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WHEEL OF MISFORTUNE

by Mary Jo Fox

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My dearest Malla, hope all is well with you, Itchy, and Lumpy. I have been on Decara IV for four weeks now, still working in the spaceport repair shop. I like working here, and I have been making good credits. The humans who work at the shop are all very nice. I don't know how much longer I will remain here before the stars call to me once more, but I swear I shall come home to you before year's end. Did you get the money I transmitted to you? The space relay system is more reliable this close to the Core, but you can never be sure.

I should go now. I have a hyperdrive that has to be fixed by this evening. Give my love to the family, and ail honor to the den. I will contact you again soon.
Love, Chewbacca.

The large Wookiee sighed before hitting the "send" button on the terminal keyboard. The message blinked once onscreen, then vanished. Malla would receive the message in six days.

Chewbacca's ears detected footsteps coming from behind him, and he turned his furry head. In the doorway stood Sparky, the cheerful young human male who owned Sparky's Spaceport Repair-N-Parts.

"Hey Wook!" the boyish human said. He adjusted the brim on his grimy cap that seemed to be a natural part of his head. "Done with that, yet?" Chewbacca whuffed a "yes" in his own language. Luckily, he managed to find a human that could at least understand the Wookiee tongue. Not many could.

I'll go back to welding that hyperdrive now.

"All right, pal."

The Wookiee ambled back into the main hanger of the repair shop. He hunched down before the hyperdrive engine, put on his goggles, and fired up the plasma welder. As Chewbacca worked, he thought about all of the interesting things he had seen over his travels across the galaxy and the people he had met. He was happy with his wanderlust lifestyle. He was lucky he had a wife who understood. Not marriage or a child could keep him at home. It was just not his nature.

Sparky came over to Chewbacca's workstation about an hour or so later. "Hey Wook!" he called.

Chewbacca quit welding and pushed up his goggles to his forehead. *What's up, Sparky?*

"I need you to go over to the supplier warehouse and pick up a case of alluvial dampers."

But the hyperdrive ...

"Aw, don't worry about it. I'll take care of it." Sparky gave Chewbacca some credits and an order chip and sent the Wookiee on his way.

The spaceport town had a variety of mechanical and sentient life, but Chewbacca still stood out like a Jawa at the emperor's court. He towered over everyone by at least a head or two. The Wookiee turned down a side street, taking a short cut to the warehouse. As he walked through the narrow alleyway, he noticed that it was very quiet and still. Highly unusual for a spaceport town. Something didn't feel right to him. Or, as it was said on Kashyyyk, "Something didn't smell right," He stopped, sniffing the air, scanning the street with his sharp eyes, and listening for movement with his sensitive ears. He really wished he had a bowcaster with him. But he was unarmed.

Chewbacca whirled around at the sound of boots scraping pavement behind him. He saw the two humanoids blocking the alleyway, their blaster rifles drawn. It took a nanosecond for Chewbacca to realize he was in trouble, and it took another nanosecond for the great Wookiee to decide what to do next. He crouched down, and using the powerful muscles in his legs, he sprang up toward the top of a five meter high building wall, his huge tree-climbing claws protracted.

They barely hooked into the mud walls. Chewbacca struggled to haul his body onto the rooftop as the humanoids shot at him.

He managed to roll onto the flat rooftop just as blaster fire struck the place he had been dangling from seconds before. He noticed that the bolts did not damage the mud brick. The blasters had been set on stun.

"Slavers!" his mind shrieked. He broke into a run to the other end of the rooftop, not even stopping as he leapt over to the next roof. His heart pounded in his ears. He could feel sweat starting to dampen his fur, yet he felt cold with fear. Never in his life had he been hunted the way he hunted Kroyies as a boy. He didn't like the feeling.

A swoosh of propelling jets overhead made Chewbacca freeze in his tracks. He turned trying to find where the source of that noise had gone. He saw it too late, a tall human in black armor, a rocket pack strapped to his back, a heavy blaster rifle in his hands aimed right at the Wookiee. The next thing Chewbacca felt was his nerves tingle, his muscles tightening as they stiffened. Then, darkness.

Slowly, consciousness returned. The first sensation to come back was scent. And Chewbacca could smell rot, despair, and death. Slowly the large Wookiee opened his light blue eyes. He could see that he lay on the floor of a dark, small cell. The walls and the floor were smooth metal, without any furnishings save a latrine in the corner.

Chewbacca blinked as he tried to move his limbs--only to discover that his arms and legs were bound in chains. He bellowed mournfully, his cries of anguish echoing off the cell walls. Whoever it was that had captured him had left him here, wherever here was. He quieted himself, listening intently, hoping sound would help indicate where he was. His stomach dropped as he heard the rumblings of a large ship engine.

A slavers' ship.

Chewbacca's worst fears were being realized. He thought he could wander the galaxy as he pleased. He had heard stories about the Empire and crime lords enslaving Wookiees, but he never quite believed them. Malla had warned him, though he hadn't thought it could happen to him. Most of the people he had met were kind to him. As for the few that were not, Chewbacca knew how to deal with them. But things were different now. He was in deep, with no way out.

As soon as that realization set in, despair seized his heart. What if he could never escape? What if he was never free to travel the spaceways again, to never see his family, to never be among the Wroshyr trees? Such a fate was surely worse than death.

After what seemed like an eternity, the cell door slid open with a hiss-clang. Blinding white light burned into Chewbacca's eyes. He howled with pain as he squeezed his eyelids shut. His hands went up as added protection from the light.

"Get up!" hissed a voice in heavily-accented Basic. Before Chewbacca could move, several strong hands gripped his arms and torso, pulling him to his feet. He wavered a bit as the room seemed to spin and tilt. The effects of the stun blast hadn't worn off completely. Either that, or he had been drugged. It would've been wise for them to drug him. An angry, scared Wookiee was probably one of the most dangerous things in the universe.

They marched a still-blinded Chewbacca out of his cell. Actually, the best he could do was shuffle, with the leg irons and the stiffness in his legs. But that didn't stop his captors from poking him in the back with what he believed were blasters.

Eventually, his eyes grew more accustomed to the light and he could start to see clearly what the slavers looked like. They were taller than most humans, dressed in dark gray armor that encased their lean bodies. Helmets shielded their faces, filters amplified their breathing. This was a higher-class slavery operation if they could afford that kind of armor. Most of the slavers Chewbacca knew about were rag-tag scum.

The guards ushered the Wookiee into a turbolift. It dropped down several levels before coming to a sudden, stomach-churning halt. The turbolift doors opened to reveal a large hangar bay filled with several sentients in chains, including many Wookiees. Hundreds of armed slavers kept them under guard as various humans moved among them. The majority of these human customers wore Imperial military uniforms or stormtrooper armor.

"Get moving!" ordered one of the guards, shoving Chewbacca in the back. He whirled around and snarled viciously at the offending guard. He had temporarily forgotten who had the upper hand in this situation. Wookiee tempers were funny that way, especially in Chewbacca's case.

Chewbacca quit his outburst when several blaster barrels appeared right in front of his nose. He defiantly whuffed a vulgarity before turning to exit the turbolift car. The guards led him to a platform where seven other

Wookiees were being displayed. Once up on the platform two of the guards chained Chewbacca's leg binders to the floor.

"You must be the new guy," grumbled the Wookiee to his left.

"Yes," Chewie quietly rumbled in reply. "This is a slave sale, isn't it?"

"Perceptive, aren't you?" The other Wookiee was a few inches shorter than Chewbacca, with russet hair and light brown eyes. He appeared to be young and very strong. "They picked me up on Corrubus. I was a free trader."

"I was working in a spaceport repair shop. I almost got away from them but..."

"The guy in the rocket pack got you. He got me, too. What's your name, pal?"

"Chewbacca. And you?"

"Attalamberchuk. I'm from the North Forest."

"I have den members there." Chewbacca looked dolefully at the imperial officers and stormtroopers. "What happens if they don't buy us?"

Attalamberchuk shrugged slightly. "Don't worry. They will. They want strong, healthy, intelligent Wookiees, particularly ones with engineering skills. The weak... they'll get shipped off to some obscure space laboratory or maybe the spice mines on Kessel. But they'll take us to their bases, their factories, their summer palaces, or whatever."

"You sound like you have accepted your fate."

Light brown eyes bore into blue eyes. "I have accepted my circumstances. But my fate is still in my hands."

A human voice disrupted the still moment. "What about this one?"

Chewbacca turned to see who it was speaking about him. Before him stood a pair of Imperial officers in crisp dark olive uniforms. Accompanying them were six stormtroopers and a middle-aged, garishly-robed human male. It was he who responded to the Imperials question after consulting his data pad.

"A new acquisition we found on Decaro IV. He's a very smart fellow. When we picked him up, he had been working as a mechanic."

"Yes," said one of the officers. "The brutes do tend to be very good at that sort of thing. He is in good health, isn't he? We need workers who can carry heavy loads."

"While he was under stun, he was checked out. In perfect shape," the man replied.

The other officer nodded. "We'll take him."

Still in chains, Chewbacca whined mournfully as the shuttle pulled away from the massive dreadnought that had been the slavers' ship. He had no idea where he was, or where he was going ... save for the Star Destroyer looming in the distance.

His thoughts turned to his family on Kashyyyk. They would never know what had become of him. He would have no way of contacting them. It tore at his heart to be condemned to a life of back-breaking labor for the Empire. But what could he do?

Nothing for now.

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