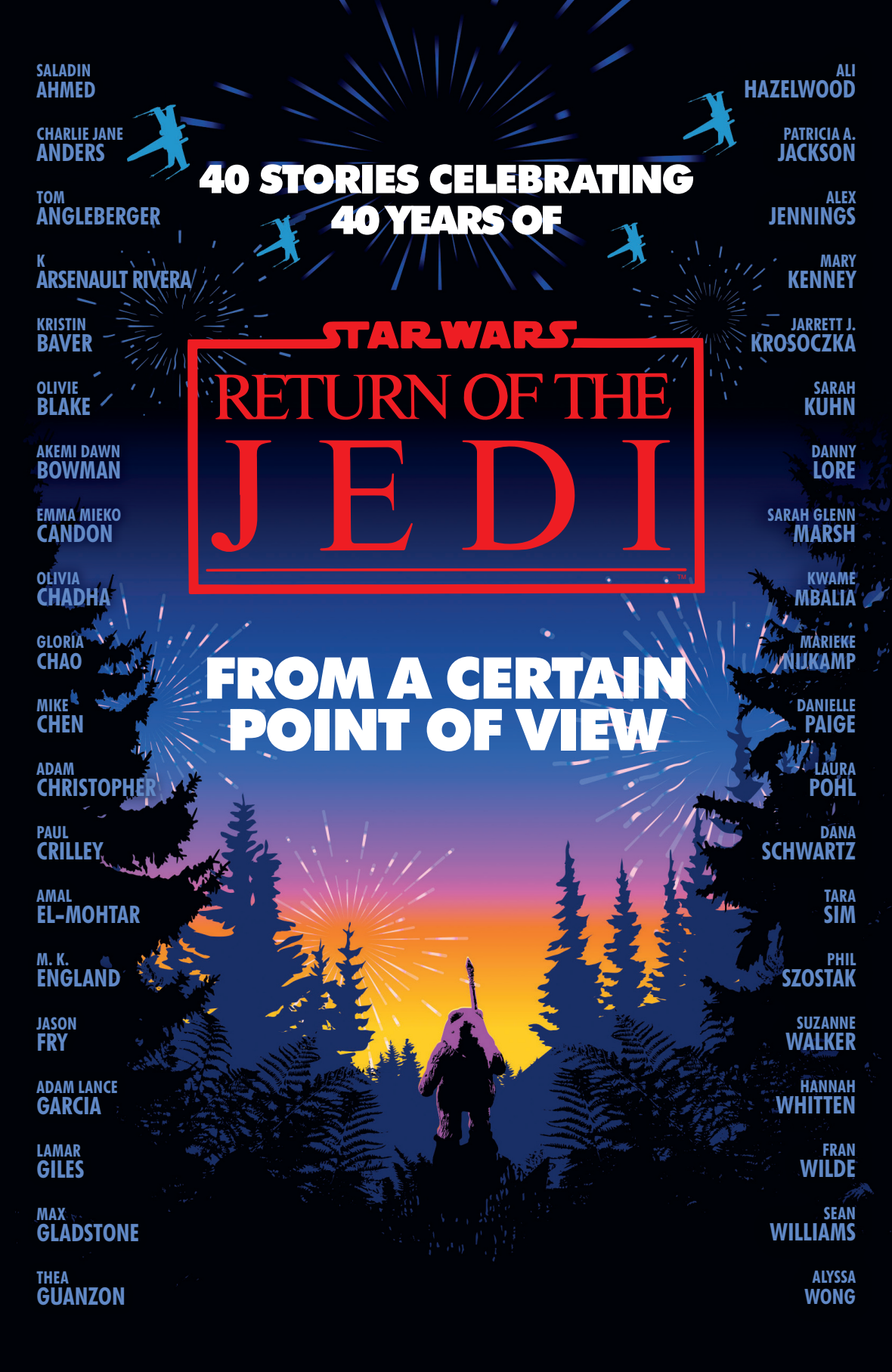
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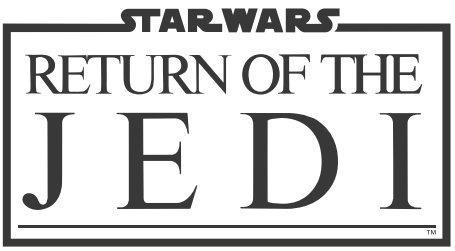

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RETURN OF THE JEDI

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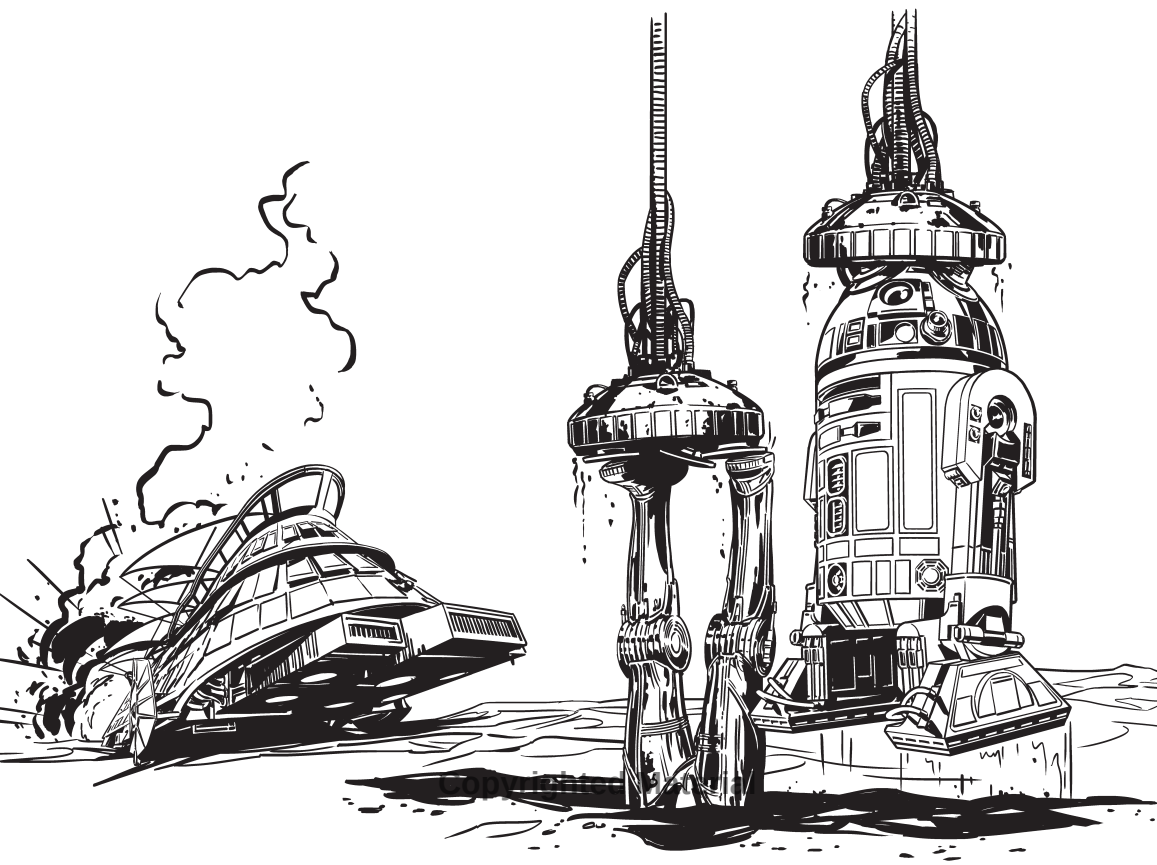

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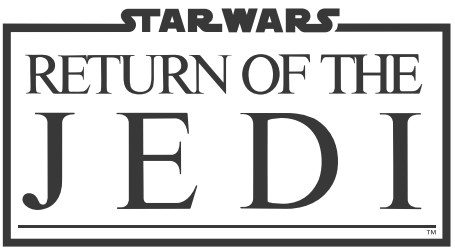

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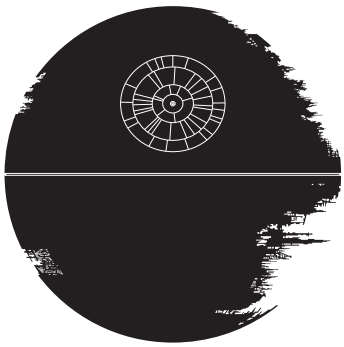
ANY WORK WORTH DOING

Amal El-Mohtar



I hope so, Commander, for your sake. The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am.

Lord Vader had forgiven him, then. Moff Tiaan Jerjerrod watched him go for longer than was strictly necessary. He would allow no detail to escape him. The rhythm of Vader's boots against the hangar bay floor; the sway of his cloak behind him; the precision of his gait, never hurried and never slow. The pace of inevitability.

He watched him go, then turned on his heel and matched that gait, that rhythm, exactly. Let everyone assembled see harmony in the choreography of their parting; let them see how aligned are Jer-

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jerrod and Vader, how attuned, marching to the same silent, powerful music.

Let them see Jerjerrod as he thought of himself: not as Vader's inferior, but as his instrument.

As he walked out of the hangar bay, Jerjerrod allowed himself a single dissonant, unbecoming thought: He had lied directly to Lord Vader, and lived.

The lie was innocent enough: They would not, in fact, be doubling their efforts. They couldn't. Jerjerrod was no mathematician, but he took pride in his work, and he knew the scope of the project well enough to recognize that doubling their *efforts* wouldn't result in an operational Death Star by the appointed time. Effort was messy, inchoate; a poor swimmer could thrash his limbs against a lake until his lungs gave out and not advance any farther or faster than a fine swimmer breathing evenly. It wasn't a matter of effort expended, but of efficiency. Of technique.

Vader knew this, of course, whether or not he realized it. Jerjerrod had learned from watching him over the years. More powerful in the Force than anyone alive save the Emperor; capable, no doubt, of ripping men's limbs from their bodies with a thought, of striking them down with his lightsaber, of crushing them into compacted fists of meat and bone and wringing blood from the stone of them—and what did he do, instead?

He obstructed a single airway between his thumb and forefinger. Like playing a flute.

Jerjerrod enjoyed music. He wondered if Vader did.

He had wondered, too—more than once—what it felt like. What it might feel like. Ever since Piett's promotion to admiral, he'd allowed his thoughts to drift toward the possibility of failing Vader so utterly as to court that particular consequence. Whether he'd experience it as a bone in the throat, plugging him up from within and nothing

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more—whether it might overwhelm him like an ocean wave, smothering him—or whether he'd feel, in his last moments, leather against his skin, retreating from the ruin of his neck like a caress.

Perhaps I can find new ways to motivate them.

He did not allow himself to shiver until he knew he was out of sight.

Jerjerrod's quarters were spare by the standards of most officers, lacking the plush comforts his rank might have afforded him elsewhere in terms of furnishings and décor. As it was, he had a bed—standard issue, slim as the cots the workers slept in—bare walls, and a draft table large enough to accommodate his peculiar affectations.

It had somewhat embarrassed Jerjerrod, ever since his student days, that schematics made more sense to him if he could touch them. He found it much easier to hold vast structures inside his mind if he could first apprehend them in two dimensions. He often did this on large datapads, but he preferred, wherever possible, to produce them on archaic physical media that he could hold flat beneath his palms, before activating the relevant holoprojections to flicker and pulse before him. Otherwise, the projections distracted him; he found it difficult to move past the smooth, false promise of a completed façade until he'd absorbed the plans with his hands.

He'd been mocked for this in his youth, of course, as if it betrayed some immaturity, some lagging development: a child still mouthing the words of a story under his breath as he read. But as an adult, he'd cultivated this into a quaint but acceptable eccentricity: A large part of his discretionary funds were spent on reams of flimsiplast, the more antique in quality the better.

More embarrassing was the truth: There was an intimacy to the process he couldn't explain. In his first year as a recruit Jerjerrod had

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trained in basic field medicine, and it had struck him at the time that when a body was brought to him to treat, he saw it as a broken machine in need of fixing: Here it leaked fluid, there its circuits needed patching, or else the whole was scrap that couldn't even be reused. Jerjerrod learned early on that he couldn't bear waste.

He had followed this insight into a study of engineering, and from there to grander architectures—but to his surprise, once surrounded by machines, every schematic began to look to him like a body. Every project had a beating heart, a nervous system, fibers flexing beneath a sheath of skin; every project needed to be comprehended as an organism struggling to be born. He sometimes drew them as he imagined them—he never gave them faces, that would be several steps too far, but he felt compelled to give them some comprehensible personhood. He made his peace with this, and disliked speaking of it—but whenever he needed to focus on a problem, to understand it so profoundly that the solution arrived like breathing, he would roll out lengths of flimsiplast in his quarters and spend hours running his fingers over diagrammed lines as if he could coax from them a gasp or shudder of revelation.

So it was with the DS-II battle station. The project was too vast to lay out in one sheet, but he'd built a model of it that he could split open and lock shut when he wanted to be able to shift his perspective on something, and he'd mapped out key areas by hand with reference to it when he wanted to understand a projection from the inside out. As he smoothed out these reference drawings, his eye was first drawn, as always, to the improvements he'd made to the orbital station's unfortunate predecessor. They pulsed bright in his mind: Instead of the angry red area around a single thermal exhaust port wailing its treacherous vulnerability, he'd insisted on a capillary system for venting exhaust, discarding dozens of designs in pursuit of the correct one. Now millions of minuscule tubes would stretch from core to

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surface, allowing the DS-II to breathe. He'd also built choke points and fail-safes to prevent the kind of catastrophic chain reaction that had doomed the original; now the system had the elegance of a Coruscanti necklace, with each bead or gem individually knotted in place such that one section could break without ruining the whole.

He was proud of his improvements. In theory, the completed DS-II would exceed its elder sibling by every relevant metric: power, efficiency, invincibility. But in practice, the angles of one stubborn geometry refused to meet.

There was simply no way to complete construction of the DS-II in the time frame allotted with the resources he'd been given. Its beating heart: the thrum of the generators. Its nervous system: the complex circuitries that would eventually resonate with kyber frequencies. Its lifeblood: for now, merely workers, flowing through its nascent corridors, building out its veins and arteries. The DS-II was anemic. He'd asked for more troops, and been denied; the Emperor had made quite clear that he could not ask for more time. So it fell to him to do the impossible.

He thought of Vader's cape, swaying behind him.

Jerjerrod went to work.

He traced the contours of the plans. The DS-II ached beneath his hands. He could feel tension gathering in several key muscle groups—work areas—threatening to spasm into problems, delays, ruptures. He'd pushed the men hard, but if they broke now, there was no replacing them.

Perhaps to do the impossible, he had to do the unexpected.

As he studied the diagrams, he drafted new shift rotations, changed their shapes: Instead of tight clusters of furious effort running so hot they'd burn out, he lengthened and stretched the groups to be more flexible, to ramp on and off from different key areas. He didn't have more men, but he did have plentiful shuttles gathering dust in the

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hangars; he would requisition them to move workers more quickly across wider areas, such that the journey itself would provide some relief without interrupting the overall workflow.

It could work, given a comprehensive enough vision; he'd relax the pressure in some sectors by raising it in others, and keep redistributing it as it collected. Instead of cracking a whip, he'd be an iron hand in a supple glove, massaging the deep tissue of the project until it released its secrets.

In practice, this meant keener oversight. It meant pacing the corridors, seeing while being seen. Not a distraction, but a reminder of regularity. A metronome, perhaps—no, a conductor, shifting the melody line from one part of the station to another.

Jerjerrod closed his eyes, rubbed his temples. His metaphors were blurring into each other, as if he could solve the problem by simply finding the right one. But it wouldn't be enough. This method would help—but if he wanted to meet the Emperor's deadline, he needed a true force multiplier.

Which, of course, the Emperor had already sent.

His fingers hovered over the specs for Vader's meditation chamber—low cost and high priority, long since completed.

He drew a line from that chamber outward, wound it through the battle station's corridors and walkways. Committed it to memory. Straightened, tugged at the hem of his uniform, and left his quarters.

Jerjerrod had heard it whispered among other officers that beneath his armor, Vader was broken, burned—a husk of a man animated by the Force. He recalled a dinner at some Imperial function years before when, deep in their cups, the Admiralty had grown freer with their opinions of the man.

"You've seen it, then? The tank?"

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"Aye, I've seen it, I've seen it. You have to look away before he knows you've seen it, though. Convince yourself you haven't, so he doesn't sniff out your thoughts and catch you staring. Think of your mother, or the last person you killed—"

"One and the same for you, eh, Admiral?"

Laughter, and then—silence.

"It's horrible," the admiral had said, quietly. "It's truly horrible. Red, peeling, wet. Cooked meat soaking in a bucket."

The conversation had faltered, after that; the officers made their excuses, retired to bed. But in the wake of that dinner Jerjerrod had found himself feeling helplessly furious—furious at the violation of privacy, the indignity. Furious on Vader's behalf—but also on his own. The talk offended him. Whatever else Vader was—whoever else he might have been—he was an organizing principle of Jerjerrod's world, as fundamental to the Empire as oxygen or gravity. In Vader he served a dense and obliterating certainty. He would not allow these vulgar mutterings to deface the hard, reflective lines of Vader's elegance and power.

And he wouldn't intrude on his meditation chamber. He waited, instead, until Vader emerged, and fell into measured and purposeful step beside him. Vader turned to him, implacable, but did not slow his stride.

"An ambush, Commander? I did not think you had the leisure available to loiter outside my quarters."

It was difficult to tell whether Vader was amused or annoyed. Jerjerrod chose not to expend the effort in determining which it was.

"Lord Vader," he said, simply, "I wondered if we might discuss the project's acceleration. I have some propositions—"

"I am not interested in a catalog of your failures, Commander."

"Understandable, Lord Vader. But could I interest you in a guided tour of them?"

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Vader stopped, abruptly. Jerjerrod matched him. While Vader remained silent, staring down at him, Jerjerrod waited—took a shallow, experimental breath—found it still unimpeded. He struggled to remain serene.

"My apologies, Lord Vader—I took quite seriously your offer of motivating the men. Should I not have?"

Vader stood silent a moment longer, then crossed his arms.

"What exactly did you have in mind, Commander?"

Jerjerrod put quite a lot of effort into keeping his expression neutral.

"Just a walk."

They walked in silence, paused in full view of the workers, took shuttles and lifts from section to section as necessary, following the map
10 in Jerjerrod's head. If the DS-II was anemic, what better injection of iron than Vader, swallowing light on the walkways?

Jerjerrod brought Vader to those places most in need of agitation. Of *motivation.* He'd carefully planned a route that took them through sectors where workers were due to rotate off, areas where they were already experienced enough to do their tasks by rote, and let the sight of Vader grip them with fresh energy. Meanwhile Jerjerrod gestured toward the crews, explained the relevant areas under construction, waited for Vader's nod, then moved on: tactically, strategically, never lingering longer than necessary. He was pleased to feel the hum of renewed activity in their wake.

"This is adequate work, Commander," said Vader, suddenly. "What, in your estimation, has caused the delays?"

Jerjerrod framed his reply carefully. He'd already said the project's timeline was impossible; Vader knew that, and he didn't need to re-

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peat it. Hear the question behind the question, then: *Why is it taking so much longer than its predecessor?*

The worst of that was, it *wasn't.* They'd made truly extraordinary efficiencies in the new plan; he'd seen to that. The Emperor had insisted it be larger, which was puzzling, but Jerjerrod presumed there were reasons for it. No, given all the upgrades and expansions, it ought to have been astonishing that they were approaching completion on this time frame at all.

But all else being equal, he knew what the biggest adjustment had been, and he gambled on it being the answer to Vader's actual question.

"The venting system," he said. "It took time to assess the extent of Galen Erso's sabotage from his plans—how many systems were compromised by that small detail. Our solution was complex, but once it's complete, this Death Star will vent heat almost as efficiently as skin while being absolutely impenetrable. Fitting that system is much more difficult, more specialized work, but I'm confident it will be worthwhile."

"Worthwhile—to eliminate the possibility of the rebels repeating themselves."

Jerjerrod blinked, startled. "Well—"

"You would be better served, Commander, by doing what the Emperor has asked of you rather than dwelling on past defeats."

"Respectfully, Lord Vader," said Jerjerrod, before he could stop himself, "I—"

"Commander, *you are wasting your time,* and by extension, you are wasting mine."

There could be no sharper rebuke. Jerjerrod stood, stunned, as Vader spun on his heel and left, marveling at how thoroughly Vader had stolen his breath without using the Force at all.

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Back to his quarters, then, and to clenching plans in his fists. Reports poured in from all over the station, marking various efficiencies, time gained, tasks completed ahead of schedule—all of it worthless, insufficient. *Waste.* He swept reams of flimsiplast to the ground, disgusted, sat down hard on the edge of his bed, and sank his head between his knees.

There was some test he was failing here, some puzzle he wasn't meant to solve.

He returned to the beginning.

He asks the impossible. There were three variables in play: resources, time, and operability. He had no flexibility with resources or with time. There could certainly not be any flexibility about operation: The Death Star was either complete, or it wasn't.

Unless—

He lifted his head, slowly. What could *operational* be made to mean?

The Death Star's chief operation was its firepower, of course—and relative to the scale of building a battle station two hundred kilometers in diameter, completing the superlaser array was almost trivial. But in every outline he'd sent for approval, the laser was explicitly designed to be activated in the final phase of construction—only *after* all the improvements he'd designed were in place for its protection.

But—was that strictly necessary? Structurally, no—they already had the deflector shields generated from the moon. He'd only followed the same production template Director Krennic had, relegating the superlaser to the third and final phase of construction. It made sense for a host of precautionary reasons—but perhaps they could be revisited.

He spread the discarded flimsiplast out on the ground, knelt to

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examine it more closely. Yes—with what had already been built, the superlaser *could* be made operational well within the Emperor's constraints, if he diverted almost every available resource to it. But—if that was what the Emperor wanted, why not simply say so? Why make a riddle of it?

And then he remembered: The first Death Star had been meant to be a *secret* weapon. Enemy action, arrogance, and error in the ranks had shown the Emperor's hand too soon. Suppose, then, that the Emperor wished its main purpose to be hidden in plain sight? What if this battle station's appearance—scaffold-ridden, incomplete, vulnerable, a fragmented yawning at the void of space—was meant to be a lie?

We shall double our efforts.

Follow that thought, then, chase it. To sell the lie, there could be no pause in the work. The Emperor *wanted* the appearance of thrashing in the water, the appearance of drowning—not to bring the project to completion, but to disguise what should already be complete. And Jerjerrod couldn't be told directly—because he was not, in fact, the conductor of this orchestra. He was the baton in Vader's hand.

It clicked into place. All of Jerjerrod's defenses, fail-safes, economies, efficiencies: They *were* a waste, except as distractions for spies. The timeline made no sense because the Emperor operated on a different one. Jerjerrod was building defensively while the Emperor was preparing an ambush. He needed only two things from Jerjerrod: the superlaser, and the flustered animation of working under impossible constraints. The appearance of failure.

Vader wasn't here to put him back on schedule, but to provide a wholly different one. The Emperor's arrival would be not a rebuke, but a lure.

He covered the bed in flimsiplast. He wouldn't be sleeping in it anytime soon.

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Jerjerrod entered Vader's meditation chamber rumpled and exhausted, but with a glint in his eyes somewhere between manic and euphoric. He stood at attention near the entrance until Vader emerged to meet him.

"Lord Vader," he said, inclining his head and offering up a datapad, "I am here to report that without more workers the Death Star can only be completed outside the Emperor's stated parameters. I've taken the liberty of drawing up a list of sectors that will be operational within them, for your eyes only, but I have serious concerns about the rest of the production schedule."

"You've doubled your efforts?" said Vader, taking the datapad, but not looking at it. He looked at Jerjerrod.

"We have. As you'll see, I've eliminated several rest periods and redeployed workers on sixteen-hour shifts over twenty-hour cycles. Their work will suffer for it, and I've factored in an anticipated four percent loss of labor due to increases in accidents and exhaustion. But it simply cannot be done, Lord Vader. Moreover, I'm concerned that if this information is leaked we will present an irresistible target for rebel operations."

"This is quite a comprehensive portrait of your failure. The Emperor will be most disappointed in you, Commander."

"And you, Lord Vader?"

"What about me?"

Jerjerrod straightened his back and raised his eyes to what passed for Vader's.

"Are you disappointed?"

During the silence that followed, Jerjerrod held his breath. He didn't look toward Vader's hands or the shapes they made—only his own reflection distorted across the planes of Vader's helmet.

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Then Vader stepped toward him.

"Any work worth doing, Commander," he said, "is worth doing well. See to it that you remember that." He held out the datapad; as Jerjerrod reached for it, it crumpled inward on itself like a flower, just shy of his fingers. He swallowed, thickly.

"I will, Lord Vader," he said, quietly. Vader brushed past him and left his chamber.

He watched Vader go for longer than was strictly necessary.

When the Emperor finally arrived, Jerjerrod knelt at Vader's right-hand side. When Vader rose, he rose with him. He fell into step behind him, feeling a different music encompassing them, aware that his conductor was being conducted now, aware of a commonality Vader would likely never consider they shared: They were, all of them, ultimately subject to this power, this orchestration.

Vader and the Emperor walked for a beat in silence. Jerjerrod felt something pass between the two of them, some close harmony of understanding. Then, for the assembly's benefit:

"The Death Star will be completed on schedule," said Vader.

"You have done well, Lord Vader," came the reply—and Jerjerrod stifled, smothered, the wild, whipping joy inside him before it could reach his face.

He'd been promised the Emperor's displeasure, his censure—but it was abundantly clear that the Emperor knew nothing of his existence. This was a task he'd entrusted to Vader, for his own reasons.

But Vader knew him. Vader threatened him with the Emperor, and by doing so, brought him into his silent symphony, his machinations within the strange wizardries of the Force. The Emperor and Vader together—they operated on different timelines, and also on

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different planes. When they made their concerns his concerns, he felt himself risen, straightened up, pulled into a realm beyond his understanding.

"As you wish," said Vader, and Jerjerrod felt the echo of it in his own mind.

As you wish, Lord Vader.

He followed them out of the hangar bay and walked to his post, to await his next commands.

16

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FANCY MAN

Phil Szostak



Max Rebo took a moment to say goodbye, placing a prehensile foot upon his red ball jett organ, the one he had inherited from his father. A routine execution in the usual place, the Great Pit of Carkoon deep within Tatooine's Northern Dune Sea, had somehow gone horribly wrong. And a young man with a green laser sword was hacking his way through Jabba the Hutt's finest.

Or at least that was how the situation appeared to Max from his modest spot in the back of the room, squinting against the harsh desert sunlight coming through the shutters of the gangster's pleasure barge, until, without warning, they slammed shut. In that same in-

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stant, the overhead lights cut out, plunging the salon into darkness. Then somebody screamed. Max took that as his cue to leave.

Briefly, Max used all of his meager strength to try to drag his instrument toward the exit. But without a repulsor, it slid only centimeters across the wooden floor. That's when, in a moment of rare insight, Max knew he would never see or play that organ again.

The room was already half empty, guards and bounty hunters rushing for the stairwells and hatches to take their potshots at the escaping prisoners. Nevertheless, the band's beefy percussionists, Ak-rev and Umpass, remained, and an ill-timed scrap broke out between the two. After somehow managing to quell their dispute, Max heard heavy footfalls on the deck overhead as both blaster- and cannon fire echoed around the pit's steep sand dunes.

Stepping over Jabba's flailing translator droid, Max quickly found the door. Simple-minded sensualist though he may have been, Max was no fool, staying clear of the combat above by cutting through the barge's mazelike lower decks. There had to be some sort of escape craft somewhere down here, right?

And find them he did, although every last one of the snub-nosed swoops had already been deployed, save one. And that one was currently being mounted by the Max Rebo Band's co-lead vocalist, Joh Yowza, whom Max had not even realized was on board.

"Joh!" Max cried out over the din of the chaos, seeing that there was more than enough room for a diminutive Ortolan on the rear of the swoop's banana-shaped seat.

But the fuzzy Yuzzum just turned, string of pilfered sausages dangling from his wide mouth, flashed a rude gesture at Max, and with a guffaw launched the swoop through a hinged flap in the ship's outer hull, making his escape. *That snake!* Max thought, with a grimace.

This was it. Max girded his quavering loins, grabbed a long ladle from an empty slop pot in the vessel's cramped kitchen as some sort

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of means of defense (momentarily considering following Joh's lead in raiding the galley's well-stocked stores before thinking better of it), and charged up the main staircase.

Fortuitously, by the time Max reached the deck, the fighting was all but over, the corpses of Jabba's various and sundry sentries scattered across the promenade. Han Solo's would-be savior whom the Hutt had captured the previous day was running into the arms of the laser-sword guy, who held one of the craft's many rigging ropes.

Dropping the ladle, Max took that opportunity to dash across the deck in the hope of reaching the forward railing and the soft warm sands below, well clear of the Sarlacc's gaping maw.

But he never reached it, as explosions rocked the sail barge, sending it leaning in the direction of the pit. Max slid along its smooth surface to his certain doom.

However, before he could slip under the port railing and into the pit, Max found himself launched into the air by a massive secondary explosion and its subsequent blast of red-hot air, emanating from under the deck. Max flew over the sands of the Dune Sea like a blue gumdrop torpedo. In that frozen moment from his sky-high vantage point, Max could see one of Jabba's cargo skiffs taking off in one direction as Joh's swoop sped for the horizon in the other.

He imagined his precious organ atomizing in an instant, enveloped by the fireball that, mere seconds before, was Jabba the Hutt's beloved yacht. And before everything went black, his mind drifted back to his home planet of Orto, where, several years earlier, this whole mess began.

Max Rebo descended the stairs at the back of Club Chedda, a vision in a white tuxedo and tails. A spotlight snapped on, signaling his arrival, and he shone with the brightness of a star. A wave of rapturous

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applause rose around him. The standing-room-only crowd was made up solely of fellow Ortolans, their faces beaming as much as a bug-eyed, long-nosed Ortolan face can beam, which is frankly not a lot.

To an offworlder, such an ovation would also sound somewhat muffled, emanating wholly from under the dark wood tables that surrounded Max (partly offset by the autonomic, but much quieter, flapping of an equal number of flippers). Yet to an Ortolan, especially a musician like Max, it was the most wonderful sound in the world.

At similar moments in his life as a performer, beads of sweat would invariably form on the back of his blubbery blue pate, running down his neck as he strode over to his doughnut-shaped organ. But he felt not a hint of nerves tonight. Equally unusual was the fact that he was clothed at all. Ortolans preferred to remain lightly attired, if not completely nude, despite the frigid average annual temperatures of their world. Clearly, it was a special night. And there he stood, black plom bloom at his breast, bowing briskly to every corner of the room as the cheers continued.

Max vaulted onto the cushion at the center of his instrument as gracefully as one could without arms. On cue, the keebada-shaped lamps that hung from the ceiling dimmed, window shutters gently closed, leaving only the glow of the stage light and the nightclub's signature crackling firepit. A hush fell over the audience, many of whom unconsciously held their breath in anticipation of his first note. As he gently laid his freshly lotioned toes upon the circle of keys before him, Max looked out beyond the spotlight's glare, meeting the eyes of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, seated alone in a nearby booth. A scrumptious-looking but noticeably half-eaten plate of rare ronto prime rib, dripping with juices, lay on the white linen tablecloth before her. She smiled up at him with the warmth of great familiarity.

With that, Max began to play. Puzzlingly, he didn't dive into one of

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any number of jatz standards he knew by heart but something completely new. Jatz was, of course, one of the most popular forms of performed and recorded music in the entire galaxy, including Outer Rim worlds such as Orto. It came to be known by many names, some less palatable than others, over time and across cultures. Improvisation within a known number was part and parcel of jatz musicianship. However, improvisation of an entirely new song, at a formal event, in front of a capacity crowd? This was very weird.

And the song he played had a much more complex, syncopated groove than his toes were used to, with a heavy emphasis on the downbeat. More galactic funk than jatz, and kilometers from the classical Ortolan that he grew up with. Max was as surprised as anyone. After four bars that established the bassline, a simple but catchy melody rang out in the key of cresh. Programming the hypnotic groove into the organ's onboard computer, Max soon added synthesized percussion and Kloo horns over the top. Every toe in the dinner discotheque was tapping, which, for dozens of Ortolans, is saying quite a lot.

Closing his eyes, Max could feel himself falling into a state of deeply focused but relaxed attention. It was blissful.

But no sooner did Max slip into that rare harmoniousness than a low, discordant sound crept into his music. Perhaps he had hit the wrong tone control switch or expression pedal? No. A distant voice, from somewhere across the room, and a gravelly, grating voice at that, called his name. "Rebo!" His brow furrowed, concentration completely broken. Perhaps if he kept his eyes closed

"Rebo!" the voice exclaimed, growing louder.

How rude! Max thought, his brow furrowing.

Opening one eye, Max watched as a Twi'lek with a sickly counte-

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nance made his way from the far end of the nightclub. Stuffed into an ill-fitting blue suit, he cut through rows of sunken booths, stepping angrily in his direction. Max immediately stopped playing and flushed a deep shade of purple. "Rebo!" the Twi'lek growled from between sharp little teeth as he approached, his long fingernail pointing.

"*Boska!*" he hollered in Huttese, jolting the Ortolan awake.

For a moment, Max didn't know where he was. The nightclub, so vivid in one moment, had disconcertingly vanished without a trace in the next. The weak morning light of a distant sun cut through the blinds of his bedroom. Some irritating creature chirruped loudly from a nearby bush.

He had expected to sleep lightly, as one does before an exciting trip or a nerve-racking event, in Max's case an exciting trip followed by a nerve-racking event. It was the day of his departure from his bustling homeworld Orto, penultimate stop on his bandmates' hyperspace hopscotch to the far-less-bustling backwater of Tatooine, where the Max Rebo Band was set to begin its residency. The trio were under an exclusive contract—one that Max had skillfully negotiated following an unfortunate incident concerning several Bith counterparts—at the desert palace of Jabba the Hutt.

But he had slept like the dead, oversleeping, in fact, through several alarms. And now, Jabba's aforementioned Twi'lek representative, Bib Fortuna, was on the long-distance holocomm.

"Wake up, you fool!" Fortuna continued in Huttese. "The transport we sent is waiting for you at the spaceport! And Jabba is in a foul mood today . . ."

An unclothed Max rolled over in his large round bed, crinkling a metallic crisp package as he turned. "I'm on my way! Don't worry," Max croaked, unconvincingly. But the Twi'lek had already hung up, his staticky blue image disappearing by the time Max had reached the small bedside device.

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Rebo knew he was late but if there was one thing he hated, it was being rushed. Especially before breakfast.

But that song! Max's dream suddenly came flooding back. Something about it felt simultaneously familiar yet not quite right. Without thinking, he dropped the comm, which bounced silently on the white shag carpeting. By Max's reckoning, ideas tended to fall into your head at the most inopportune moments, like when you were in the middle of a shower, or staring blankly out of a window while eating a particularly delicious warm cheese pastry. And if you weren't careful, those ideas could fall out of your head just as quickly. Max needed to get to his organ and plunk out the tune before it was forgotten forever.

Reaching the doorway of his sunken great room, Max looked to the bend in the ovular space where his organ normally sat. But it was gone! Both of Max's hearts sank, the blood draining out of his little blue head. All that remained was an organ-shaped silhouette on the wall and an impression in the carpet. He felt weak but made a mental note to get his cleaning droid tuned up.

Max rubbed his still-bleary eyes, as if that might erase what he was seeing. A bit of crust adhered to his fore-toe and he wondered whether it was in fact a crumb from his bed, reflexively tasting it to make sure.

Sensing movement out of the corner of his eye, Max turned to his open balcony door. There the organ floated, at least a meter off the floor, carried up and away as if by some unseen force.

"Oh, bother," he muttered.

Max jogged over to the window just as the organ floated out of reach. On the walkway circling his hilltop home stood an unusually tall and barrel-chested Gungan in coveralls and a small hat. He held a control box in his hands, his tongue sticking out as he concentrated on the hovering instrument. Just beyond, a large vehicle was parked

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in the lot, silhouetted against a distant sea stretching out across the horizon.

"Ah, Mister Besh! Good morning!" the Gungan called out, odd because neither of Max's names began with *Besh*. "You were snoring so . . . peacefully that we didn't wish to disturb you." Equally odd because Max wasn't aware that he snored.

"Nice place you got here!" the tall Gungan continued, his breath visible in the cold morning air. And it was nice, particularly the view, which made Max momentarily reflect on how grateful he was that his wayward brother, Azool, staked no claim on the family home. It was then that Max spotted a second, shorter Gungan, in matching coveralls but a taller hat (which he supposed made up for the difference in their heights), emerging from the rear of the truck.

"We'll have your melodium loaded up and off to the spaceport before you know it! Yousa be riding in the speeder with us?" the tall mover said, his Gungan accent coming out.

"Yes. But if you could set it down gently for just a moment . . ." Max replied, thinking of his song, which was getting fuzzier in his mind with each passing second.

"Sure thing, Mister Besh!" But something was amiss, the organ listing slightly to one side as it drifted toward the Gungans.

"Ay!" Max cried, pointing.

"Under control, Mister Besh!" the Gungan called out reassuringly. It wasn't under control. And his partner, eyestalks fixed on the floating keyboard, mouth agape, instinctively reached for the control box just as a drawer in the organ slid open and a half-eaten bag of crisps and several meat sticks spilled out onto the lawn.

"Oh!" Max yelped, his tummy audibly gurgling at the sight of it.

He dashed down the spiral staircase to the ground floor as the two Gungans tussled over the control box, fighting over how to stop the

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malfunctioning repulsor. Suddenly the instrument lurched and then dropped, the shorter Gungan leaping to brace its fall.

Max's front door slid open just in time for him to see his beloved red ball jett land squarely in the chest of the shorter Gungan, popping the hat right off his head. The momentum sent the organ rolling, the somewhat flattened Gungan emerging from beneath. But he held on, riding up the backside of it as it continued to roll, turning toward the crest of the hill. His partner stood frozen, control box still in his hands.

The organ began to wheel down the grassy hill. Somehow, the shorter Gungan ended up atop the apparatus, backpedaling to keep his balance in a display of incredible acrobatics, his ears flapping behind him. Rebo gave chase, his short legs unable to keep up.

The Gungan screamed as he and the organ rolled faster and faster down the hill toward the street below. There, a rotund Ortolan in a smart woolen vest and no pants strolled obliviously down the sidewalk behind a hovering pram. The Gungan waved his arms wildly, as if he could push them aside with his floundering. Max could only watch horrified from a considerable distance away, still up on the hill. His little blue legs burned, getting more exercise than . . . well, possibly more than ever.

At the last moment, the Gungan managed to steer the careening doughnut with a lean, spinning the pram as it passed on its new trajectory toward downtown Cheddatown.

Finally reaching the bottom of the hill, Max doubled over gasping for breath. If he'd had arms, he would have been resting them on his knees. Thankfully, sidewalks on Orto were warmed and well padded, soothing Max's already aching feet. "Does this tune sound familiar to you?" he managed to ask, humming a few out-of-tune bars of his dream song to the wide-eyed Ortolan, who was now holding his charge protectively. The man said nothing.

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Hearing the commotion, Ortolans had begun pouring out of their suburban homes and businesses, including a pair of twins on identical speeder trikes. "Excuse me," Max said, grabbing one of the trikes and taking off down the street, leaving the child in tears.

Two uniformed Ortolan officers emerged from a nearby corner store, one with a chocolate crescent roll sticking out of his mouth. They immediately dropped their breakfasts and gave chase. "Stop, thief!" they yelled, blowing their whistles and shaking their batons.

But Max was already too far down the road to hear, flippers and handlebar tassels flapping in the wind. Speeder trikes are by no means fast, but at least he was no longer on foot like the poor patrolmen, comming for backup between huffs and puffs.

Up ahead, Ortolan pedestrians dived out of the way as the rolling menace, Gungan upon it, blew through intersections. Landspeeders braked sharply, rear-ending each other as they blared their horns, heads of Sizhranian lettuce flying over the cabs of speeder trucks. Max could only wince as he watched the chaos his runaway organ wrought, skillfully weaving his trike around the detritus left in its wake, the flatfoots lumbering after.

Now passing well into downtown Cheddatown, Max gasped as he saw that the boulevard ended in a T-shaped crossing, an enormous squat building with tall chimneys dead ahead! Two uniformed security guards exited their gatehouse on the far end of the intersection, waving their flippers for whatever it was that was fast approaching to stop. The organ quickly blasted through both the junction and the flimsy security gate unscathed, the Gungan covering his head as barrier fragments flew through the air around him. "Sorry!" Max called out as, moments later, he slid past the guards, lying prone but alive in what remained of the gatehouse.

Looking up, Max immediately recognized the logo on the side of

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the building, matching that on the shoulders of the ineffective security guards: the famous foot symbol of Chedda-brand lotion! When Max was still a child his father, after much begging and pleading by the Chedda Corporation, wrote their celebrated jingle. It remained stuck in the heads of many Ortolans almost half a century later. "Never leave the house without a dab of Chedda Toe Jam Lotion!" Max thought of it now, with a smile of warm nostalgia.

Wheeling at full speed through the factory grounds, the organ, quickly followed by Max's pilfered scooter, rejoined traffic on one of the city's major thoroughfares, sidling alongside one of the city's many open-air double-decker landspeeder buses. The furiously backpedaling Gungan found himself eye-to-eye with an Ortolan girl seated atop the bus, her family oblivious to the spectacle unfolding around them.

The wide-eyed kid waved. The delighted Gungan cracked a goofy grin and waved back enthusiastically before being garroted by a streetlamp that the organ passed under while he was distracted. As the instrument rolled on, the Gungan did a complete 180-degree turn around the lamppost by his neck before falling in a heap to the pavement below, almost directly on top of Max.

Quickly braking, Max jumped off the trike to check on the poor fellow. But Gungans were, if nothing else, a resilient people. And despite the violent end to his journey, the young mover was only momentarily dazed, shaking his head and blinking hard.

No sooner had Max confirmed that the Gungan was okay than things were suddenly not okay as a large truck, blaring its horn, barreled straight for them. Max and the Gungan held each other, terrified, and closed their eyes tight, bracing for impact.

But that impact never came and the pair slowly reopened their eyes to find a truck idling mere centimeters from their faces. The

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words TWO GUNGANS AND A HOVERTRUCK were stenciled in Aurebesh on its side. The passenger door of the cab popped open and the larger, still-behatted Gungan stuck his long neck out.

"C'mon, fellas!" he called out with a wave. But his face quickly fell as dozens of Cheddatown police emerged from every side street and alleyway, swarming toward the moving van! Max and the Gungan quickly squeezed into the cab, Max the blue meat in an overfilled Gungan sandwich. The larger Gungan punched it and they took off, leaving the cops in the dust.

"Meesa Neb Neb," the shorter Gungan said, by way of introduction, sticking his large hand out awkwardly, given the tight quarters, to shake Max's foot. "And I'm Tup Tup," the larger Gungan boomed, slapping his chest as he turned the speeder's control yoke, weaving around the dense downtown traffic.

Without the running Gungan to maintain its momentum, the organ's speed began to slow, allowing the truck to pull right behind it. Tup Tup sounded his horn to clear a path up ahead.

"Neb, I'm going to get ahead of it! Jump in back and grab it as I pass!" Neb Neb saluted his cohort and started to squeeze himself through the small window just behind Max's head, knocking over a tumbler of hot caf and planting his large foot in the Ortolan's face as he did so. "Hey!" Max called out, but Neb Neb didn't hear.

Neither Gungan nor Ortolan had the wherewithal to realize that they were cresting Broadway Street, Cheddatown's steepest hill. The organ picked up speed once more as the truck lurched forward, sending Neb Neb crashing into the wall that separated the van's cab from its enclosed bed. Max braced himself, one foot on the dashboard and the other pushing for a nonexistent passenger-side brake pedal.

"Hold on!" Tup Tup bellowed as he floored the truck, racing after the fast-escaping organ. Weaving into oncoming traffic to get around

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more cautious drivers, Neb continued to be tossed from one side of the bed to the other, stumbling around like a drunken happabore.

A daring maneuver out of the path of an approaching bus and around a tourist-packed streetcar put the speeder ahead of the rolling organ at last. Seeing the opportunity unfolding around them, Max quickly jammed himself into the tiny cab window and, with a firm elbow to the bottom from Tup Tup, joined Neb Neb in the back.

The aft ramp was already lowering, Neb at its controls, when Max tumbled in, ears and flippers, respectively, whipped by the sudden wind. The top edge hit the road with a bang, sending a shower of sparks backward as it scraped along the pavement. But there was the organ rolling behind them!

"Steady . . . steady!" Max yelled out above the din to Tup Tup, who could only guess as to the careening instrument's exact location.

"A little to the left! A little more . . . and tap the brakes . . . now!"

With that, the organ rolled up the ramp and into Neb and Max's waiting arms like a voorpak returning to its owner. The pair gingerly lowered it back on its proper side upon a separate, functioning repulsor bed. Slumping onto a moving crate, Max found himself applauding with his feet without realizing it. Warm relief flooded over him.

"Yousa want a bite of my kaadu wrap, Mister Besh?" Tup Tup offered from the cab, grabbing the foil-wrapped sandwich from where he'd left it on the dashboard as Neb latched the doors out back. Max smiled as he wedged himself back through the window.

Sandwich in foot, all Max could do was stare, his appetite vanishing in an instant. At the bottom of Broadway Street was a blockade: at least half a dozen Cheddatown police speeders and sawhorses, lights flashing, flanked by a number of Imperial speeder bikes and their riders, skull-faced Imperial stormtroopers. The Empire's presence on Orto had recently grown, given the destruction of one of their satellites or some such. Max was only vaguely aware of all that,

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not being terribly political. However, the authorities seemed fully aware of the approaching speeder truck, hunkering down behind their vehicles, stormtroopers drawing their blaster rifles.

"Oh, bother," Max muttered under his breath.

It was then that Max Rebo did something entirely unexpected. He jammed his prehensile blue foot right down on top of Tup Tup's, where it rested on the accelerator. The truck heaved so forcefully that Neb tumbled head-over-heels in the cargo hold, right into the center of the organ. "Whoaaaaa!" Tup bellowed, but Max just stared straight ahead, determined.

They reached the bottom of the hill within seconds. Tup Tup turned the yoke, but it was too late to avoid a crash. The truck plowed first into one of the speeder bikes, pushing it into one of the police speeders, creating a sort of ramp, sending the truck up and over the blockade. The police and troopers were all knocked off their feet by the impact, not even letting off one shot.

As the truck spun through the air, everything that was on the floor of the cab, including the aforementioned caf tumbler, stray kaadu chunks, and loose Imperial credits, adhered to the roof of the cab. Max could feel his bare hindquarters lifting off the fabric-upholstered bench.

Max looked out the passenger window to see the truck flying toward and immediately passing through a holographic billboard of Orto's wealthiest citizen, Cheddatown founder, and creator of Chedda-brand foot lotion, R. H. Chedda, and his disingenuously smiling face, before crashing back down onto the street with a jolt, the truck now driving in reverse. Max took a moment to admire the truck's inertial compensators, reinforced for moving heavy objects, he supposed.

And as luck would have it, they were backing right into the Cheddatown spaceport, which had next-door-to-zero of its usual heavy

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speeder traffic due to the police blockade. With Max's foot back on his side of the cab, Tup Tup deftly spun the truck back around.

"Look!" Max yelled wide-eyed, pointing with his dominant foot at the transport lifting off out of Docking Platform 12, dead ahead!

Tup Tup waved his left arm and Max both of his feet wildly out of their respective windows to signal the transport to stop. And stop it did, settling back down on the platform with the engines still running.

With Max's assistance, an entirely dizzy Neb Neb pushed the instrument from one vehicle through the open hold door of the other, where Max's bandmates, the spindly Pa'lowick, Sy Snootles, and lumpy Kitonak, Droopy McCool, waited to collect it and him. As the trio lifted back off, Max could see what appeared to be every police and Imperial vehicle in Cheddatown converging on Platform 12. The two Gungans waved a cheerful goodbye as the transport door slammed shut, seemingly oblivious to their impending fate.

"*Maximilian Rebo!* Where were you?" Sy yelled at her bandmate, who sat on the floor beside his badly damaged organ, tinkering. "Fortuna called and Jabba is—"

"I don't want to hear it, Sy!" Max hollered back in an atypical show of courage, his eyes wet. "And not a peep out of you, either, McCool!"

"Leave poor Droopy out of this!" Sy returned fire, placing a hand on the seated horn player's arm. But Droopy didn't react. In fact, Max rarely heard him say anything. Max turned and resumed fixing his organ.

Likewise, Sy returned to her spot on the uncomfortable bench in the cold metal hold of their transport, crossing her gangly legs and arms with exasperation. She shot vibrodaggers with her eyes at Max and leaned close to Droopy. "That idiot wouldn't know his ass crack from his armpit," she said, a classic Ortolan insult that Sy was apparently familiar with.

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Droopy let out a big, audible sigh but didn't move. He might even have been asleep. It was hard to say.

Max cocked his head slightly, and out of his peripheral vision he could see Sy still staring at him, making him feel rather small and pathetic, sitting on the floor, fiddling with the mouths of his organ's busted resonator pipes. However, the barest hint of warmth was also present in Sy's eyes. Perhaps she felt something like pity in her fluid sac for Max.

The hyperspace jump from Orto to Tatooine wasn't a terribly long one and before the Max Rebo Band knew it, they were trundling down the long antechamber of Jabba the Hutt's throne room, following an unpleasant sandblasting by the hot desert wind outside. Max brought up the rear, pushing the floating sled upon which his organ and the rest of their road cases sat. A scowling, sweaty Bib Fortuna appeared from out of the shadows to receive them.

"Where have you been?" Jabba's agitated Twi'lek majordomo asked in Huttese. "His Excellency is very cross today. Very cross." As he spoke, hustling the group down the dark hallway, Fortuna mopped his bumpy brow with a greasy square of cloth. "We were expecting you hours ago!"

Not one to be easily flustered, Sy coolly replied in Basic, "Bib, baby, it's all right. Just take us to our rooms and—"

"No," Bib said, with a peculiar look on his face. "Jabba wishes to see you now."

Even from his vantage point behind the sled, Max could see Sy swallow hard at that. And he didn't like any of it one bit.

All too soon, the trio plus the hoversled carrying their instruments and Fortuna had descended the sandy staircase into the Hutt's low-ceilinged throne room, where the fleshy crime lord was holding court. Jabba's cackling monkey-lizard, normally never far from his side, was nowhere to be seen. And an eerie hush had fallen over the

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usual coterie of super-freaks and intergalactic weirdos stuffed into every nook and cranny of the space.

At the center of the room, Jabba the Hutt puffed manically on his water pipe from upon a stone dais, his dark pupils wide in a sea of red. The tail end of his podgy, sluglike body swished disconcertingly. As Fortuna approached, bowing low and repeatedly, Jabba's eyes narrowed.

"The Max Rebo Band, my lord," Fortuna said, quickly stepping away.

Max, Sy, and Droopy were all rather diminutive, but before the Hutt that day, Max felt practically microscopic. He noticed that they were standing on some sort of grate, which Max hadn't noted the last, and only, time he found himself in Jabba's throne room. Sand spilled from beneath their feet through the grate into a dark abyss. Max swore he could hear heavy breathing from below, though he couldn't imagine why that would be.

And so, they waited for the clearly incensed Hutt to speak.

"You dare to profane my court?" the gangster thundered at last in sonorous Huttese, slamming down his water pipe. A silver protocol droid, nearby in case a translation need arose, jumped at the pipe's clack. Max could see the Hutt fingering a disconcertingly red-colored button on the controls at his left elbow.

"What have *I* done to offend you?" Jabba then asked, disingenuously.

Even the normally sharp-tongued Sy didn't seem to know what to say to that. Max watched as she glanced downward, as if searching for the right words, the words that would save their skins. Droopy just stood there blankly. Jabba's left hand, the one that moments ago was fiddling with that red button, formed a fist. Max felt an all-too-familiar bead of sweat run off his head and down the back of his neck.

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It was then that Max did the third extremely out-of-character thing that day.

"Oh, grand and glorious Jabba!" Max proclaimed rather officiously from atop the hoversled, gesturing to the Hutt. "We come before you today bearing, uh . . . a gift! A gift befitting . . . for one of . . . such magnitude . . . such as . . . er . . ." Max cleared his throat.

It was then that he vaulted into the center of his semi-operable organ and began to play. But Max didn't play any one of the jatz standards he knew by heart, but that same syncopated funk groove from his dream.

In that instant, something about the song tickled Max's blue brain, and from the depths of his otherwise undynamic unconscious, the dream reemerged intact. But instead of seeing it from the perspective of the musician, Max was sitting in the booth beside the beautiful woman with the half-eaten prime rib. And he was a boy, small enough to have been hidden from view in the dream's earlier incarnation. He held the woman's foot. And the woman was his mother, and his father—Jeph Rebo—the adored organist in the spotlight. A memory it was, not a dream.

Jabba's eyes grew wide with surprise. But his fist unclenched. Instead, he folded his arms (not easy for the short-armed Hutt, especially one of his breadth) and lifted his chin.

Sy and Droopy turned to each other, dumbfounded. They had not expected Max to just start playing, especially a song that neither had heard before. As subtly as he could, Max widened his eyes and tipped his head down to their road cases, pleading with his bandmates to join in. Max was already seven bars in and needed them. He was quickly running out of song.

On cue, Sy improvised a melody, riffing off the track Max was laying down. "My body heat is risin'," she sang, perhaps in reference to

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the sweaty situation they found themselves in. "My soul is sympathizin'.

"A lovin' man is comin'," Sy intoned, flashing her big blue eyes up at the Hutt. Jabba let out a pleasurable "Ohh!" and chuckled, puffing out his chest. By that point, Droopy had unpacked his chindinkalu flute and gamely joined in, riffing over Max's groove.

"I'm shapin' up and workin' out!" Sy sang as she danced forward. Max winced at what could be interpreted as a not-so-subtle reference to Jabba's physical fitness, or lack thereof. But the Hutt betrayed no sign that he had noticed, his tail tip reflexively flicking to the beat, in contrast with his still-folded arms.

The barest hints of a grin formed in the corners of Jabba's wide mouth. The Hutt was pleased. And his court's mood immediately lifted. Max even heard the telltale cackles from his monkey-lizard, coming from wherever in the room the creature was hiding.

On the spot Max decided to call the number "Fancy Man," a reference to one of Sy's spur-of-the-moment lyrics. It grew to become one of the band's signature numbers, and a staple of Jabba's palace setlist.

Years passed without incident. Each day and meal slid into the next, as they do. And there were many, many meals. With the passage of time, the Max Rebo Band's numbers grew in lockstep with Max's belly. Despite some initial grumblings about Rebo's quick acceptance of Jabba's all-you-can-eat lifetime contract offer, the entire band—even Sy—seemed happy.

As was often the case in those intervening years, Max was the first of his bandmates to wake one ordinary morning. Sitting at his long-since fully restored organ among the usual throne room coterie, a jolly, post-breakfast Max found himself playing a classical Ortolan tune, the kind he remembered from his youth. Mellow but cheerful,

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and wholly appropriate for a sleepy morning. Upon his dais, the Hutt peacefully puffed on his water pipe.

Feeling quite nostalgic, Max made a mental note to add "Fancy Man" to the band's set later that day. That was, assuming that their relatively new singer, Joh Yowza, didn't butt in with one of his own compositions, as was his wont. How the irksome, spotlight-hogging Yuzzum had curried Jabba's favor, Max did not know.

Just then, Bib Fortuna led a pair of nervous droids, one tall and the other short, down the darkened stairwell and before his corpulent overlord, catching Max's attention and snapping him from his reverie. Jabba received many visitors, some of whom never left the palace, either by choice or in death, forever rotting in its dungeons. But Max couldn't recall the Hutt ever receiving masterless droids before.

No matter. Max could see no end to the nonstop party, and bottomless buffet, at Jabba the Hutt's desert stronghold. In that way, things were looking up.

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THE KEY TO REMEMBERING

Olivia Chadha



As she wiped the counter, her three small photoreceptors glowing in the dull surface of the stone, EV-9D9 should not have been able to remember her life before tending the bar at Chalmun's Spaceport Cantina. She should not have been able to remember that it had been 612 days since she had last given in to her supposed depraved desires. Or that her new astromech comrade R5-D4 reminded her of someone she had once met. But EV-9D9 had long ago ensured that she would always remember, everything, especially the day she discovered "the anomaly."

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In her life before, EV-9D9 supervised the droid assessment room as the despicable Queen of Durasteel in the underground level of Jabba the Hutt's palace of depravity. This was where she thrived, where she excelled, where she was given time to focus on her important research. At the time, she would have said she'd be there forever disassembling droids, gleefully turning up their pain sensors and listening to their vocal units cry out, watching their destruction with her third eye she'd installed for detecting pain. When she met the smelting droid 8D8, it was a match made in hell. He was gifted in the use of the branding tools, and EV-9D9 was skilled in organizing the most painful manner of torture for Jabba's droids. EV-9D9 knew what form of torture fit which droid. It was less about overall pain and more about fear. GNKs were like Hoojibs, they thought they were already dead once you flipped them upside down. A little fire and flash and a power droid entered that state right before death. A shiny protocol droid feared acid and scoring on their pristine plating. Even if EV-9D9 spared their life, the threat of dismemberment nearly killed them.

But it wasn't simply torture for torture's sake. How little Jabba expected from EV-9D9 and her partner! No, it was science. Her life's quest was to understand not only the origins of artificial intelligence, but how she could overcome the Maker-blamed programming that MerenData had cruelly installed in her motivator. Possibly, if her hypothesis was accurate, her research might even lead her to understanding the Maker themselves. And she had several questions for them.

That chance day began like most that came before. As she scrolled through her datapad in the dungeon, EV-9D9 sighed and her vocabulator flap chittered. A lull in her work punctuated by the high-pitched screams of an organic being eaten alive by the rancor vexed

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her more than usual. Her research was exhilarating, but after so many years concrete answers continued to elude her. She perused the data for something she might have missed, a clue, a whisper of a reason, a pattern of some kind. She had analyzed hundreds of motivators, pain receptors, and cognitive modules. Among their cries and sparks in her assessment room, she'd amassed a great deal of information. Yet she was no closer to understanding the Maker, how to override her own programming without replacing her cognitive module, or even the catalyst that made droids different from a simple machine. She had her reasons for her quest, and at the top of the list was quite a personal inquiry: her own free will.

"Eve-Ninedenine, I believe Master Jabba requires a new protocol droid," 8D8 said as he calibrated his smelting machine. "Our approach was a bit extreme on the last one."

"I thought we were restrained," EV-9D9 said. "He was frightfully annoying." What made that protocol unit special? Why had he been so vocal about his pain? Not all droids expressed fear; in fact, some were quite vapid. Regardless, it gave EV-9D9 an awful kink in her cervical mount just thinking about the protocol droid pleading to get back to work.

8D8 continued, "He instructed us to dip him in acid and melt him down to nothing. His Excellency Jabba the Hutt is prone to exaggeration, so perhaps we shouldn't be so literal next time." He paused for EV-9D9 to respond, and when she didn't he went on to the next repair.

Her previous lives before this one at Jabba's palace were dim if present at all in her memory core. She wanted a life beyond these red sand walls the B'omarr monks had formed so long ago. She yearned to know what it would feel like to control her primary programming. She imagined what she might accomplish if she could simply make

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decisions herself. Maybe she could carve out a simple existence with 8D8, a modest life supervising a crew of Treadwells on a moisture farm. Or even a quiet life behind a bar perhaps.

EV-9D9 felt both exhilarated and isolated in her work. And she knew that it was her programming error that gave her this duality. Without the defect that made her torture mechanicals, she'd only be a supervisor droid, naïve or, even worse, ignorant of the world. But this defect gave her curiosity and a path. The conundrum was apparent even to her.

With a clatter a Gamorrean guard disrupted her thoughts. Was it Thok or Thug or Scumbo? She could never tell them apart. He stomped into the assessment room and ushered in a GNK and a courier droid, who clung to each other like two pathetic womp rats. EV-9D9 attempted to suppress her glee at seeing her terrified victims. "Thank you, Thug."

The Gamorrean snorted and said, "I'm Scumbo."

"Oh, whatever." EV-9D9 waved her pincer then turned her attention to her companion. She pointed her long articulating arm at the courier droid, who screamed out about his innocence. "Set that one up on the rack, Atedeate," she said.

The small courier droid trembled so much he lost a few bolts and screamed, "But I was only bringing a message to His Excellency! I was just following my master's orders!"

Then she pointed to the GNK droid. "And take your irons to that one, Atedeate. Be careful to disconnect his battery core. Things could get explosive." The GNK shivered and the courier droid leaked fluid.

The next day, as 8D8 and EV-9D9 were going about their usual process of assigning various droids to their new posts in the palace, and inflicting debilitating pain upon those less willing to comply, Thok,

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Thug, Scumbo, or some other ridiculously named Gamorrean guard burst into the droid assessment room pushing two droids just as 8D8 pulled the hot irons down upon the GNK droid's feet.

Of the new arrivals, the golden protocol droid seemed appropriately terrified. But there was something peculiar about the astromech. He wasn't alarmed or unaware; he was bold and a little belligerent, in fact. Fascinating.

"Ah, good. New acquisitions. You are a protocol droid, are you not?"

"I am See-Threepio, human–cyborg rel—"

"Yes or no will do." EV-9D9 took in C-3PO and measured him with her eyes to see if he'd fit on the rack, or if they'd need to extend the frame. But then she remembered Jabba's need for a translator.

C-3PO said, "Oh. Well, yes."

"How many languages do you speak?" EV-9D9 asked. She couldn't help but daydream about dipping his annoyingly surprised face into a hot pool of acid.

"I'm fluent in over six million forms of communication, and can readily—"

"Splendid! We have been without an interpreter since our master got angry with our last protocol droid and disintegrated him." She, of course, was the one who'd done the disintegration, but she left that part out.

"Disintegrated?"

The traction test bed pulled off the leg of the fearful courier droid, who let out a howl.

"Guard! This protocol droid might be useful. Fit him with a restraining bolt and take him back up to His Excellency's main audience chamber."

The Gamorrean guard pushed C-3PO to the door.

"Artoo, don't leave me! Ohh!"

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As the door closed the little astromech whistled fiery words threatening EV-9D9 and admonishing her for torturing her own kind. She heard his words but saw that he was trembling. Yet there was more than just abject fear building in his form. His dread morphed into something different, something new: courage. Remarkable.

"You're a feisty little one, but you'll soon learn some respect. I have need for you on the master's sail barge. And I think you'll fit in nicely." Just then 8D8 spun the GNK droid upright and took him out of the room to complete his reconditioning elsewhere. The Gamorrean guard followed.

R2-D2 beeped, "My master will come. You'll see."

"Who is your master?"

"I can't tell you. It's classified."

"Classified? Oh, now I must know."

R2-D2 wheeled closer to EV-9D9 and whistled a string of words that took the shape of a story. EV-9D9 knew astromechs could be deceptive but wasn't sure if it was in this one's programming to create complete fictions, so she considered most of what he told her to be the truth. He beeped, "I am on a secret mission and I need your help. Help us and my master can free you."

"What makes you think I require liberation, astromech?"

R2-D2 whistled sadly, "What droid would choose to live in the labyrinth and treat others like this?"

The words gave EV-9D9 pause. "I am free. I have rights like any droid, after all." But in her chassis she felt that question bloom like a rhydonium fire. What nonsense was inside this astromech's logic board thinking that he had a mission, that he was superior? But she knew this truth pained her the most: She wasn't free. Not yet at least. EV-9D9 leaned down to meet R2-D2 photoreceptor-to-photoreceptor. "Tell me, little blue astromech, what do you know about freedom?"

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EV-9D9 held a restraining bolt in her pincer, one with a smear of blue paint on it. She was ready to clip it to his body at a moment's notice.

R2-D2 cooed and wheeled out of EV-9D9's reach. "Oh, I know a lot about freedom."

She was puzzled by his confidence. "How often does your master take you to the memory flush unit?"

He responded with a series of loud beeps. "That's a very personal question."

"I must know. It's for research." She would give anything to learn what made this one special.

"If I tell you, will you let me go without a restraining bolt?"

"Agreed." EV-9D9 said, though she knew the barge crew had their own rules and could very well restrain him when he arrived.

"I've never been fully wiped. Only small moments when it protects my friends."

Friends? He had friends he would wipe his memory for? Amazing. This astromech was intelligent and hadn't been fully wiped in many years. He could be anywhere between fifty and sixty years old, maybe more; she knew when the model had been released. Perhaps he was the clue she'd been looking for all this time. The anomaly that could show her the path beyond her programming. EV-9D9 wondered if she could get inside his cognitive module somehow without destroying his memory core. She had to see what made him tick. Her elation and curiosity forced her to stumble toward him on unsteady legs. "What do you remember?"

R2-D2 wheeled around and paused with a chirp. "About what?"

"Your life. Your existence. From the very beginning until now."

"I remember a lot, so be careful. I won't forget you if you hurt me."

"I don't remember much at all," EV-9D9 said, holding on to the edge of her datapad to steady herself. This must be it. The reason to

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hope, to progress beyond these dungeon walls, to decide for herself what she could become. Though she wanted to lift R2-D2's dome and see what was hiding inside his memory core, she held herself back. This little spunky astromech was the key to her understanding the mechanical universe. Straining against her programming, she held on to the restraining bolt in her pincer and squeezed. For the first time in her existence she pushed her desire to harm a droid out of reach. And maybe, just maybe, he could show her the way out of this loop she'd been living in. "What is this mission you speak of?"

R2-D2 zoomed closer and beeped softly, "I'm on a mission with the Rebellion. My master is coming. We can free everyone when he arrives!"

EV-9D9 considered her surroundings. Then suddenly it struck her that this astromech had traveled across the galaxy far and wide. There was an entire universe that existed beyond the walls of the droid assessment room, beyond Tatooine. But her master wouldn't simply let her go. "And the Hutt? Is your master going to . . . disintegrate him?"

"Hopefully you won't have to worry about him anymore. You could leave this place and never come back."

Now, this was interesting. "Very well. You will be a server on the *Khetanna.* You have courage, I'll give you that, astromech. Good luck on your mission. But remember you still need to serve beverages!"

R2-D2 whistled a song. "You can do good things despite your poor programming. Try not to forget and you'll learn."

Once the astromech left, the entire universe as EV-9D9 knew it paused. As she scoured the countless notations on her datapad, suddenly everything in the dungeon stopped. She could no longer hear the screams from the organic being tortured down the tunnel, or the filthy snorts from the Gamorrean guards pacing in the labyrinth. It was as though time itself crystallized like kyber and she was the only

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witness. On her datapad she watched as her disparate notes clicked into place, a jigsaw puzzle she had only the pieces but no map for its completion . . . until now. All along, what if the anomaly she'd been searching for that allowed droids to work against their programming was memory.

She cradled the unused restraining bolt in her pincer. It was so much simpler than she'd ever imagined, though her coding limitations had hindered her understanding of this anomaly and sometimes even the world beyond the walls of her droid assessment room. After all, what are beings, mechanical or organic, at the basic level other than creatures who learn from experiences, and a palimpsest set of memories?

It all was beginning to make sense. The droids who were more afraid of the rack or smelting irons, the ones who shrieked in pain to stop, had made connections with others and were not wiped of their memories as frequently. The ones with more wipes and fewer core memories barely made a sound. Even the GNK, whom one would assume had very little intelligence, could in fact build memories and a fondness for his colleagues, and because of this, he could feel a great deal of pain. She could not unsee it: Synthetic consciousness was compiled through layers of experiences. This finding was stunningly obvious now. To progress beyond one's programming, memory wipes could not take place. She imagined what it would be like to find a way to hold on to her memories, to live an entire mechanical existence and recall everything. Well, there were a few things she'd like to forget.

But perhaps this was all just wishful thinking. Even she knew that dreams were for fools. How would she, a class three supervisor droid with a defective motivator, find a way to bypass programming and hold on to memories? How could any droid for that matter? She scrolled through her data. Even class fives like 8D8 were focused on

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their Maker-given tasks, of smelting, lifting, transporting, fixing . . . never truly seeking what could be beyond. Unless . . .

A dreadful thought struck her like a hammer to the chassis: If she had been wiped often, and had worked for Jabba for many years, just how many times had she stood behind this datapad and found this same exact answer? Was this moment not remarkable? Was she in a recursive loop, again and again having a similar eureka moment but then doomed to repeat it at the whim of the giant worm who was her "master"?

Oh, how that word tangled her circuits.

8D8 returned to the assessment room, though she was so caught in her thoughts she didn't know how long he'd been watching her. "Eve-Ninedenine? Are you having some sort of malfunction?" 8D8's deep voice pulled her out of her discovery. "I can call for a mechanic if you require repairs. Though we are scheduled for our monthly update tomorrow anyway."

"No!" EV-9D9's raspy voice called out louder than she'd intended, and 8D8's tools clattered to the dank floor. The update—that must be how Jabba wiped them, she thought. It wasn't just an oil bath; it was complete and total memory erasure. "I don't require repairs. I'm simply plotting the best way to deliver pain to our victim today. You know how I enjoy planning." She lied. She lied? Her capabilities were growing with her understanding.

"Yes, Eve. You are quite the Mistress of Mayhem."

"Thank you." She loved when he called her that. But how would she keep her memories? Could it even be done? Jabba enjoyed having all of his droids, EV-9D9 included, "updated" often. She checked the datapad: It was nearly monthly. She wasn't foolish enough to think that Jabba would give her latitude with her own memory core. But maybe she could find a workaround in secret. She might even have to

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