



THE *WAYWARD CURRENT*

THE LONG-HAUL TRANSPORT BARGE *Wayward Current* was almost through its six-week journey from the wild, sparsely populated Mooshie Cluster to glitzy, flamboyant Canto Bight on the planet Cantonica. The deckhands gathered on the mess deck had just come off their watch; they were there to eat, socialize, and play games before catching a few hours of sleep.

They made a motley crew—some humanoid and human, a few reptilian and avian, and even a few droids. Almost all the deckhands were still short of full maturity by the standards of whatever species they belonged to. That was important, because Tuuma the Hutt, captain of the *Wayward Current*, insisted on having a crew the majority of which were still so enchanted

by the boundless possibilities of the future that they would accept next to no pay in exchange for a chance to see the galaxy.

Ulina, the third mate, drained her pungent, tongue-burning Olo tea as a loud moan echoed through the dimly lit corridors of the barge, like the last dregs of steam departing from the furnace of an old moisture farm. She scanned through the dozen or so deckhands gathered around the low rusty table, wolfing down their food, and settled on a lanky fifteen-year-old girl with cropped hair.

"Sounds like the feisty filly in the corner stall is having trouble sleeping." The patch over Ulina's left eye glowed red with annoyance. "Did you do the endurance exercises with her in the double-gravity chamber today? You know fathiers need heavy exercise when they're cooped up on a ship like this."

"Sorry," said Teal, the fifteen-year-old. "I had to clean the reflux combusters—"

"No excuses," said Ulina. "Each of these fathiers is worth more than three years of your wages. Go fix your mistake."

"Do I get only half rations next meal?" asked Teal timidly.

"You've been making a lot of mistakes on this trip. Almost late for some chore every day." Though her tone was severe, the red glow in Ulina's eye patch faded to a gentler orange. "But . . . we've been shorthanded. If you finish and come back quickly, I might not even remember that you had to do your chores out of order. I'm old, as some of you keep reminding me."

The young deckhands around the table chuckled at this. No one knew where Ulina was from, but it was said that she was older than all the deckhands put together. The gruff third mate had a kind streak in her that was all too rare among the desperadoes who plied the long-haul trade routes to eke out a living.

"If you dawdle and the first mate runs into you when

he makes his rounds, though, you'll have to go hungry. He's got a much better memory than I."

Chastened but also relieved, Teal stuffed her bread and nutrient paste tube into her pockets as she got up from the table.

"You're acting like we're going to steal your food," said G'kolu, a twelve-year-old Anlari boy whose fleshy horns were only as long as a human finger. The horns curled to show his amusement. "You're not going to enjoy eating that in the stinking fathier stalls anyway. Leave it here. I promise it will be here when you get back."

"That's not why—" Teal stopped.

"What, are you planning on sharing it with the fathiers?" asked Jane, a girl from Tanto Winn, where everyone had green eyes. "That bit of bread isn't even enough to fill the gap between their teeth. They won't appreciate it."

Teal shook her head. “None of your business.” She turned and ran off.

The echoes of her footsteps bounced against the bulkheads and partitions, drawing more groans and neighs from other fathiers, massive towering creatures of incredible speed and grace—when not confined in the cramped quarters of a spaceship. They stamped their four legs, each as big around as a tree trunk and a few meters tall, and the din they made took a while to subside.

G’kolu’s horns twisted pensively, but he said nothing. The first rule of being on a deep-space crew was that you respected the privacy of others. Everyone had secrets.

Ulina turned to the rest of the deckhands. “Better get some sleep. We’ll be in port by morning watch, and it’s going to be a long day of unloading in Canto Bight.”

"I'm thinking we need another serving of vegicus tails," said G'kolu. "Even the captain has to agree that we need energy to do the work, right?" The boy could wheedle for more food better than anyone else on the crew.

Ulina was about to object, but Dwoogan, the ship's cook, was already firing up the fryer on the other side of the counter. Dwoogan was a tall muscular woman whose scarred face hinted at a mysterious past. Somehow she always managed to turn the most revolting ingredients into something delicious—even the vegicus, the vermin that lived in the bilges and storage nooks of long-haul spaceships. On long voyages with limited supplies, a resourceful cook like Dwoogan sometimes turned to them as extra protein supplements.

Ulina grunted noncommittally, but the young deckhands could tell by the pulsing green glow of her eye patch that she had assented.

A tantalizing oily aroma soon filled the mess deck.

The deckhands let out a loud cheer that set off more groans from the fathiers in their pens in the ship's bowels.

"I wonder if we'll see anyone famous in Canto Bight," said G'kolu, his horns standing up eagerly. The city's immense fathier racetracks and crowded casinos were legendary.

"Who do you want to see?" asked Dwoogan. She dropped handfuls of vegicus tails into the boiling oil, making everyone's mouths water as the greasy scent filled their noses.

"The jockeys!" said Jane, her green eyes wide, as if she were already in the grandstands.

"The holo stars!" said G'kolu.

"The people who have so much money that they wear their clothes only once before throwing them away," said Tyra, a thirteen-year-old human girl whose family had scavenged in junkyards all over the galaxy.

"The heroes of the New Republic!" said Naldy, a

skinny boy with striped skin who wouldn't tell anyone where he was from.

"Any heroes in particular?" asked Dwoogan. Her tone was affectionate, playful. She stirred the tails with a ladle and didn't flinch as drops of hot oil splashed against her powerful arms.

"Luke Skywalker," said Naldy.

"But he hasn't been seen in years," said G'kolu, his horns making a skeptical half turn.

"Doesn't mean that he *wouldn't* be in Canto Bight," said Naldy defensively. "He rode tauntauns, didn't he? I bet he would make an amazing jockey."

"I bet he'd rather be in the piloting races," said G'kolu. "Way more money in those. I heard that he once made the Kessel Run in under twelve parsecs."

"You're thinking of someone else," said Tyra. She and G'kolu shared the same quarters and bickered like siblings. "Skywalker was the one who once took down twenty AT-ATs with his lightsaber."

The other young deckhands chimed in.

"My mother told me it was two hundred! And he rode a tauntaun while doing it."

"Tauntauns are even harder to ride than fathiers—"

"My uncle said he used magic to smash two Star Destroyers together—"

"It wasn't magic. It was just good piloting. And it was *six* Star Destroyers—"

"*Twee-BOOP eek eek eek—*"

"That's a name I haven't heard in a while," said Ulina. The children and droids instantly quieted. Ulina's eye patch pulsed from amber to magenta. "There are lots of stories about Luke Skywalker. Some of them might even be true."

The deckhands hung on every word. Ulina had seen far more of the galaxy than the rest of them, and there seemed to be nothing she didn't know.

"Tell us one?" pleaded G'kolu, his horns leaning forward eagerly.

"It's late," said Ulina.

The deckhands would not accept this.

"Just one! Please?"

"We'll work extra hard tomorrow."

"Dwee BOOP tweetweetwee?" Even the ship's ancient droid custodian, G2-X, joined the chorus as he set the platter of fried vegicus tails on the table.

Dwoogan came over and stood at the edge of the group, her arms crossed in front of her, a grin on her face.

Ulina looked at her. "What are you so pleased about?"

"Every night, you say no. And they manage to drag a story out of you anyway."

"Since you're mocking my ability to maintain discipline, I'm going to assign *you* the task of telling the story tonight." Ulina strained to keep the smile off her face but was not having an easy time of it.

The deckhands cheered again as they reached grubby

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fingers for the platter of hot vegicus tails. A story from Dwoogan was an even better treat.

“All right. As it happens, I did once hear a story about Luke Skywalker. . . .”

