed. Three more blasts rocked the crawler, and the treads began making a staccato wailing that did not sound at all well.

"Hang on," yelled Mace, pulling on his goggles.

"Wait, Mace..." But there was no waiting. Mace gunned the engines. With the added weight of the two droids in the back seat, the speeder tilted back enough to make the 45-degree steep angle of the ramp. The top thruster barely cleared the doorway.

For a few exhilarating seconds, the speeder was airborne. Whatever forces that controlled time and space seemed to find these two scavengers entertaining at the very least. They weren't decapitated by their exit. Nor did the speeder shatter when it returned to the ground, though for a few terrifying moments it sounded as if it was going to.

But, most amazing was their direction. The troopers were attacking from the northwest, and the speeder's chamber was oriented to face the southeast. With an entire burning crawler between them and the fleeing speeder, the Imperials would be hard pressed to have detected Mace and Aguilae.

Mace was at full throttle, despite the warning buzz of the speeder's thermostat. The sound of blaster fire was gradually fading away under the roar of the repulsor, and the crawler was growing to just a speck on the horizon, billowing thick, oily smoke into the clear sky.

Aguilae looked back, knowing that Jek and his tribe were gone. All that, for nothing. She had survived, though, and she wasn't taken home. That was all that mattered, but the droid was gone. She snorted an ironic laugh. She didn't even know if Jek had the droid to begin with.

The R5 and the power droid warbled fragments of conversation to each other in the awkward silence that accompanied most of the journey. Mace may not have known much, but he did recognize when Aguilae wanted to be left alone. At least, most of the time.

"Oh, hey, Aggy, you know what the R5 told me? He said the koovy white-type

standing-upright droid we're looking for wandered away from the crawler before they even left the city."

The speeder's thrusters were momentarily drowned out by the loudest curse Aguilae had ever uttered.

\* \* \*

Unut Poll took the small receipt chit the Jenet had given him and gave a quick visual inspection of the scooter he had returned. Everything seemed to be in order, save from some extra syntherope that the renter had left on the cargo cowling, but the credit was good, and that's all that mattered.

"Doing a little hunting?" Unut asked, painfully conversational.

"No," the Jenet replied, not looking up from the datapad he was tapping, updating expenditures to Mcgrrrrr's account. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason." Ordinarily, those smart enough to survive on Mos Eisley's streets knew better than to ask questions, but the Jenet looked harmless enough. "I was just wondering about the rope, that's all."

"The rope is there to hold the droid down," the Jenet responded. "Are there no sub-adult schools on Cona?"

"Mister, in my school, they taught us the difference between a droid and empty desert air," said Unut, crossing his arms.

To this, the Jenet's ears perked up, although no one could have seen them for the borg implant. He looked back at the speeder. And there, in the shadow of Unut's stall, was his scooter, trailing some torn and frayed syntherope from its cowling.

The borg implant quickly provided the Jenet with over three hundred thousand expletives appropriate for the situation. Instead, he inhaled, willed his pores to radiate dignity, and said, "Excuse me."

As the Jenet turned and left, Unut could not help but laugh. This was definitely one to tell his staff.

"Hey, Wioslea, you'll never guess - - What's this?" Unut paused midstep, his glittering eyes spotting an oxidized, sand-pitted X-34 tri-thrust speeder parked in his lot.

His clerk, a tall comic-faced Vuvrian, looked up nervously. "We just bought it, from a moisture farmboy." She rubbed her oddly shaped hands, and stared at the clunker for a moment.

"How much?" Unut rumbled.

"Two thousand." Wioslea barely squeaked.

"Two thousand! What, is your brain baked? What are you, entering your second grubhood?"

\* \* \*

Takeel positively beamed. He did it. He found the droid. He knew he could. He looked around, hoping his brother would notice. He - - wait, the droid.

An ice-cold second of sheer panic on a hot desert world melted away as Takeel saw the droid wandering about 15 meters behind him.

"I said follow me," he bellowed. "How dumb can you be?"

The humanoid business droid continued its buzzing, and shuffled along awkward legs, barely avoiding passersby.

"Will you hurry it up, I gotta get you to Jabba's," the Snivvian urged.

But if the droid had any care as to who Jabba was, and how important it was to rush to him at this moment, it made no indication. It continued its buzzing and shuffling.

"Why Jabba wants you I don't know," said Takeel, getting behind the droid in an attempt to steer it in the right direction. "You're so stupid."

\* \* \*

The speeder had broken down three blocks from the shop, and Jek's Jawas had taken Aguilae's rental chit from her. It was, without question, the worst day she had ever had.

And now, appropriately, she was helping Mace shepherd two droids through the bustling alleyways so that no one would steal them.

Isn't that, she mused, how this all started?

"Come on, cheer up, Aggy!" Mace insisted, allowing his exuberance to cover the fact that he was skimping on his share of the lifting of the damaged R5. "We got these koovy droids, and a story to tell too!"

"Swell, a story. That'll put dinner on our tables and nikta in your liver," she snarled, knowing full well Mace couldn't understand her. She was out a transliterator, out a transponder coupler, she hadn't found the parts for Unut's Starhawk, and she was sure the Arcona was going to charge them for towing the speeder the three blocks. And, to top it all off, there was no trace of the business droid anywhere.

Until three seconds later.

"Mace! Mace! Nekkel juuuar obwegadada! Dinkle obwegadada!" She shouted, gesticulating madly.

"I said I was sorry, Aggy, it's-" Then Mace saw what she was pointing at. There, not 20 meters away, in a shadowy space between two buildings, was the droid, a Snivvian, and a Jenet holding a blaster.

"I'm afraid that this is my property," the Jenet said, emphasizing the point by slowly waving his blaster.

The hunchbacked Snivvian had drawn his own weapon, a laughable anachronism of polished metal. "No way, grubber, you don't know what I went through to get this thing."

A small part of the Jenet dating back to before the borg surgery screamed internally. "I'm sure it's very interesting, but you see, the droid is my property."

"Oh yeah, I don't see your name on it," snapped Takeel.

"First of all, you don't know my name. Secondly, I doubt you can even read. Thirdly, if you'll look closely on the droid's ventral hatch, there is a restraining bolt bearing the signet of Opun 'The Black Hole' Mcgrrrrr, the owner of this droid." The Jenet said, with surprisingly clear enunciation through clenched teeth.

Suddenly, a bright red blaster bolt tore from the crowd, striking the droid square on its back, sending its charred limbs hurling in several direction.

The two spun, facing the crowd. But the Jenet's sheer shock and rage over the destruction caused him to delay long enough for his own blaster to be knocked out of his hand by a well-placed second shot.

"That was all Jabba needed, borg" a voice called out from the now still crowd. Another Snivvian, this one in a sharp red jumpsuit, walked out carrying a smoking blaster. An unlikely form, he walked through the parting onlookers. He stood about 1.4 meters tall, and looked remarkably similar to Takeel.

"Brother!" exclaimed Takeel, nearly forgetting the situation entirely. "You shot my droid."

"You fool!" fumed the Jenet, "Have you any idea what you've just done?"

"Yes. I've gathered some rather incriminating evidence about your employer for my employer." The Snivvian, known to some as Snaggletooth, pulled out a datapad from his belt. He displayed it so the Jenet could see, all the while keeping his blaster trained on him. Its small screen showed a grainy holo image, with time-code counter ticking away at

the bottom. The first scene was very dim, and showed a fat, slobbish man and his Jenet attendant sneaking around what appeared to be Jabba's townhouse. The image skipped for a bit, and the time-codes showed a significant advancement. There, in the brightly sunlit streets, was the Jenet, producing a labeled restraining bolt, and moving out of the camera's view. Then the image skipped again, and replayed the images just prior to the droid's demise.

From the skewed angles and wobbly picture, a borg implant wasn't required to surmise that the droid's photoreceptors had been recording the images.

"So, that's why it was so vacant," the Jenet muttered. "The droid's capacities were stretched running whatever transceiver rig the Hutt patched into it."

"Very good." Snaggletooth said, "Jabba has all sorts of holos of Mcgrrrrr now. Stealing a business droid? From your host, even! Such bad form. Not to mention what sorts of secrets you let spill in the two days you had the droid. "

"One and a half, really." The Jenet sniffed. He looked down his muzzle at the scruffier of the two Snivvians. "Tell me, what role did he have to play?"

"Purely accessory," Snaggletooth added. "Very good, brother. You found your first real bounty. Looks like Ephant Mon won the bet. I wonder what Jabba has to pay."

Takeel had missed everything said after "Very good" and relished the praise of his brother.

"Tell your employer to be at Jabba's palace by 2300, and tell him not to try anything stupid. His ship is impounded, and he's not going anywhere." Snaggletooth lowered his blaster, then turned to his brother.

"And I believe these are yours," he said, giving his brother a handful of small centimeter-gauge metal sphere ammunition.

\* \* \*

Mace hadn't gotten it, the whole situation they'd witnessed, and Aguilae was certain she couldn't explain it to him even if she had the transliterator. The point was, if the suns shined on them through good skies, then Jabba would ignore the second theft of his business droid by Mace.

And if not, well, they'd deal with that when it came.

They managed to salvage what was left of the droid, knowing that since it had transmitted all of its holo information to Jabba or Snaggletooth, no one would need the charred remains. Maybe they could sell it to someone, or maybe some other Jawas would come in from the swap.

She wouldn't mention Jek to them. He and his tribe deserved that much. Let their scraps be found by those scrounging; she would not tip off anyone to its location. She and Mace had taken their share. The CZ's motivator looked like it would fit in the R5, and the power droid seemed fine.

A few years back, she would have picked the sandcrawler remains clear. But not now. That was too much of the Jawa way, and she had chosen this life. And she was going to stick it through. Someday, she was going to make a fortune.