

Star Wars

A Forest Apart

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## Chapter 1

Across the skylane from Chewbacca's quarters rose Sasal Center, its forty spires ringing an open-air mezzanine as large as the Well of the Dead back on Kashyyyk. Beside the center stood Wauth Complex, more massive than Korrokrayyo Mountain itself. On the other side loomed the mirrsteel needles of Ooe'b Towers, as tall as wroshyr trees and webbed together by a tangle of pedestrian bridges that always reminded Chewbacca of the mazes down in the Shadow Forest. It would have been wrong to say that he enjoyed living here on Coruscant, but he had come to think of it as home—perhaps even to see the shape and mystery of the forest in its soaring lines and durasteel depths.

At Chewbacca's side, his life-mate, Mallatobuck, was staring down through the transparisteel, mesmerized by the great rivers of traffic flowing along the skylanes below.

[Is this what they do for fun on Coruscant? ] she asked. Her blue eyes and honey-colored fur were as beautiful as the day Chewbacca had pledged himself to her. [Circle the world in airspeeders? ]

[Oh no, ] Chewbacca joked. [I ordered the traffic for your visit. ]

[Be careful. You know I believe whatever you say. ] Mallatobuck spoke without looking away from the window. [Still, I think traffic is the one thing I will miss. It is like the Cascade of Rrynorrerun. Endless. Calming. ]

[Endless, yes—but calming? ] Chewbacca shook his head. [You have never tried to make a three-lane climb, Malla. ]

[I have not, ] she agreed, [because I thought you valued the lives of your mate and child. ]

[I do. You know I would never let you drive. ]

[Let me? ] Malla rowled. She regarded him with mock anger. [With such talk, you're lucky to be the father of my child. ]

[Very lucky. ]

Chewbacca grinned and pulled her to his side. Malla had waited fifty years for him to return from his adolescent wanderings, then married him knowing that he had pledged a life debt to Han Solo that would prevent them from sharing a home. In moments of vainglory, Chewbacca thought it must have been his strength or battle ferocity that had won her devotion. But deep down he knew better. Deep down he knew he was just the luckiest Wookiee alive.

He checked his chronometer and—sad at how quickly their last hours together were passing—said, [It's almost time. ]

[I'll see if Lumpy has finished gathering his souvenirs. ] Malla turned to leave, then stopped and pointed at a plastoid shoulder case in the middle of the hall. [That's odd. ]

Chewbacca started toward the hall. [Lumpy? ]

Malla caught his arm. [Galactic Rebels, ] she sighed.

Chewbacca curled his lip. [Does he play it this much at home? ]

[More, ] Malla said. [Here, at least he has the real thing. ]

[Real thing? ]

[You, ] Malla said. [You have noticed how he idolizes you? ]

[I am in his hologame? ] Chewbacca began to think this Galactic Rebels was not so bad.

[Sort of. ] Malla's tone was exasperated. [He pretends to be you. ]

Chewbacca smiled. [What is wrong with that? A cub should respect-]

[It is more than respect, ] Malla interrupted. [Chewbacca, you cast a long shadow-and longer from here than if you lived in Rwookrrorro with us. Lumpy tries so hard to be the son of the 'Mighty Chewbacca' that he bores his friends and angers his adversaries-and when they challenge him to back up his words, he is always the one who comes home bloodied and quiet. ]

[Always? ]

Malla nodded. [It has grown so that he hardly goes out. ]

Chewbacca's jaw dropped.

Again, Malla nodded.

Chewbacca scowled at his study door. [I see. ]

A strong mate like Malla made it easy to believe Lumpy was not suffering because of his father's absence, but the truth was that a life debt placed a burden on an entire family. There were somethings that even the best mother could not teach a young Wookiee as well as a good father-and when it came to handling the troubles Malla was describing, no father would be a better teacher than Chewbacca.

Chewbacca returned his gaze to Malla. [Lumpy shouldn't go home with you. ]

Malla's brow shot up. [He shouldn't? ]

[He needs to spend time with his father, ] Chewbacca said, certain of himself. [No more than a standard year or two. At his age, he shouldn't be gone from the forest too long. ]

[No, er, yes . . . I mean, you're right. About the forest. ] Malla blinked several times, then, as her composure returned, her expression grew more thoughtful. [What about you? How will you manage? ]

[I am his father. I will manage. ] To Chewbacca, that was all the answer needed-but he knew Malla would want details. [I have room, and I am sure the Princess will let me borrow Threepio on occasion. ]

[A protocol droid? Trying to control a young Wookiee? ] Malla shook her head. [Not without a stun baton. ]

[I suppose not, ] Chewbacca admitted. [But there is our embassy. It's not far from here, and Princess Leia is on good terms-]

[You are on good terms with our embassy. ] Malla patted his cheek. [Sometimes, you are almost humble. ]

Though humble was no compliment to Wookiees, Chewbacca did not bother to protest. [So you agree? ]

Malla thought about it, then said, [It would do him good to see that your life is not one long holo-adventure. He needs to see that you spend most of your time doing normal things-like maintaining the Falcon , or hiding in the corner with Han at diplomatic ceremonies. ]

Chewbacca gave her a sidelong glance. [Is that what you think? ]

[No one's life could be as yours is portrayed over the 'Net. You-and Han Solo, too-would be dead ten times over. ] Malla took his hand, then nodded. [It might be good for him. ]

Chewbacca smiled. [Then it's settled. ] He started for his study door. [He will stop

playing these games, and I will teach him to win a clench challenge. ]

[What? ] Malla strode after him. [How will that solve anything? Teaching him to clench fight will only make Lumpy talk about you more-and give him the skill to force others to listen. And taking his games away will only give him one less thing to talk about that is not you. ]

[He is going through a stage, ] Chewbacca said. [It will end when he learns confidence, and confidence will come with victory. ]

They reached the study door, and Malla caught Chewbacca by the arm.

[Our son is already trying to be you. That is the problem. ] Her voice was so low Chewbacca had to lean down to hear. [What you must do, my mate, is teach him to be himself. ]

Chewbacca considered Malla's words for a moment, then nodded. [Agreed. He must learn to be himself . . . and win the clench challenge. ]

He stepped through the door into his study, where the image of an auburn-furred Wookiee was snarling atop the holocomm pad, a long line of statistics arrayed below the picture and the name lumpacca floating above. The plastoid chair in front of the workstation was empty, and a message flashing in one corner was threatening to end the session unless the player responded in thirty seconds.

[Lumpy? ] Chewbacca called.

When there was no answer, he went to the other door and looked across the hall. The refresher was open, and the interior was dark. The same was true of the two sleeping rooms.

Chewbacca had a sinking feeling. [Lumpy? ]

A muffled crash echoed around the corner, and Chewbacca's worst fears were confirmed when he stepped into the hall and found the door at the end standing open-the door that connected the back of his apartment to the back of the Solos' apartment.

Malla came up behind him and looked past his shoulder. [Ourson went through that door? ] she gasped. [Lumpy? ]

[He disobeyed us. ] Eager as he was for Lumpy to find his rrakktor-the defiant, adventurous heart of a Wookiee-Chewbacca was less than pleased to see that the cub had chosen to start looking for it in the Solos' elegant apartment. [If he is starting his rebellious phase, his timing is awful. ]

[It can't be Lumpy, ] Malla insisted. [He's never even shouted at me. ]

[It has to be Lumpy. The Solos aren't home. ]

The Provisional Council was hosting a state dinner that evening to welcome the New Republic's newest member worlds. Leia, C-3PO, and Winter were all at the Imperial Palace overseeing preparations. Han, putting his own preparations off until the last minute as usual, was trying to find a haberdasher who could outfit him with civilian formal wear on short notice.

Chewbacca started down the hall. [Lumpy! Don't touch any-]

A louder crash sounded from the depths of the apartment.

[That doesn't sound good, ] Malla said. [How angry will Princess Leia be? ]

[That depends on what he's smashing. If it's the singing lamp the Jumerians gave her as a wedding present, she might even thank him, ] Chewbacca said. [Let's just hope he hasn't broken Han's bottle of Ithorian Mist. That would be bad. ]

Chewbacca entered the Solos' apartment-a showpiece of Alderaanian elegance, even here in the back-and led the way to a small larmalstone vestibule. From this central hub, doorways opened into Leia's office, the sleeping and dressing chambers, and a huge refresher suite that included an exercise area, steam closet, and tub units that could pulse, stew, bubble, and mineralize occupants into a state of languid bliss.

Outside Leia's dressing chamber lay a shattered perfume vial, the amber treasure it had once contained now puddled on the floor. Inside, the room was littered with spilled cosmetics, everyday jewelry, serving silver from the formal dining area, a holocomm from Leia's office, and a framed set of thousand-credit chips Han kept as a souvenir of the time he broke the bank in a Pavo Prime casino. A frantic clatter was coming from one of the spacious clothes closets that opened out of the back of room.

As Chewbacca started inside, Malla caught his arm and whispered, [This is not like your son. ]

[I am very glad to hear that, ] Chewbacca said. [If it were, I would have to-]

[No, Chewbacca-I mean Lumpy does not have a destructive heart. He would never do a thing like this. ]

Chewbacca glanced over the mess on the floor again, and the sinking feeling he had experienced earlier turned to fear. The security system had been instructed to recognize Malla and Lumpy as unrestricted guests, but a sentry droid should still have arrived by now to investigate the crashes.

[Someone has disarmed the alarm system, ] Chewbacca whispered. He pushed Malla gently toward the other side of the vestibule. [Find a comlink and inform building security. ]

[Of course. ] Malla turned back toward Leia's dressing chamber. [When I'm sure our son is safe. ]

Knowing better than to stand in the way of Malla's maternal instinct, Chewbacca grunted and stalked into the closet. His son was on the floor, removing rare Alderaanian dinnerware and expensive office electronics from a slashed rucksack and hastily stuffing them into one of Leia's gown bags. In the back of the closet, a gaunt milky-skinned man stood next to a hole in the wall half a meter square. He was pointing a hold-out blaster at Lumpy's head.

"No farther, Wookiee. "

The man's voice was a ragged rasp-at least Chewbacca thought it was a man's voice. The intruder's peaked ears were sticking straight out from a hairless, emaciated head, and he had a rawboned frame so thin it looked barely adequate to carry his tattered utilities. Chewbacca could not be certain of the gunman's species, let alone his-or her-gender. The small blunt nose and high cheeks suggested a human female, but the long chin and thin gray lips seemed more masculine.

"Another step, Furboy, and I burn your whelp here a third eye. "

Lumpy spun around, his eyes wide and his child's soft fur lying flat against his head. The sight was a powerful confirmation to Chewbacca of how badly he needed to spend some time with his son. The slashed rucksack suggested a struggle, and Lumpy was nearly as large as the scrawny figure guarding him-and probably twice as strong. Had he known how to handle himself, the thief would never have had a chance to bring the blaster to bear, and the cub would have been free to flee-or attack, if he chose. Instead, he seemed unsure of himself and almost ashamed, as though he believed he was to blame for this mess.

[Caught yourself a burglar, I see, ] Chewbacca said. He felt Malla pressing at his back and eased forward to make room. [You did well. Han and Leia will be grateful. ]

Lumpy's eyes lit with pride, but the thief snarled, "Quiet! Another word from any of you unskinned pelts and..."

[My mate will rip your arms off, ] Malla rumbled. She tore a handful of gowns off Leia's racks to make room for herself beside Chewbacca. [Release our son. ]

The thief, who clearly did not understand a word of Shyriiwook, made the mistake of shifting his blaster toward Malla. "Nobody has to get hurt here. "

Chewbacca ignored him and stepped half a meter forward. [Lumpy, come-]

[It's okay, Dad! ] Lumpy launched himself at the thief. [I got him! ]

But Chewbacca could see that Lumpy didn't have him-the young one's head was down, and his arms were low. The thief sidestepped the attack easily, grabbing Lumpy by the wrist and spinning him around into a one-arm choke so smoothly that Chewbacca reconsidered that flying leap he had been gathering himself to make. Fearing that Malla would not have the experience to recognize how dangerous this intruder was, he placed a restraining hand on her elbow. She tried to shake it off, but he would not let her.

The thief, who had missed none of this, smiled. "Good boy, Fang. Now, like I said, nobody has to get hurt. "

Pointing the blaster at Chewbacca's chest, he used a toe to sort through the half-filled garment bag, then dragged out a government datapad and flipped it neatly into the air. The arm wrapped around Lumpy's neck lashed out almost too quick to see and caught the datapad, and before Chewbacca could move, the thief had Lumpy back in a choke.

"Go outside and close the door while I disappear down that. " The thief gestured at the hole beside him. "Come back in three minutes, and your cub here will be safe and sound. "

Malla started to retreat out the door, but Chewbacca pulled her back. [We aren't leaving him alone with our son, ] he growled. [The next thing he will want is ransom. ]

"Go on! " the thief ordered.

Chewbacca shook his head and held his hand out, then raised a single finger. [Lumpawarrump, I want you to come to me. ]

The thief fired past Chewbacca's shoulder into Leia's gowns, and the acrid stench of melted shimmersilk filled the closet.

"The next one hits. "

Chewbacca shook his head and raised a second finger. [Now, Lumpy. ]

[Don't be scared, ] Malla said. [This is no time to disobey. ]

[I'mnot scared, ] Lumpy insisted-despite his flat fur. [See! ]

He grabbed the arm around his neck and pulled forward, but his legs were too straight to flip a leaf-dummy, much less someone as dangerous as the thief. Chewbacca shoved Malla in one direction and threw himself in the opposite, and the panicked thief-finding even an eleven-year-old Wookiee too much to handle-began to spray blaster bolts everywhere.

[Bend your knees, Lumpy! ] Chewbacca yelled. [Thenpull! ]

Lumpy bent his knees-then collapsed beneath the thief's weight. Chewbacca sprang up and, hurling an armful of smoking shimmersilk ahead, flung himself at the back of the closet.

Halfway there he crashed into Malla, and they landed a meter short of Lumpy's captor.

"Last chance, Furboy. " The thief's pearly eyes were locked on Chewbacca's. "Back off, or your..."

Chewbacca lashed out, knocking the would-be hostage taker into a set of shoe shelves. The hold-out blaster clattered into the corner, but the thief did a half twist and came down on his feet, still clutching the stolen datapad.

Chewbacca lunged. With Malla and Lumpy packed tight next to him, he was too slow. The thief skipped over his outstretched arm, bounced off the floor, and swung into the hole feetfirst.

Malla swept Lumpy into her arms, and Chewbacca scrambled past them, thrusting an arm into the hole and jamming his fingers against the opposite side of a service run. It couldn't be more than half a meter wide, barely large enough to fit his shoulder. He rose on his knees and swung his arm around inside, finding pipes, conduit, and ventilation tubes-but no thieves.

[Gone like a kkekrrrg rro, ] Chewbacca reported. He turned to find Lumpy clutched to Malla's breast. [Are you all right? ]

An odd expression of shame flashed across Lumpy's face; then he frowned up at his mother and separated himself.

[That thief is the only one hurting, ] he said. [I had him-until he pulled that blaster. ]

Chewbacca laughed. [Isn't that always the way? ] He stepped away from the hole and clamped Lumpy's shoulder. [But you did well, Lumpawarrump. That was no ordinary thief. ]

Lumpy's mouth dropped open. [It wasn't? ]

[Why would a thief take a common datapad and leave that? ] Chewbacca toed a bejeweled table chrono-a gift from the Bakurans as a token of gratitude for the Solos' assistance defeating the Ssi-ruuk. [He came to steal information, not wealth. ]

[Our son was fighting a spy? ] Malla gasped.

Chewbacca nodded proudly. [I think so. Whoever it was, he only wanted this to look like a robbery. ] He waved Malla out of the closet, then followed her into the disordered dressing chamber. [We must comm New Republic security. ]

[Security? ]Lumpy echoed. He was behind Chewbacca, still inside the closet. [They'll never catch him! ]

[The sooner they begin their investigation, the better their chances. ] Chewbacca motioned Malla across the vestibule toward Leia's ransacked office. [That is why we must hurry. ]

[But this hole goes down as far as a wroshyr root! ] Lumpy's voice was muffled by the mouth of the service run. [And the spy might have an escape door cut anywhere. ]

[Come along, Lumpy. ] Malla started back toward the closet. [Your father said-]

[I've got a better idea. ]

[No! ]

Chewbacca and Malla roared the word in the same instant, and they both rushed back into the closet.

Lumpy was already pulling himself into the service run. [I'm the only one small enough to fit. ] He grabbed a pair of pipes and slid out of sight. [Meet me at the bottom! I'll wait for you there, okay? ]

[It is not okay! ] Malla raced to the hole and stuck her head inside. [Lumpy-]

Chewbacca caught her from behind and clamped a hand over her mouth.

[Don't yell. ] He pulled her away gently, already thinking about whom he would have to call to find out where the service run came out. [Lumpy will be safer if the spy doesn't know he is being followed. ]

Malla whirled on him. [You want him to go? ]

Chewbacca shook his head. [It is dangerous, and he is not ready. ] He was not quite able to restrain a smile. [But it was brave. Our son is finding his rakkorr early. ]

Malla rolled her eyes and started for the door. [That is not rakkorr, my mate. It is Galactic Rebels. ]

## Chapter 2

The Level 2012 Physical Plant was a realm of droids and machinery, saturated with the harsh smell of solvents and dimly lit because it was so seldom seen by sentient eyes. Chewbacca consulted the tower schematic on his datapad and, leaving his glow rod off to avoid alerting the thief to their presence, led the way into the cavernous room. The air was warm with mechanical heat, and the durasteel floor trembled with the constant growl of equipment. The silhouettes of oddly shaped droids floated, walked, and rolled past in the darkness, sometimes close enough to reveal a bloated slime bladder or a set of dangling utility tentacles.

Chewbacca circled around a two-story recirculation pump that was the heart of the building's self-contained plumbing system, then came to an expanse of dark open floor. Off to the right, toward the building's interior, he could just make out the giant gyre-filters that converted sewage back into pure water. He studied the schematic a moment, then pointed up into the murk on the left.

[The outer service grid hangs there, along the ceiling, ] Chewbacca said. [Lumpy should be waiting fifty meters along the east wall, about fifteen meters in. ]

[You mean where those sparks are? ] Malla asked.

[Sparks? ] Chewbacca looked in the direction she was pointing and saw a tiny umbrella of blue flickers. He exchanged the datapad for the repeating blaster hanging from his bandolier utility clip. [What are they welding? I told building security to clear this area. ]

[And they told you to let them handle it. ] Malla's voice had gone reedy with concern-perhaps even fear. [Every forest has its oryyka howlers. They cannot keep you out of their tree, so they ruin your hunt. ]

[They won't ruin this hunt, ] Chewbacca assured her. [There's nothing to worry about-everything is under control. ]

[Everything is not under control, ] Malla retorted. [If everything were under control, an eleven-year-old cub would not be chasing spies-and no one would be over there welding. ]

Chewbacca sighed. [It will be under control soon, ] he said. [Trust me.]

Vowing to rip the arms off the day-shift security captain, Chewbacca raced across the floor. To download an unabridged schematic and arrange access to the physical plant, he had been forced to comm Han-who was now racing back to the building-and have him threaten to make a public stink about lax security. The security captain had obviously found another way to slow things down until he could gather his squad and take control of the situation. Chewbacca should have expected it. The fellow was, after all, a Sullustan.

As Chewbacca and Malla drew closer to the sparks, they began to make out the shape of a six-armed repair droid. It was standing on its hydraulic stilts five meters off the floor, welding a new durasteel grate over the base of a service run. The air stank too much of melted metal to smell any trace of Lumpy or the thief-or Leia's spilled perfume-but in the flickering light, he could just make out a set of laser-stenciled characters identifying this as the service run Lumpy had entered.

[Stop! ] Malla ordered. [Let my son out of there! ]

When the droid continued to work, Chewbacca roared in anger and slammed the butt of his blaster rifle into a stilt.

The droid finally stopped and, still holding the grate up, tipped its head down at Chewbacca. Where its photoreceptors should have been, it had a TrangTwo Lowlight Optical Band-a common modification designed to reduce lighting expenses in automated plant areas.

"I am not programmed in that language, " the droid said. "Please restate in Basic or binary flash code. "

Chewbacca, whose Wookiee throat could not form Basic words, growled and pointed the barrel of his blaster at the droid, motioning it away from the grate.

"I am sorry we cannot communicate. " The droid returned its attention to the grate and reignited its welding torch. "For your own protection, please..."

Chewbacca shot the droid in the primary powerfeed, and its six arms dropped to its sides, the still-burning torch nearly slicing his arm off as it hissed past. The security grate followed an instant later, clanging off the droid and almost knocking Chewbacca over. Malla pulled him out of the way of the returning torch.

[You couldn't use the circuit breaker? ]

[This was faster. ] Chewbacca shut off the welding torch, then slung his blaster over a shoulder and climbed the droid up to the pitch darkness of the service run. [Lumpy? ]

When no answer came, Chewbacca activated his glow rod and found several tufts of soft adolescent fur hanging on the durasteel stubs where the old grate had been cut free-presumably by the thief. The casing of a large power conduit was smeared with blood, but not enough to suggest a fight. Probably, Lumpy or the thief had cut himself on the way down.

[He's gone. ] Chewbacca dropped back to the floor, his pride in his son's courage slowly changing to concern. [He did not wait. ]

[That surprises you? ] Malla activated her own glow rod and began to sweep it across the floor. [You haven't been listening. ]

[He did not honor his word, ] Chewbacca insisted, now growing angry. [That is forbidden. And it is dangerous down here. How could he be so foolish? ]

Malla sighed. [Wouldyou have waited? ]

[What does that have to do with anything? ] Chewbacca's scowl slowly faded as he realized what she was saying: that Lumpy was only doing what he thought his father would. [And this is different. ]

[Not to him, ] Malla said.

She crouched on the floor and shined her glow rod on a dark puddle smeared by the imprint of a small Wookiee foot. She rubbed her fingertips in the stain-it was already as thick as honey-and brought them to her nose.

[Blood, ] she said.

[There was some in the service run, too. ] Chewbacca started across the floor and quickly found another track. [Lumpy didn't eventhink about waiting. When we get him home, I will have a long talk with him about the boundaries of his rebellion. ]

Malla fell in beside him. [It is not rebellion, ] she said. [He is doing this because he thinks it is somethingyou would do-not because he wants to assert himself. ]

[That will change after I am through with him. ]

Malla was silent for a moment, then she said, [Let's just get him home, Chewbacca. ]

[We will, ] Chewbacca assured her. [And after we do, I will be firm. ]

Malla said nothing, leaving Chewbacca to wonder whether she doubted him or was just worried. Though he hated to admit it, he had his own reservations. It seemed to him he should have known instinctively what to say, how a good father would handle the situation. But the truth was that Lumpy seemed more a stranger every time Chewbacca saw him. One time he was a ball of fur chortling in his mother's arms, and the next time he was already swinging from the rafters.

With no choice except to use a glow rod to follow the tracks, Chewbacca instructed Malla to hold hers low and away from her body while he covered them with his repeating blaster. The tracks led across the floor, growing fainter, until they found another print in a small puddle of blood. Chewbacca thought for a moment that his son was just being careless about where he stepped, but then he noticed how Lumpy had twisted his foot to soak up more.

[He is deliberately leaving us a trail, ] Chewbacca observed. [Perhaps I am being too hard on him. ]

[Leaving a trail is not waiting. ] Malla followed his tracks down the narrow passage between a pair of huge chiller tanks. [What is taking those security guards so long? ]

[That would take a week to explain, ] Chewbacca answered. The Sullustan captain was a thorough planner and a meticulous organizer-and by the time he finished sealing his perimeters and gathering his intelligence, the thief would be gone and Lumpy would be lying unconscious or dead somewhere. [And we are better off without them. Their procedures would only slow us down. ]

As they neared the far end of the chiller tanks, Malla pulled up short and cried out in

dismay. [No! ]

Imagining the worst, Chewbacca pulled her out of the way and stepped forward, one hand curled into a fist and the other bringing up the repeating blaster. Coming toward them he found only the domed box of a floor-cleaning droid, its purple sterilight focused on the blood trail they had been following. When its guidance sensors detected Chewbacca and Malla standing in its path, it politely retreated out of the way and swung aside to let them pass.

Chewbacca had Malla shine her glow rod on the floor behind it. The only sign of the trail that Lumpy had so carefully left for them was a two-meter stripe of rapidly drying durasteel. He knelt down and, laying his blaster aside, grabbed the cleaning droid by the sides of its plastoid box.

[Where did the tracks lead? ]

The function indicators on its front panel twinkled through a test cycle, then it said, "I beg your pardon. "

Chewbacca growled in frustration and spun the droid around to face the opposite direction. [Retrace your path. ]

The droid whirled back around and shined a spotlight on Chewbacca's foot. "Please excuse me while I tidy up. "

[Tidy up? ] Chewbacca snatched the droid off the floor and hefted it over his head. [Where is my son? ]

"I didn't mean to disturb you. " The droid continued to speak in its normal polite tone. "I'll be out of your way in a moment. "

[I don't think it understands Shyriiwook. ]

Chewbacca hurled the droid away in disgust. It crashed down five meters away, then began to request assistance righting itself.

[Father! ] Lumpy's voice was barely loud enough to be heard over the drone of the giant circulation fans off to the right. [Over here! ]

Chewbacca snatched his weapon and glow rod off the floor and charged toward the voice. [Lumpy! Are you hurt? ]

[No! ] he cried. [But hurry-I can't hold them much longer! ]

[Them? ]Malla cried.

They rounded a bank of gurgling bubble filters, and Malla's glow rod found their son perched atop a row of meter-high overpressure pipes. He was on the third one in, squatting on his haunches and struggling to keep hold of a pair of ankles kicking up from an open clean-out panel. The feet above both ankles wore left boots.

Chewbacca started for the pipes at a sprint, more astonished than he was proud. He began to shout instructions, not all of them compatible. [Be careful! Brace your feet! Shake them up! ]

[Chewbacca! ] Malla yelled, racing after him. [Don't encourage this! ]

[Don't worry. ] Lumpy began to work his arms back and forth, and a muffled thumping arose inside the pipes. [They're not real spies, just-]

Whatever they were, their blasters were real enough to send a spray of blue bolts slashing through the clean-out door. The angle was poor, and all the attacks slanted away from Lumpy. But he was so startled that he let go and fell off the overpressure pipe, disappearing over the other side.

Chewbacca reached the pipes and bounded onto the third one in a single leap. He dropped to his knees, stuck the repeating blaster through the clean-out door, and began firing blindly down the pipe.

[I had them, Dad! ] Lumpy scrambled up opposite Chewbacca, directly in the thieves' line of fire, should they try to counterattack. [Did you see?]

[I saw. ] Still shooting down the pipe, Chewbacca reached across the clean-out panel and gently pushed Lumpy back where he had been. [But you said you would wait at the service run. ]

[I couldn't! ] Lumpy said. [Not after what I heard! ]

[What you heard doesn't matter, ] Malla said, arriving on Chewbacca's other side. [I didn't give you permission to go down the service run in the first place. ]

[You didn't, ] Lumpy retorted. [But you're not the only-]

[I didn't either. ] Chewbacca stopped firing and, secretly pleased by the note of rebellion in Lumpy's voice, turned to face his son. [And after you disobeyed us, you broke your word. ]

At the first hint of his father's disapproval, Lumpy's shoulders sagged and his eyes filled with disappointment. Still, he did not look away from Chewbacca's gaze, and when he spoke, it was in a measured tone.

[I guess I shouldn't have done that, ] he said. [But wait till you hear what I found out! ]

Unsure whether Lumpy was agreeing with him or arguing, Chewbacca cast a furtive glance at Malla-who only shrugged and spread her hands. She didn't know what to make of it, either.

Chewbacca turned back to Lumpy. [Don't think this will change your punishment. We are in Coruscant's Shadow Forest down here, and you must learn not to enter such places alone. ]

[I know-but you'll be glad I did. ] Again, Lumpy seemed neither resentful nor frightened of his punishment, merely accepting. [These guys aren't real spies-]

A soft hiss sounded from the clean-out panel, and Chewbacca barely managed to pull his blaster out of the opening before the metal door slid closed. He motioned Lumpy to remain silent and had Malla run the light of her glow rod up the pipe to the valve station, where the birdlike form of a small, armless droid was hopping out of view behind the control board.

Chewbacca glared after it for a moment, then turned back to Lumpy. [Go on. ]

[When I got to the bottom of the service run, there were two more little white humans, like the thief, ] Lumpy said. [And they were all arguing, saying how 'It' was going to be real angry because the robbery didn't look right anymore. ]

[It? ] Chewbacca echoed. Now that his son was safe, he was again growing concerned about the thief. [Who will be angry? ]

[It, ] Lumpy repeated. [I think that's their boss. Anyway, Rath-he's guy I caught in the Solos'-started yelling about how at least he had the datapad, and then some more of them came and said they had to hurry the pad down to the DC because they didn't have much time to slice it and they had to be set in ten hours. ]

[Set where? ] Chewbacca asked. The intruder and his companions were sounding less like spies and more like saboteurs. [Did they say what was happening in ten hours? ]

Lumpy shrugged. [That's all I heard before they left. ] He squared his shoulders. [But I thought you'd want to know. That's why I followed them here and tried to catch prisoners. ]

The clean-out door in the pipe behind Lumpy suddenly slid open. Chewbacca pulled the cub away and, swinging the repeating blaster around, sprang over to have a look.

The door closed as he landed.

Malla shined her glow rod toward the valve station, where the birdlike droid was again hopping out of sight.

[I don't like this. ] Chewbacca motioned Lumpy toward his mother. [When building security arrives, they'll keep you safe until Han catches up with a military detail. Tell them

everything you told me-and anything else you can remember. ]

Lumpy paused on his way over the overpressure pipe. [Where will you be?]

[Trying to catch your thieves. ] Chewbacca unclipped his datapad and, cradling his blaster in the crook of his arm, brought up the tower schematic again. [The wall safe in Princess Leia's office was open. If the datapad came from there-]

[It could have New Republic secrets on it! ] Lumpy said.

Chewbacca glanced up to find Lumpy standing atop the overpressure pipe, his hands braced on his hips.

[I'm going with you, ] he declared. [I'm the one who caught them. ]

[You are eleven years old. ] Chewbacca was careful to keep an even tone; with Lumpy, he was beginning to see, it was all too easy to extinguish the tiny spark of rebellion that would grow, in time, into the truerrakktorr of the Wookiee warrior. [You have made me proud already. We should not press our luck. ]

Lumpy puffed out his chest. [But you said it is dangerous down here alone. ]

[Not for your father. ] Malla reached for Lumpy's hand.

[No! ] Lumpy pulled away and, angling past Chewbacca, leapt onto the adjacent pipe. [He needs me to-]

The clean-out door slid open, and four pale hands shot out to grab Lumpy by the ankles. Malla screamed. Chewbacca tossed his datapad to her and fumbled the blaster into his hands. Lumpy slammed face-first onto the pipe. His eyes bulged in fear. He stretched a hand toward Chewbacca, then slipped through the opening and disappeared.

### Chapter 3

The overpressure pipe-barely large enough to hold Chewbacca even on his hands and knees-opened into the shadowed chasm of a midlevel skylane, where a stream of haulage traffic was drifting slowly along, backlit by the neon displays of a tapcaf gallery hanging off the massive Wauth Complex opposite. Below the gallery, the trunk of the building descended into the black depths of the city, its facade broken at random intervals by ever-more-squalid balconies and mezzanines, the lights in its windows growing increasingly dim and infrequent. Chewbacca saw no sign of Lumpy, but that hardly meant the cub was gone.

Chewbacca pushed his blaster barrel, crushed when he'd used it to prevent the clean-out panel from closing, through the mouth of the pipe to make sure the shock field was off. When there were no sparks or crackles, he cautiously stuck his head outside to inspect the surrounding area. Pitted as they were by centuries of acid rain and foul air-especially this far down-the walls were eminently climbable.

He saw only the mouths of the adjacent overpressure pipes, protruding about a meter from the lichen-scaled walls.

Behind him, Malla asked, [Anything? ]

[Not yet. ]

Ignoring the achy protests of the muscles he had wrenched pulling open the clean-out panel, Chewbacca rolled to his back and saw the bottom of a long airspeeder descending toward him. It might have belonged to building security, except that one of the floater pads was exposed and leaking a blue glow. The Sullustan security captain would never tolerate a vehicle in such disrepair.

Chewbacca pulled himself inside and immediately ran into Malla. [Back up! ] he said. [I think we have-]

[Trouble, ] Malla finished, leading the crawl backward.

The airspeeder settled in front of the overpressure pipe, wobbling wildly as the driver struggled to maintain control with the malfunctioning floater pad. The vehicle was armored

in black plastoid, with a boxy passengers' compartment in back and an empty gun port behind the driver's cabin. Atop the roof, the protective dome of a weapons turret had long ago been lost, leaving only the smooth durasteel mounting ring.

Standing behind the turret's heavy blaster was a haggard Devaronian in a tattered cloak. His sharp teeth were brown and rotting, his horns scaled from a dozen kinds of vitamin deficiency, and his flesh as pale as that of the thief who had stolen Princess Leia's datapad. He shouted at the driver to bring him around, then waited as the vehicle's wobbling tail began drifting toward the mouth of the overpressure pipe. Chewbacca stopped his retreat, then snorted in disgust and started back toward the mouth of the pipe.

[Chewbacca, ] Malla began. [I know you are angry, but-]

[There is nothing to worry about. ]

The Devaronian opened fire, spraying the side of the building with bolts. He missed the pipe entirely, but a ricochet did hit his own wobbling vehicle. Chewbacca reached the mouth of the pipe and dropped to his belly, covering his crooked blaster so the turret gunner would see only the muzzle.

[That's enough! ] he roared.

Though it was doubtful the Devaronian understood Shyriiwook, the fellow's eyes went straight to the blaster tip. He stopped firing and crouched inside his turret.

"That was just a warning, " the Devaronian yelled. "If you want to see your kid again, go home and forget about the Princess's datapad. "

Chewbacca estimated the distance to the airspeeder at no more than five meters.

"Do what I say, and he'll be back in your apartment at midnight, " the Devaronian continued. "Interfere, and you'll have him back in pieces. "

Without looking away from the Devaronian, Chewbacca said, [Brace me, Malla. ]

[Brace you? You can't be thinking-]

[It is no different from tree leaping, ] Chewbacca said.

[Chewbacca, you haven't lived in a tree for fifty years! ]

The Devaronian started to add something else; then his gaze dropped to Chewbacca's blaster tip, and he ducked out of sight.

[Now, Malla! ]

When Chewbacca felt Malla jam her hands into soles of his feet, he grabbed the sides of the pipe and launched himself at the airspeeder. It dipped its nose and started to turn away, but he was already there, dropping down from above and belly-slamming onto the roof even before his stomach began to flutter.

The airspeeder shuddered and listed up on one side, but Chewbacca managed to extend his climbing claws and hook a set over the turret's mounting ring, then held on as the driver struggled to bring the vehicle under control. An instant later, Malla came down opposite him, catching the mounting ring with both sets of climbing claws, her weight leveling the airspeeder as her body swung gracefully into the passengers' box.

[Nice jump, ] Chewbacca said.

[You're right, it is like tree leaping. ] Her eyes were round with fear. [Except the target moves more. ]

The Devaronian popped out of the turret, pointing a blaster pistol at Malla. Chewbacca caught him by a horn and pulled him onto the roof of the passengers' box.

The Devaronian howled and rolled, trying to bring his blaster to bear on Chewbacca. Malla grabbed a leg and ripped him out of Chewbacca's grasp, then hurled him away behind her. The last Chewbacca saw of him was a pale figure spinning down through the hover traffic.

The airspeeder entered a shallow dive, then began to pitch and wobble madly as the driver inside tried to throw them free. Chewbacca looked across the roof at Malla.

[Can you hold on? ]

Malla glanced at the tiers of streaming skylanes below. [Like a leaflizard in a cyclone! ]

Chewbacca grunted his approval, then hammered his fist into the door window. The transparisteel was too strong to break, but the startled driver turned to look-and that was all Chewbacca needed. In one smooth motion, he pulled himself onto the roof and squeezed headfirst down through the turret.

The driver-a yellow-skinned Rodian whose dish-shaped sensory antennae were inflamed and flaking-glanced in his mirror. He cried out in alarm, then reached for a blaster rifle holstered to the back of his seat. Chewbacca braced one hand against the floor and, with the other, plucked the weapon out of the Rodian's grasp.

[Don't move, ] he growled, still upside down.

"What? " The Rodian's voice was buzzing on the edge of panic. "Who speaks Wookiee? "

Chewbacca pointed the blaster rifle at his head.

"Okay, yeah, okay! I know what you're looking for. "

The Rodian returned both hands to the steering wheel and began to steady their dive-at least as much as the dilapidated vehicle would steady. He caught Chewbacca's eyes in the mirror.

"Hey, Shaggy, " he said nervously. "We don't have the smoothest ride here, and you don't look so steady. How about pointing that somewhere else? "

Chewbacca growled and bared his fangs.

"Stupid question? "

Chewbacca nodded.

The Rodian returned his attention to the windshield and carefully leveled them off. Chewbacca dropped the rest of the way inside, then slipped aside so Malla could join him.

Inside, the airspeeder stank of mildew and unwashed bodies. It seemed to be some sort of prisoner transport. Five seats lined each wall of the passengers' box, all facing the rear and equipped with stun-cuff restraints for both legs and arms. Behind the front seating area were two guards' chairs, mounted on swiveling bases so that the occupants could watch prisoners or fire through an adjacent gun port with equal ease. There was no sign of Lumpy-a fact Malla noticed immediately.

[Where's my son? ] she roared at the driver.

Chewbacca laid a hand on her shoulder. [He's taking us to him, I think.]

[You think ? ] she growled. [Let's be sure. ]

Malla pulled Chewbacca's datapad off its utility clip, then slipped into the front passenger's seat. She punched a few keys, then held the display up in front of the Rodian.

The screen read, "Tell me where my son is or I'll rip out your antennae. "

"It's safer if I don't tell you, " the Rodian said. "Just forget about the Princess's datapad, and your son will be returned safe..."

Malla typed another message and shoved it under the Rodian's snout. "Both antennae! "

He was unfazed. "I'm serious. That kid is a real handful. If they find out you're coming anyway, they'll figure he's more trouble than he's worth. "

Chewbacca grabbed an antenna.

"They're taking him to the DC! " the Rodian blurted. "I'm supposed to meet them there. "

A beep sounded from the equipment console. The Rodian glanced down at a dark vid display and banged it with his fist. A hazy map appeared and instantly began to fade, but the image lasted long enough for Chewbacca to glimpse a green descent arrow.

The Rodian began to drop through tiers of traffic. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, the lights lining the skylanes began to wink out. Even the traffic began to thin, winding through the dark chasms in flickering snakes of running lights.

"What's the DC? " Malla typed.

The Rodian began to stutter. "De-de-det . . . "

Chewbacca twisted the antenna.

The stuttering grew worse. "T-t-t . . . " He developed an eye twitch.

[What's wrong with him? ] Malla asked.

[What do you think? Look at him-he's deranged. ]

Chewbacca was pretty sure that the Rodian and his companions were what some called "underdwellers, " dispossessed people who had fallen so low-economically and spiritually-that they could live only in the twilight depths of the city, eking out a meager existence in the perilous margins where civilization sank into savagery. What they wanted with Princess Leia's datapad he could not imagine, but he did feel certain that solving the mystery would be an important step in finding Lumpy-as well as serving the New Republic and honoring his life debt to Han.

[Tell him the New Republic already knows about tonight, ] Chewbacca said. [Tell him that is why we must recover Lumpy in the next ten hours. ]

A look of alarm flashed through Malla's eyes, but she typed the lie without hesitation. She understood that Chewbacca had duties to both their son and the Solos.

The Rodian's free antenna turned outward. "You know about tonight? "

Chewbacca began to pull the antenna he was holding.

The Rodian's twitch became a general tremor, and the airspeeder began to weave as though piloted by someone under the influence of intoxicants. "I . . . I . . . can't tell you. "

[Tell him we know about It, too, ] Chewbacca said, recalling the name Lumpy said they used for their leader. [Tell him the New Republic can protect him from It. ]

The airspeeder dipped into an oncoming traffic lane, drawing a sharp hiss from Malla. She braced for impact-then sighed heavily as they dropped half a tier and scraped across a rubble-strewn pedestrian bridge that had remained hidden until it was illuminated by the airspeeder's headlights. Then they dropped another half a tier, settling into a half-empty skylane.

[Are you sure you want to say that? ] Malla asked.

[I am sure. ] Chewbacca set the blaster rifle aside, poising himself to reach over the seat. [It will be interesting. ]

[Katarns are interesting. Shadow creepers are interesting, ] Malla objected. Still, she began to type. [I like dull. Dull and safe. ]

She held the display up for the Rodian.

He read it, then flecks of foam began to appear at the corners of his mouth. "Nobody can protect me! " He turned to stare at Malla. "If you really knew It , you would..."

Chewbacca saw the Rodian's hands tense and yelled for Malla to take the wheel, then jerked him out of the driver's seat just as his hands made a violent twisting motion. The airspeeder veered and began to wobble, nearly sliding into an air skid before Malla brought the nose back on course.

[Chewbacca! This thing is going to-]

[Calm down. ]

Chewbacca tossed the Rodian into the passengers' box, then squeezed into the driver's seat and took the controls. The airspeeder handled like a mad rancor, its rear corner dropping and jumping as the damaged floater pad kicked in and out. He barely steered them around the wreckage of a dangling balcony, then slipped back into the near-empty skylane.

[Things are not that bad. ]

[Not that bad? ] Malla shook her head in disbelief. [You and Han must be playing sabacc with Hutts again! ]

[They have Lumpy, ] Chewbacca said. [But we have their driver. ]

An alarm light flickered to life on the instrument panel, though the label beneath it was too covered in grime to read. Chewbacca cursed and began to listen for trouble sounds; then the roar of rushing wind filled the passengers' box behind him. He glanced into the mirror and saw the Rodian standing on the edge of the open rear door.

"You don't know it, " the Rodian said, and stepped outside.

[I hate it when they do that, ] Chewbacca growled into the mirror. [The coward's escape. ]

[Chewbacca, how can you be so calm? ] Malla continued to stare through the back door. [Without him, we are like a blind mallakin searching for its chick! ]

[I am hardly calm-just unworried. And we are not quite like a blind mallakin. ] Chewbacca pointed through the windshield at a set of amber running lights half a kilometer ahead. On the right side, three out of four were dark, and the entire left side was flickering erratically. [We can see our chick's tail feathers. ]

Malla peered through the windshield at the running lights, then sighed and settled back into her seat. [I am sorry, Chewbacca. I forget that you are a master at this. ]

He shrugged. [Han keeps me in practice. ]

Chewbacca followed the running lights down another half a dozen traffic tiers, being careful to maintain the same distance as had the Rodian, always fighting to keep control of their vehicle. The skylanes grew completely deserted, then-as they dropped another level-nonexistent. The trip became a pitching, serpentine ride through a darkness as black as night, dodging over sagging bridges and dropping through the heart of a rubble-strewn mezzanine. And always there were the wretched figures who inhabited this part of the city, thousands and thousands of them, half-glimpsed in a flash of headlight as they scurried about their business-or ducked out of sight.

Chewbacca tried to concentrate on his flying and not think about how frightened Lumpy must be in the airspeeder ahead, but it was difficult. Every instinct in him cried out for him to fly faster, to catch up to his son and let him know his parents were close behind. But Chewbacca could not alert Lumpy without also alerting his son's captors, and the last thing he wanted was to start a high-speed chase. Even if someone did not crash, it seemed unlikely that the battered vehicle he was driving could keep up.

Malla remained silent also, and Chewbacca could not help wondering what was going through her mind. As hard as his life debt had made their lives, he knew that she would never blame him for keeping it, or wish that he would dishonor himself and return home while Han still lived. She had told him many times that she loved him because she could trust him, and that she could trust him because he kept his honor. But perhaps she blamed him for being too soft on Lumpy, for not making him obey at a time when it was so important. Certainly, he blamed himself.

Chewbacca followed the other airspeeder beneath a long stretch of durasteel gallery that had torn loose of its supports and fallen at a steep angle across the chasm-he could not call this place a skylane-then glanced over at Malla.

[I am sorry, ] he said.

Malla looked at him in surprise. [Sorry? Why should you be sorry? ]

[I should have been firmer, but I didn't want to break his spirit. ] Chewbacca returned his attention to the dark path ahead and saw that he had let the running lights creep out of sight. He increased his speed. [I have not had enough practice at this, Malla. Half the time, Lumpy is a stranger to me. ]

Malla laid a hand on his thigh. [Then you are doing well, Chewbacca. I have had eleven years of practice, and my words were the ones that made him leap into danger. ] She fell silent and looked out the side window. [I should have stayed out of it. You are the only one he wants to listen to now. ]

Chewbacca did not know how to respond. Under other circumstances, it might have warmed him to hear again how much his son looked up to him. As matters were, the reminder just filled him with a frightened ache.

The twisted skeleton of a stripped space freighter appeared ahead, wedged across the lane and blocking the route. Chewbacca hit the decelerators and sent the airspeeder into a shuddering air skid, bringing them to a stop so close to a cross-strut that he could have reached out his window and wiped off a handful of grime.

[Hutt slime! ]

Chewbacca activated the vehicle's spotlight and began to search for an easy route through the freighter—a path that might explain why he had not caught up to the other airspeeder.

[What's wrong? ] Malla asked.

[Lost the chick. ]

The light revealed only a tangled mass of durasteel slowly being disassembled by emaciated metal salvagers—most equipped with tools barely more sophisticated than laser saws and pry bars. A hundred meters above, the stern had punched a jagged rent into a permacrete building facade; on the opposite side of the lane, a hundred meters below, the bow rested in the buckled pocket of what looked to have been a durasteel parking balcony.

[They might have gone under it. ] Though Malla tried to speak in an even tone, there was a panicked edge to her voice. [Or over it. ]

Chewbacca shook his head. [We would have caught up, ] he said. [I didn't lose sight of their running lights until a few seconds ago. ]

Malla peered back up the lane. [I don't see any intersections, but—]

[That doesn't mean they're not there, ] Chewbacca finished.

He glanced at the blank vid display the Rodian had brought to life earlier, then rapped it sharply near the top. A hazy labyrinth of tier numbers and heading arrows appeared on the screen. Chewbacca had just enough time to see that the green route marker had shortened to a green dash under their location indicator; then the image vanished. He hit the display again and saw that the closest intersection was half a kilometer behind them.

Chewbacca shook his head. [We couldn't have traveled more two hundred meters since I lost them. We're just not going that fast down here. ]

[Where did the Rodian say they were going? ] Malla asked. [The DC? ]

[The det-something. ] Chewbacca glanced at the prisoners' seats behind them, then began to input a destination. [Detention center. ]

He hit the display again, and a message appeared. "Detention center number? "

Chewbacca typed, "List detention centers. "

When he hit the display this time, the screen filled with a list of locations and designator numbers, all with Imperial-style prefix letters.

[Imperial underdwellers? ] Chewbacca asked. [That makes no sense. ]

[No, but it might explain what they have planned for tonight, ] Malla said.

Chewbacca furrowed his brow.

[The welcoming ceremony , ] Malla explained. [Imperials would certainly have reason to disrupt that. ]

[And that would explain why they took Princess Leia's datapad, ] he agreed.

Chewbacca was growing more alarmed. The underdwellers had found a way to defeat the security system in the Solos' apartment, so he could only assume that they would be able to slice the security even on Princess Leia's military-grade datapad. Then they would be able to use the 'pad to access entry codes and schematics for the ceremonial chambers of the Provisional Council, and Chewbacca did not even want to contemplate the damage they could cause crawling around inside the service runs there. He activated his comlink and tried to open a channel to Han, but the signal light remained stubbornly dark.

[We are on our own? ] Malla asked.

Chewbacca nodded. [Too much interference this deep. ]

[Then our son is in trouble, ] Malla said. [I must have seen a hundred centers on that list. ]

[More than a hundred, ] Chewbacca agreed. He banged on the display again, studied the list of locations as long as the screen would allow him, then nodded in satisfaction. [But this is all the help we need, I think. ]

[Really? ] Malla's tone was equal parts hope and doubt.

Chewbacca raised a finger for patience, then unclipped his glow rod and twisted down in his seat to look at the serial number under the instrument panel.

There was none.

He smiled and switched off the glow rod. Those who were truly trying to hide their identity altered or defaced their vehicle serial numbers. Imperial Intelligence, on the other hand, liked to advertise the long reach of its sinister power. They used vehicles with no serial numbers because they wanted people who looked for such information to know with whom they were dealing.

[Now I am sure. We are closer than we thought. ] Chewbacca sat up again and found a crowd of pale underdweller faces looking through his window, their expressions more appraising than curious. [Very close. ]

He turned away from the underdwellers and, watching the dark building facades on Malla's side of the lane, started back toward the fallen gallery.

[Chewbacca, perhaps it would help if you told me what we are looking for. ]

[I don't know, exactly. ]

[You said we were close, ] Malla objected. [You said very close. ]

[We are, ] Chewbacca said. [But I've never seen one before. ]

[On what? ]

[An entrance to a secret Imperial detention center. ]

[Oh, ] Malla said, sounding a bit frightened. [Would it look something like a small docking bay entrance? ]

[It might. ]

Malla pointed down over her side of the airspeeder. [Then you should turn here. ]

Chewbacca swung their nose around and, about twenty meters below, saw a dim blue glow spilling from the mouth of a durasteel tunnel. Although there were no obvious weapons

emplacements or guard posts, the unadorned starkness of the surrounding facade-and the utter lack of nearby portals or balconies-lent the entrance a silently intimidating air.

[Yes, ] Chewbacca said. [I am sure that is what a secret Imperial detention center looks like. ]

Stars Wars: A Forest Apart

#### Chapter 4

Chewbacca dropped their nose toward the square blue maw of the entrance tunnel and began a slow descent into the detention center. Malla took the blaster rifle from between the seats and began to inspect the underside.

[It is a special-action model, ] Chewbacca explained. [The safety disengages automatically when you grab the stock and place your finger on the trigger. ]

Malla experimented with her grip for a moment, then shook her head. [I do not trust myself with that. ] She returned the weapon to the holster behind the driver's seat, then stared through the windshield. [I am sure you have a plan. ]

Chewbacca nodded. [A good one. ] He negotiated a sharp crash-corner designed to prevent high-speed penetration runs, then said, [Find Lumpy and take him back. ]

[When the pale ones realize it is us in their car, you don't think they will try to kill him? ]

[That is why we must move quickly and strike hard. ]

Chewbacca negotiated the second part of the crash-corner, and they passed through an open security gate into a cavernous garage. Illuminated in the same dim light as the entrance tunnel, it was filled with derelict airspeeders, carboplas barrels, and jumbled heaps of salvage. Opposite the tunnel, he could barely make out a two-story command deck, its transparisteel observation wall caked in grime and pocked with blast holes.

The other airspeeder had been backed into a parking bay beneath the command deck. Four underdwellers were behind the vehicle, struggling to haul a flailing ball of fur toward an open security door leading deeper into the detention center. As he and Malla drew closer, Chewbacca began to see lumps and bruises on the bloodied faces of his son's captors.

[Look at the fight he is giving them! ] He swung the speeder around in front the adjacent bay. [I count two broken noses and a dislocated jaw! ]

Malla gave him a reproving scowl. [This is no slap match, Chewbacca. ] She rose from her seat and turned toward the back of the airspeeder. [To fight that hard, Lumpy must be terrified. ]

[A little fear is healthy-it teaches you to be careful. ] Chewbacca backed into the bay. [You know what to do? ]

She nodded. [Hit hard, hit fast, come back with Lumpy. ]

[And Princess Leia's datapad, if you see it. ] Chewbacca rose and slipped into the weapons turret. [I'll cover you. ]

Malla raced out the speeder's rear door, roaring threats and curses. By the time Chewbacca could lift the heavy blaster out of its mounting socket, she was already upon the underdwellers, hurling gaunt bodies aside and tearing bony hands off her son. Chewbacca fired a few bolts at the floor to chase the two survivors through the security door. Then Lumpy was free, scrambling to his feet-and starting after his captors.

[This way! ] Lumpy waved an arm toward the security door. [It's a-]

Malla caught the cub by the arm and jerked him back toward the airspeeder. Lumpy squirmed free. So much for fear teaching him anything.

[Lumpy! ] Chewbacca roared. [Come-]

[It's a trap! ] Lumpy grabbed Malla by the wrist and tried-unsuccessfully-to pull her

toward the security door. [Hurry! ]

Chewbacca turned to scan the rest of the garage and saw a pair of small panels sliding open in the far corners of the room. [Go! ]

He waved Malla ahead and dropped out of the turret just as the security door began sliding shut. He aimed out the back of the airspeeder and blasted the upper guides. The door slid off its track and jammed.

Cannon bolts began to hit the speeder's armor, shaking it and penetrating often enough to leave no doubt as to the fate of anyone who remained inside. Malla and Lumpy reached the security door and squeezed through the crack. Chewbacca raced after them, hitting the door with his shoulder and knocking it askew as he powered past.

He slammed headlong into a maelstrom of ricocheting blaster bolts and flailing Wookiee arms and flying underdwellers, then glimpsed a wall of pale faces trying to enter through the doorway opposite and opened up with the heavy blaster.

The wall vanished.

Chewbacca slammed the butt of the weapon into the skulls of two underdweller humans who were bouncing blaster bolts off the walls as Lumpy struggled to keep their arms pointed at the floor, then turned to find Malla bending the last of her attackers over double-in the wrong direction.

Leaving Malla to watch his back, Chewbacca stepped across half a dozen gaunt bodies and peered through the doorway into the bottom of a gloom-filled cell block of no more than a hundred units. Rushing across the central atrium was a small gang of underdwellers armed with old E-11 blaster rifles. Chewbacca raised his heavy blaster and shook his head; when they stopped and started to lift their own weapons, he cut them down.

Only then did he notice that he and his family seemed to be in a prisoner-processing area, with a guard station to the left and a wall of stun cuffs to the right. Out in the garage area, the blaster cannons were continuing to fire, their bolts ricocheting off the floor and occasionally even hammering the sagging security door itself.

[Anybody hurt? ] Chewbacca asked.

[I'm . . . I'm okay, ] Lumpy said. [I think. ]

[You're covered in blood, ] Malla said, reaching for him. [Let me have a look. ]

He started to consent, but caught Chewbacca looking at him and pulled away.

[It's not my blood. ] Lumpy glanced in the direction of the hammering cannon bolts, then turned to Chewbacca. [It's lucky I knew there was a trap, right? When-]

[We have not escaped yet, Lumpy, ] Chewbacca said, glancing around the little room. The door leading into the guard station was locked tight, leaving the cell block as the only available exit-which was why Chewbacca knew they had to avoid it at all costs. [You can explain later. ]

Lumpy's face fell.

Chewbacca ignored the pang of guilt he felt for cutting the cub off and, peering through the guard station's grimy observation wall, located the control panel. Motioning Malla and Lumpy down into a corner, he pressed the muzzle of his heavy blaster against the transparisteel and leaned into it with all his strength.

[Lumpy, don't ever do this, ] he said. [Unless you have to. ]

[But isn't the blowback going to-]

[Yes, it is. ]

Chewbacca closed his eyes and pulled the trigger, was blinded by the muzzle flash anyway, and slammed backward into the wall opposite. His next sensation was sliding across a badly listing deck, his ears ringing with blasterfire and his nostrils filled with the reek of scorched fur. He had one arm raised in the air and a knot between his shoulder blades that

felt like someone had hit him with a stun baton.

[Can you stand? ] asked a soft Wookiee voice-Malla's voice.

Chewbacca opened his eyes and saw that he still had legs. Then he saw the small processing room where they were still trapped, and the last few moments came back to him in a rush. He snatched his dropped weapon off the floor, struggled to his feet, and saw the guard station. There was a fist-sized hole where he had pressed his blaster to the transparisteel, and the rest of the observation wall had been heat-fused into opacity.

[Where's Lumpy? ]

Malla gestured at the guard station door, which was now open. Chewbacca stepped through and found Lumpy waiting inside, keeping watch out the opposite side of the room.

Once Malla had joined them, Chewbacca stepped over to the control panel, closed both the cell-block door and the entrance to the station itself, then blasted the control panel.

He turned to Lumpy. [Now tell me about this trap. ]

Lumpy's expression was delighted. [Really? ]

Chewbacca was torn between chastising the cub for not obeying and praising him for saving their lives-mostly because he did not know which avenue was more likely to keep Lumpy under control until they could find a way out of this mess.

Chewbacca settled for nodding.

[After they pulled me into their airspeeder, ] Lumpy began, [It made a big point of telling me you would follow. ]

[It? ] Malla asked.

[Their droid, ] Lumpy explained. [At least I think It is theirs-everyone acts like It ownsthem. The droid said It knows how Wookiees think, and It would be ready when you came after me. So when we got here and It told Its guys to keep me out in the parking bays until you saw me, I knew It was setting a trap. ]

[This droid . . . ] Chewbacca took Lumpy's place at the exit and found himself looking down an empty corridor, with only two doors on the garage side and a broken turbolift at the end. He knew the lift was broken because someone had pushed a scrap-metal ladder up the shaft. [What did It look like? ]

[Kind of spidery, with a shiny black body and lots of long legs, ] Lumpy said.

[Sounds like an IT-one of the interrogator series, ] Chewbacca said, struggling to figure out why an outdated torture droid would take it into its programming to do something like this. [You did well. The ITs are very clever-which is why you must do exactly as I say from now on. ]

[Don't worry, ] Lumpy said.

[Weare worried, ] Malla said. [If you had obeyed just once today, we wouldn't be in this mess. ]

[And then we wouldn't know where Princess Leia's datapad-]

[Lumpy! ] Chewbacca glared down at the cub. [You are making me worry. ]

Without waiting for a reply, Chewbacca led the way down the corridor. Concerned as he was about what the IT droid might have planned for the banquet that evening, his first priority was escaping the detention center with his family. Getting killed trying to be heroes would save no one.

Both doors in the corridor proved to be locked from the other side, so the only possible escape route was the turbolift. Chewbacca kept expecting a gang of underdwellers to enter the hall behind them-or drop out of the lift itself-and attack, but they reached the corridor's end without incident.

He motioned Malla and Lumpy to wait while he climbed the makeshift ladder to be sure the area was clear. He could no longer hear the blaster cannons rumbling out in the garage, but there were other sounds-muffled whirrings and muted shouts, and the unmistakable crack of a droid's voice giving orders.

At the top of the ladder, Chewbacca found himself on the command deck he had seen earlier, looking out across a murky jumble of desks, control panels, and blaster stations. When the facility was new, the observation walls to either side had afforded unimpeded views of both the cell block and garage. Now the transparisteel was so begrimed he could make out only nebulous shapes and ghostly stirrings.

On a brightly lit desk near the center of the room, a small, vaguely bird-shaped droid was squatting over a datapad, humming and chirping and blinking to itself as its manipulator digits danced across the keypad. Unlike nearly everything else in the detention center, the droid's body casing was polished and gleaming, its servo-systems obviously lubricated and well maintained.

Chewbacca descended the ladder again and turned to Lumpy. [Was there another droid with the IT? ] he whispered.

Lumpy nodded. [A little slicer. ] He answered just as quietly. [It was with the thieves inside the Solos' apartment building. ]

Chewbacca nodded. He remembered glimpsing a similar droid near the overpressure pipes before Lumpy was taken, and a slicer would certainly explain how the Solos' security system was disarmed. Probably, the slicer even explained why the maintenance droids had been covering the thieves' tracks in the physical plant. The only thing its presence did not explain was who was supplying underdwellers with million-credit slicer droids.

[The slicer is up there working on a datapad-]

[What are we waiting for? ] Lumpy demanded. The cub jumped on the makeshift ladder and started to scramble up. [Let's go! ]

This time, Chewbacca was ready. [Get down! ] He plucked Lumpy out of the turbolift and planted him firmly on the floor. [You're going to get someone killed! ]

Lumpy's eyes grew round and liquid, and his lip began to tremble. Chewbacca instantly felt guilty, but being harsh seemed the only way to get through. He pointed a finger in the cub's face.

[You're not ready, ] he said firmly. [You stay with your mother. Understand? ]

Lumpy nodded, sullenly, staring at the floor.

Chewbacca looked to Malla and rolled his eyes, then asked, [Will you be all right here? ]

[I'll know where to find you, ] Malla replied. [But hurry. ]

Chewbacca ruffled Lumpy's fur, then climbed the ladder and began the slow, silent advance of a Wookiee on the stalk. Once he was close enough to be certain of hitting his target, he raised the blaster rifle and trained it on the desktop. When he had approached to within three paces, Chewbacca stopped and cleared his throat.

The slicer droid continued to work. "Busy. "

Chewbacca zinged a blaster bolt past its cognitive processor housing. The manipulator digits went motionless, then the thing hopped around to face him.

"What is it? " it demanded. Noticing Chewbacca's species, the droid switched to Shyriiwook. [I'm on a deadline here. ]

[You are not going to make it, ] Chewbacca said. [Trip your circuit breaker, and you might survive to be reprogrammed. ]

The droid squatted on the datapad. [I'm programmed to self-destruct upon capture-but it doesn't have to come to that. I can get you out of this place alive. ]

[That implies you will be leaving-and the only way that will happen is slung over my back.

] Chewbacca eased forward and began to inspect its casing. [What model are you? ISB-one-twenty? ]

[One-twenty? ] the droid scoffed. [Don't insult me. My processor speed is fifty-point-three-two times faster than the one-twenty's. ]

[Then you must have the GwendoLyn Six, ] Chewbacca said.

[That's right, ] the droid said proudly. [Tachyon processing bands, quantum RAM, biocell storage. ]

[Nice chip, ] Chewbacca observed. It was also one that the maker, the Imperial droid supplier MerenData, had developed in the last two years. [You must have set Ysanne Isard back the price of an entire assault company. ]

[I wouldn't know, ] the droid replied-clearly oblivious, despite its processing power, to how much it had just revealed about itself. [Cost has never been one of my operational parameters. ]

Chewbacca smiled at the droid's tacit admission. The former director of Imperial Intelligence, Ysanne Isard had-for a time-been the glue holding the Empire together in Palpatine's absence. Fortunately for the New Republic, she had perished a year and a half earlier, when her shuttle exploded near the end of the Bacta War.

As Chewbacca was puzzling out the details of the plot, he heard a gentle thump behind him-it was probably just a granite slug falling off a wall. The important thing was that he now understood the basics of Isard's plan: send a slicer to update the programming of an IT droid still lurking in one of the Empire's secret detention centers, then sit back and watch as it executed its new prime directive-to destroy the government of the fledgling New Republic.

[I have heard that Ysanne Isard never worried about cost, ] Chewbacca said, still holding his blaster on the slicer. [How-]

Chewbacca dropped the question when he felt the muzzle of blaster touch the small of his back.

"I think you two have done enough talking, " a raspy voice said.

[I agree. ]

Chewbacca pulled the trigger-slagging the slicer droid, the datapad, and much of the desk-then spun on his ambusher, pivoting his body aside and bringing one arm around to knock the blaster away. He made contact with his elbow and felt the cracking of a brittle skull-then found himself looking down the barrel of a second underdweller's weapon.

This one was a human female, just as gaunt and pale as the others, but taller, with a sharp nose and icy white eyes. She gestured at the blaster in Chewbacca's hands.

"Drop it. " Behind her, two furry figures appeared at the top of the stairs and began to stalk silently toward her.

Chewbacca shook his head.

"I won't ask again. "

He dropped the blaster at his feet.

"Good. Where are the other two? "

Chewbacca shrugged.

The woman's eyes narrowed, and she pointed her blaster at his head. "Then I guess there's no reason..."

She was interrupted by the IT droid's sharp voice, coming from a comlink on her belt. "Report. I saw blaster flashes. "

Being careful not to aim her blaster away from Chewbacca's head, she raised the comlink to

her lips. It was one of the short-range, direct-beam models, ideal for conditions this deep in the city.

"You were right, " the woman said. "The Wookiee went straight for that slicer droid. He slagged it. "

Malla took advantage of the woman's distraction to slip the last two paces forward. Nonetheless, Chewbacca began to have the sinking feeling that he had fallen into another trap. Silently, he begged the woman to mention Princess Leia's datapad, to say that it was slag, too.

Instead, she glanced down at her unconscious partner, then added, "So's Rath. "

"No matter, " the IT said. "ISBy's work is complete. I can handle the interface with the Princess's datapad. Have you eliminated the Wookiees? "

"Not yet. "

Malla reached over the woman's shoulder and plucked the blaster away, at the same time using the other hand to cover her mouth. The underdweller started to struggle, but quickly stopped when Chewbacca wagged a finger at her. Lumpy followed a moment later, carrying her partner's blaster.

"What are you waiting for? " the IT demanded. "Am I going to have to burn you again? "

Chewbacca pointed at the blaster rifle in his son's hand and raised three fingers. Lumpy fired three shots into a nearby desk, and Chewbacca began to groan as though in pain.

"Much better, " the IT said. "Make sure they are dead, then return to the garage. The underdwellers' time is at hand. When the Rebels are gone, your loyalty will be richly rewarded. "

Chewbacca sneered in disgust, then took the woman's comlink and snapped it between his fingers.

[Fear and hope. ] Chewbacca extended a knuckle and struck the woman beneath the ear, knocking her instantly unconscious. [They are the tools of the torturer and the tyrant. When you hear them together, it is time to reach for your bowcaster. ]

Lumpy nodded, still staring at the floor.

Chewbacca frowned. [What is this? If you are angry, at least have the courage to look me in the eyes. ]

[I'm not angry. ] Lumpy met Chewbacca's eyes, but there was no flash of defiance in them, only apology . . . and perhaps even embarrassment. [I just wanted to show you. That's all. ]

[Show me? ]

[That I can handle myself, ] Lumpy said. [Like you and Han. ]

[Ah. ]

Chewbacca shook his head in surprise. Malla was right after all-Lumpy's rebellious streak had more to do with trying to please his father than with asserting himself. That did not bode well for his rraktorr in a few years, but it did mean that Lumpy had a generous heart-and that would carry him safely down more dark paths than any amount of rraktorr.

Chewbacca ruffled Lumpy's head fur. [My son, you truly are confused. This isn't your fault. ]

[It isn't? ] Lumpy and Malla asked this at the same time.

[Did you steal Princess Leia's datapad? ] Chewbacca asked. [This is just how things happen around the Solos. If you hadn't gone after that thief, the situation would have been a lot worse. We might have lost the whole Provisional Government. ]

This thought seemed to please Lumpy enormously. [So I kind of saved the New Republic? ]

Chewbacca smiled. [Not yet. ] He checked his comlink and, still not finding a signal, started for the front observation wall. [First we have to steal an airspeeder and get out of here. ]

Malla cast a longing eye on the broken turbolift. [Couldn't we just climb? ]

[I wish we could, ] Chewbacca said. [But even if we knew our way around, it would take hours-and this is a detention center. It probably doesn't even open into the floors above. ]

[And we have to get Princess Leia's datapad back, ] Lumpy added.

[If we can, ] Malla said. [There's only so much-]

[No, we have to, ] Lumpy said, peering through a blast hole. [They're already loading the zemex. ]

Chewbacca's throat went dry. [Zemex? ]

Lumpy turned to face him. [I forgot-as we were coming down the tunnel, the IT droid told one of the underdwellers to ready the zemex for loading. ]

Malla joined Chewbacca at the wall. [That's bad? ]

Chewbacca nodded. [Imperial nerve agent. ]

He found a blast hole and peered down into the garage. In a work area near the center of the floor, several underdwellers were removing the seats from the passengers' box of one of their black-armored airspeeders. Closer to the command deck, a dozen of their fellows were carefully ferrying durasteel zemex canisters to the edge of a loading dock. With a rounded nose and four fins to keep them standing upright, the cylinders had the look of primitive bombs.

A small droid was supervising the operation closely, Princess Leia's datapad clutched in its grasping claw. Its body was the same glossy, sensor-studded orb of the standard IT-O Imperial interrogator droid, but it carried the tools of its trade-needles, torches, and laser scalpels-on long multijointed limbs that resembled insect legs.

Malla sighed and glanced over at Chewbacca. [I take it the fate of the New Republic rests in our hands? ]

[Yes. ] It was an answer that frightened Chewbacca, but there was really no other choice. He had to stop the droid, and that meant his family had to help him; as unfamiliar as Malla and Lumpy were with Coruscant's particular kind of forest, he did not think they would make it back to the civilized layers without him. [And Han's life, too. He will be at that banquet. ]

Malla nodded. [I suppose we must. ]

[IT is our problem, ] Chewbacca said. [We can't give the droid a chance to activate the garage defenses again. ]

[Why not just blast the thing now? ] Malla asked.

[Because getting home is the most important part of the mission, ] Lumpy said, [unless you're dumb enough to play an Imperial. ]

Malla looked to Chewbacca for a translation.

[We don't want to be trapped up here, ] Chewbacca said. [We have to be closer to that airspeeder when the fighting starts. ]

Everyone was quiet for a moment, then Lumpy said, [I can get us there.]

Chewbacca listened-patiently, he thought-while Lumpy explained how he could draw the IT droid into a trap of their own for a change.

When the cub finished, Chewbacca shook his head. [Absolutely not, ] he said. [I thought

you were through playing hero. ]

Lumpy's expression fell, but he lowered his head and said, [I am. It kind of scared me anyway. ]

[Good, ] Chewbacca said.

Malla thought for a moment, then said to Chewbacca, [That must mean you have a better idea. ]

They were all silent while Chewbacca tried to think of one.

Finally, Malla said, [I thought so. ] She turned to Lumpy. [Go ahead. It's the one thing the droid will never expect. ]

Lumpy's eyes grew nervous. [Really? ]

When Malla nodded, Lumpy turned to Chewbacca.

Chewbacca glanced at Malla, then grunted his permission. [I have no better ideas, so it seems I am outvoted. ]

Lumpy rose and stepped over to a sizable blast hole above the loading bay. [Then I'll see you in a minute. ]

[I'll be covering you, ] Chewbacca answered. [If you get trapped-]

[I know. Don't grovel, ] Lumpy finished. [Interrogation droids aren't any different from some of the Wookiee bullies I know. Things go worse if you give them what they want. ]

With that, Lumpy turned to climb through the blast hole. Neither Chewbacca nor Malla embraced him; nor did they tell him how much they loved him. That would have implied they did not think they would be seeing him again. They simply took a position ten meters away at a much smaller hole, where they were less likely to be seen, and watched as Lumpy carefully began to lower himself.

The sight of his young son taking such a risk was almost more than Chewbacca could bear, and it only made matters worse that even Malla had agreed that it was necessary to prevent a devastating blow to the New Republic. How often, he wondered, would he find himself in a similar position over the next year or two? When it was only his own life he was risking, his thoughts remained focused and his nerves steady. Now his mind was racing, looking for another option long after the time for such decisions had passed. His hands were trembling so badly that he had to move his finger away from his blaster's trigger for fear of firing it accidentally.

Chewbacca started to speak at the same time as Malla.

[You first, ] he said.

[Just a question, ] she said. [How often does this sort of thing happen? ]

[Around the Solos? ] Though Chewbacca's next words were painful, he spoke them without hesitation. [Too often for Lumpy to stay. ]

Malla took his hand. [Thank you for being the one to say it. ]

[But he still needs to learn to clench fight, ] Chewbacca said, grinning. [When we are done here, I will see about coming home to Kashyyyk for a few weeks so I can teach him. Han can stay out of trouble that long-I hope. ]

Malla smiled. [Okay. Home it is, then. ]

Lumpy's rear claws screeled on the transparisteel as he felt for the seam at the bottom of the observation wall, startling the underwellers so badly that one group nearly dropped a canister of zemex. All eyes turned toward the noise. Lumpy found the seam he was seeking and reached down to hook his hand claws into the gap.

The IT droid yelled, [Stop! ]

Lumpy swung out of sight beneath the deck.

[Time to go, ] Malla said.

They rushed out of the room and clambered down the broken turbolift, then went to the nearest door and, finding it still locked, stood waiting. A moment later, they began to hear Lumpy's frightened voice echoing from the other side, too muffled to be intelligible. The IT droid answered in a wheedling tone, Lumpy growled rather unconvincingly, and the door slid open.

Malla pulled him back through the doorway. Chewbacca opened fire, and half a dozen underdwellers tumbled back onto the loading dock. The IT droid went bouncing along the low ceiling, sparks and smoke pouring from a gaping hole in its side, then reached the high spaces in the main part of the garage and floated into the rafters, still clutching Princess Leia's datapad.

Chewbacca led the charge through the door, taking the underdwellers so completely by surprise that those who did not scatter quickly enough simply died. He glimpsed the IT droid weaving and bobbing its way out over the loading bay and blasted it again, sending casing shards, scalpel arms, and electroshockers flying in all directions. He did not see any datapad parts.

A stream of blaster bolts erupted from the work area. Chewbacca returned fire, losing sight of the IT droid, but reducing the dangerous stream to an inaccurate dribble. With Malla and Lumpy close behind, he darted across the loading bay and took shelter behind the zemex canisters.

The underdwellers ceased firing altogether.

[Like the mallakin that hides behind the katarn, ] Malla observed. [But how do we escape the nest? ]

Chewbacca stuck his head up. Ten meters away, the barrels of half a dozen blasters were pointed in their direction over the airspeeder the underdwellers had been working on.

[We take the nest with us. ] Chewbacca passed his blaster to Malla and said, [Just shoot at the floor and scare them. ]

[What about the datapad? ] Lumpy asked. [As long as we don't have that-]

[The IT will come to us, ] Chewbacca said. [We're threats to its primary objective. It won't let us leave here alive. ]

[I wish you had put that another way, ] Malla said.

Chewbacca picked up one of the heavy zemex canisters and cradled it across his arms. The thing weighed as much as a speeder bike, but he was halfway to a battle rage and had no trouble carrying it.

[Follow . . . me. ]

Chewbacca started toward the airspeeder at a trot, Malla and Lumpy to either side of him, hiding behind the canister.

The horrified underdwellers remained behind the airspeeder, watching him approach with gape-mouthed expressions of disbelief. When Malla began to spray bolts in their direction, they snapped out of their trance and fled for the exit.

As Chewbacca and the others approached the airspeeder, IT-or rather, what remained of IT-floated over and settled on the neck of the canister. It still had three limbs, one of them clutching Leia's datapad. But most of its outer casing was missing, leaving burned wires and fused circuit boards to dangle unceremoniously outside its body.

The droid turned its visual input eye on Chewbacca and, in a barely comprehensible croak, said, "You used him for bait . . . your own offspring? "

Chewbacca stopped at the back door of the airspeeder and, keeping a close eye on the droid, nodded.

"I didn't expect . . . that. " As it spoke, it was drawing one of its remaining limbs back toward its body. "And you won't expect..."

But Chewbacca was expecting it; he had already noticed the heat rings inside the leg's hollow tip. As the tiny fusioncutter flickered to life, he dropped the canister and lashed out, catching the droid by the base of its cutting arm and smashing it against the frame of the airspeeder.

The IT brought its fusioncutter around and burned a long, deep gash across the back of Chewbacca's wrist. Chewbacca's hand opened of its own accord, but he was already sweeping the other down to recapture the droid as it sank toward the zemex cylinder. This time, he caught it by the grasping claw.

[Hold steady, ] Malla said.

She jammed the blaster barrel through the droid's shattered body casing and squeezed the trigger. The IT vanished in crackling blue flash that left Chewbacca blinking the spots from his eyes . . . and trying to slap embers out of his smoldering arm fur.

[Didn't you hear me tell Lumpy to never do that? ] he complained.

[Unless he had to, ] Malla corrected. She pulled the grasping claw-still clutching Princess Leia's datapad-from his hand and tossed it into the front of the airspeeder. [And I had to. Now stop complaining and take us home. ] She pushed Lumpy to the airspeeder and climbed in after him.

[Home. ] Chewbacca crawled into the driver's seat and started the speeder, accelerating into the exit tunnel so fast he had to roll the floater pads up at the crash-corners and bank off the walls. [Home it is. ]

An interview with Troy Denning, author of Star Wars: Tatooine Ghost

Del Rey: Star by Star was your first book in the Star Wars : The New Jedi Order series. Now comes Tatooine Ghost , a novel set many years earlier, just after Han and Leia's marriage. Were you able to apply any lessons learned from Star by Star in writing Tatooine Ghost ? How was this experience different?

Troy Denning: I had a better idea of how the review process worked and knew how supportive it would be. The editors at Del Rey and Lucasfilm are focused on helping the writer tell the best possible story, and their support makes a huge difference. With Star by Star , I was worried about making continuity gaffs and a little hesitant to take detours that weren't in the outline; with Tatooine Ghost , I felt free to do whatever the story needed because at worst someone would say, "That doesn't work because of X; maybe you should try Y instead. " And I knew that if I did make a continuity error, there would be a dozen pairs of very sharp eyes ready to catch it!

Obviously, I also had to adjust my thinking about Han and Leia. This story occurs in a much happier time for the Solos, before Chewbacca's death forces them to come to terms with their own mortality. In Tatooine Ghost , they still have that youthful feeling of invincibility, and the confidence that everything will work out fine in the end. Obviously, it sets a little lighter tone; while the emotional stakes are still very high, the complications are not quite so shattering.

DR: How would you describe Tatooine Ghost ?

TD: The basic idea was pitched to me as a "Classic Bridge" novel, one that ties elements of the Prequel era to the Classic era, and I think that's a pretty good description of how the book turned out. The story is basically an accident-adventure driven by the complex relationships between characters from two different eras. On the surface, it's a classic quest-the heroes must recover a physical artifact in order to prevent a terrible harm from befalling their people. But success hinges on resolving the emotional and spiritual conflicts that arise from their relationship to the past; until they are able to reconcile themselves to their personal histories, they cannot save the day for the New Republic.

DR: That's one of the things I enjoyed most about the book: the way that bits and pieces from the past keep popping up as important elements in the plot and in the growth of Han and Leia toward the people we know they will become. In a way, both the past and the future of these characters are known to readers, but not to the characters themselves. That must have made an interesting challenge! How did you find room for creativity with

the demands of continuity pressing in from two sides?

TD: I enjoy tough writing problems because they demand creativity. One of my favorite projects is *Pages of Pain*, where I was given the assignment of writing a novel from the viewpoint of an enigmatic character who never speaks, with the stipulation that the reader know less about her at the end than at the beginning. It required me to rethink the way I approach a story, and every book I've written since has benefited from that experience.

DR: Can you give us an example of how it changed your thinking?

TD: I'm more conscious of the narrator as a character, for one thing. Modern readers prefer to identify as closely as possible with the protagonists; and they really don't want a third person filtering the experience for them. So, in much-probably most-modern fiction, the author strives to make the narrator invisible, to convince the reader that there isn't a narrator at all. But somebody has to tell the story, choosing which details to pass along, hinting at whether a frown is angry or sad, deciding whether to pick up the pace with short sentences and punchy writing. Those choices create a personality, and that personality is the narrator. Even if the author tries to hide him, it is the narrator who gives the story its shape and feel. Try to imagine, for instance, how different *Star by Star* would have been if I had envisioned a Yuuzhan Vong telling the tale instead of someone sympathetic to the Jedi. The book would have included all of the same events, but the story would have been an entirely different one.

But I'm straying pretty far from your question. It was a challenge to write a story in which the characters' future is so well-known to the readers. I had to use the Solos' relationship in *Heir to the Empire* as a sort of guiding beacon for *Tatooine Ghost*. Kathy Tyers did a wonderful job setting up Leia's internal conflict over her heritage in *The Truce at Bakura*, and to a large extent it was my job to resolve that conflict and move the Solos to where they are at the beginning of the *Thrawn* trilogy. The challenge was to put something at stake in how they got there.

DR: Approaching this from the opposite direction, *Episode III* won't be in theaters for a while yet. But the events of *Tatooine Ghost* happen after *Episode VI, The Return of the Jedi*, so Han and Leia, as well as other characters, might very well know details from *Episode III* that aren't known to readers. I imagine that you had to be careful not to give anything from *Episode III* away . . . while at the same time being equally careful not to contradict anything. It makes me dizzy just to think about. How did you walk this tightrope in a novel that is so much a dialogue-almost literally in the case of Leia and Shmi's palm diary-between past and present?

TD: Avoiding spoilers was easy-I don't know what happens in *Episode III*. I just focused on *Episodes I and II* and tried not to contradict anything there. Of course, I also had *Del Rey* and *Lucasfilm* looking over my shoulder, and presumably they know a lot more than I do.

DR: Who or what is the ghost of the title? Is it Shmi? Is it Anakin?

TD: As Han says somewhere in the story, it depends on how you look at it. To me, the ghost is something much larger than either Anakin or Shmi.

DR: Do you mean the Force?

TD: Yes and no. I don't really want to say, because the ghost is going to be something different for everyone. You could even make a case for it being Obi-Wan or the Tusks, and all of those interpretations might be valid.

DR: I thought it was interesting to see Leia wrestling with the same difficulty that troubles so many fans of *The Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones*: namely, how to reconcile the immensely likeable young Anakin Skywalker with Darth Vader, the living embodiment of the dark side that he becomes.

TD: Yes, that's the heart of Leia's struggle. You can't reconcile the coexistence of good and evil unless you look beyond preconceptions.

DR: Of course, there's always the danger that she's inherited this propensity from her father.

TD: There is that danger, yes. In fact, as the novel begins, Leia has already started to follow in her father's footsteps precisely because she has fallen into the trap of narrow thinking, of believing that a person is either one thing or the other.

DR: In Leia's Force-visions, you give readers an unusual glimpse into the mysterious nature of the Force. We know that the dark side of the Force can be a terrifying thing, but here you show us that it's not just the dark side. Leia is resisting what the Force is trying to show her . . . and the Force doesn't like to be resisted!

TD: This touches on a theme close to my heart, the idea that life is a current. You can either fight the current or go with it. If you fight it, life will be a battle, but you stand a good chance of ending up some place close to your goal (although you may be too tired and battered to enjoy it). If you go with the current, life will be easier, but you have no idea where you'll end up-it could be bad, it could be good. The compromise is to work with the current, to guide yourself within it to someplace you'll be happy. Leia, of course, has been a current-fighter all her life; the realization she reaches in *Tatooine Ghost* is that her particular current is a very strong one.

DR: At one point, the Force seems to be warning Leia that her brother, Luke, may go over to the dark side. I know that this did in fact happen in the *Dark Horse Dark Empire* comic series, but I was wondering if this was a bit of foreshadowing for a future exploration of those events in book form?

TD: The vision you're talking about is a direct reference to the comic story, but I doubt it will be explored any further in novel form. (In fact, I think Lucasfilm editors have said they have no plans to turn comic stories into novels.) I utilized that scene solely because it already existed in the *Star Wars* continuity, so it would have been redundant to make up something similar.

DR: You're probably best known as a fantasy writer from your work in the *Forgotten Realms* series. How different is it to write science fiction? Or do you consider *Star Wars* fantasy as some writers and readers do?

TD: I go back and forth on this. I'm sure I've taken opposite positions in different interviews. At the moment, I guess I think of *Star Wars* as space opera rather than fantasy-if for no other reason than it doesn't feel like fantasy when I write it. There are certainly fantasy parallels: an epic plot, larger-than-life heroes, a concern for the spiritual element of the quest. But, at its heart, I think *Star Wars* is very concerned with the relationship between technology and spirit, which fantasy is not. Besides, I just can't bring myself to think of the Force as magic. Magic is beyond nature, while the Force is intimately connected to life and therefore very much a part of nature-even if it is beyond our understanding.

DR: How did you get your start as a writer? What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

TD: I started writing stories in 8th grade, when our English teacher assigned us the task of keeping a journal (at first, I don't think he realized the entries were fiction). I've been at it since. Eventually-fifteen years later-I was able to put together a decent-enough story that TSR asked me to write one of the *Forgotten Realms Avatar* books.

The best advice I can give to any aspiring writer is to stop aspiring and start doing! You have to write every day. You have to ignore the little editor in your head that tells you to rewrite each paragraph before you move on to the next one. You have to study your craft by reading the fiction of other writers, but also books and magazines on how to plot, to create believable characters, to establish viewpoint, etc. Fiction really is an art, and it takes a lot of study to do it well.

DR: Which writers' work was the most helpful for you as far as learning your craft?

TD: If I had to pick just one-and thankfully I don't-it would be William Goldman. The things he did with *The Princess Bride* are just brilliant; I find myself going back to study the sword fight scenes every few months. He makes it look so easy and spontaneous-which, of course, is a tribute to how long and hard he must have worked on that book. I think most writers would agree that the most difficult thing to do is make your prose look effortless.

But when I talk about studying the craft, I really do mean studying . My favorite books above all are books about writing: Robert McKee's *Story* , Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Joseph Campbell's books *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* . It's not enough just to read fiction; you have to step back and look at it from the outside.

DR: You've also written an eBook novella, *A Forest Apart* , that takes place immediately

prior to *Tatooine Ghost* and features Chewie, his life-mate, Mallatobuck, and their son, Lumpy. It's good to see Chewie again, and especially taking the starring role!

TD: One of the highlights of *Tatooine Ghost* was that Chewbacca would be back, and I really wanted to do him justice. In my early drafts, I overdid his part a bit—he was appearing in scenes where he didn't belong, and in other places I was straining to give him a larger part than his role warranted. I fixed this before the editors saw the manuscript, but I loved writing him so much that I wanted to do more. So, when we talked about an eBook, I realized this was the perfect opportunity to explore his character. I have to say it's not easy to write an all-Wookiee story, but it was a lot of fun.

DR: What are you working on now? Will you be returning to that galaxy "far, far away" anytime soon?

TD: My next project is a Han and Leia story, tentatively titled *Never Trust a Squib*, for *the Insider*. It should come out a month or so after *Tatooine Ghost*. Then I'll probably start work on an epic fantasy series that I've been putting together for a couple of years. Beyond *the Insider* story, I don't have any current plans to return to the GFFA, but I'm definitely open to the possibility. I'm a *Star Wars* fan from way back, and I love where the stories are going now.