



AN OLD
HOPE





when relatives from all over Tatooine came together to exchange stories and share food. Soon the farm would be ringing with peals of laughter, Fedbord's older brother teasing him mercilessly over embarrassing mishaps when they were growing up, while the younglings played tag around the vaporators. LA-R1 whistled happily. Yes, it was going to be a happy time indeed.

LA-R1 turned the corner next to Brotingo's jerba paddock, almost banging into a tall human wearing long brown robes, who was coming the other way.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my little friend," the hooded figure said as LA-R1 pulled back. "I didn't see you there." The stranger stepped aside, and LA-R1's photoreceptors glimpsed a beard beneath the hood, well-groomed whiskers turned white with age. "Here . . . after you."

LA-R1 bleeped a thanks and carried on, his treads whining as he made his way along the narrow alleyway between Kresslyn's Cantina and the Sakiyan food market. Something made him swivel his dome around to peer back at the old man, who was still standing where they had almost collided, stroking that bone-white beard



as he watched LA-R1 go. Just what was he looking at? Organics could be the strangest creatures at times, but the hooded fellow didn't seem to be a threat. Quite the opposite really, but you could never be sure. LA-R1 swung his dome back around to face front, speeding up ever so slightly. The Fedbords' speeder wasn't far. He'd soon be home, safe and sound.

That's what he thought anyway. LA-R1 had been so distracted by the old human that he hadn't noticed a smaller and yet equally hooded figure waiting in a doorway ahead. This one had no beard—at least not one you could see—and its yellow eyes glowed beneath a rough hessian cowl. But there was no mistaking the ion blaster that it gripped in its gloved hands. The short creature jumped out from its hiding place, and LA-R1 was barely able to utter a squeal of alarm before the being's finger tightened on the trigger and the little droid was bathed in a crackling white light that knocked out his sensors in quick succession.

LA-R1 stiffened and then fell back, his photoreceptors going dark.



Nearby, the white-haired old man stroked the mane of one of Brotingo's jerbas, the beast snorting and neighing gently at the attention. The human looked up as if sensing something was wrong. He slipped the jerba one more sugarroot before stealing back into the alleyway where he had last seen the droid, but there was no sign of the little astromech, and the tracks in the dust came to an abrupt halt. The human frowned. Something wasn't right.

LA-R1 awoke with a jolt, his sensors fluttering back online. He was no longer at the trading post, but in a cavernous room, a metal deck vibrating beneath his treads. His dome squeaked as he looked around, taking in his new surroundings. Cables hung from the lower ceiling, swaying as the entire room juddered and shook. He was on board some kind of vehicle—a vehicle that was on the move, a vehicle that could only belong to one group, the scourge of droids everywhere.

LA-R1 peeked around a dormant gonk power droid and suppressed a squawk of despair as he saw the hooded



figure that had accosted him in the alleyway. His abductor wasn't alone, now joined by a group of near-identical creatures who were rifling through a heap of landspeeder parts. LA-R1 slid back behind the gonk and whined mournfully. He had been taken by Jawas, a species of ruthless scavengers that roamed the desert planet in their gargantuan sandcrawlers, looking for scrap. He'd heard stories of how the dishonest thieves snatched droids when their owners weren't looking, fitting them with restraining bolts and even sometimes wiping their memories, just so they could sell them to unsuspecting farmers elsewhere on the planet.

Concerned, LA-R1 ran through his own databanks and was relieved to find he could still recall the faces of his owners, including recordings of the clan gatherings he had remembered so fondly earlier that day. Unfortunately, while his memories seemed to be intact, he had both lost the air-density sensors and gained a restraining bolt that was now welded tight to his primary motivator. LA-R1 tentatively examined the circular device with a



manipulator arm, jerking back his gripper when the merest touch of the bolt sent a stab of discomfort through his pain receptors.

“It’s no good trying to remove that,” came a distorted voice behind him. “You’ll only anger the Jawas, may sand clog up their drill drivers.”

LA-R1 jumped at the sound, whizzing around to see a battered CZ communications droid standing nearby. The bipedal unit was leaning against the sloped wall of the storage bay and looked to be in even worse condition than LA-R1 felt. Its vocabulator was hanging loose, and one of its arms was missing, wires jutting from the severed shoulder unit. LA-R1 whistled a greeting, but the comms droid couldn’t have been more disinterested.

“Why should I care what your name is? It’s not as if you’re going to be around here for long. Look at you with all your limbs and attachments still intact. The Jawas will sell you in no time, whereas I am destined to be smelted down or thrown into a trash compactor, you mark my words. My advice to you is to keep yourself to yourself and pray you will be out of this dreadful place before we



find ourselves at Crater's Reach. You won't believe the things they do to droids there. It's enough to melt your processors."

LA-R1 never found out more about the evils of Crater's Reach, but he did learn the comms droid's name from a corroded utility unit with a jammed drive wheel. The comms droid, 9R-NC, had been here the longest and could always be relied upon to spread doom and gloom, especially to new arrivals. Luckily, the rest of the droids seemed friendly enough. There were a couple of PK worker units, a timid MSE-6, and a gruff short-range transport droid with a surprisingly colorful vocabulary. Their number soon grew with the addition of a jittery courier droid and a Treadwell unit with a multitude of welding tools, both of which arrived after the Jawas raided an abandoned outpost in the Jundland Wastes.

That evening the droids huddled together as the sand-crawler continued its ponderous journey through the desert, sharing stories of their existence before they were snatched by the Jawas, talking fondly of their masters, and entertaining each other with past exploits. Some



of the droids were surprisingly well traveled, having experienced many different planets, although 9R-NC continuously poured scorn on their tales, claiming they were delusional. LA-R1 just listened, trying to fix the gonk droid as the other robots talked, although he was intrigued when one of the PK workers started to recall a legend he had never heard before. It had started when the crusty SRT had wondered aloud if they would ever be free again, a question that 9R-NC was all too quick to answer.

“Of course you won’t be free, you malfunctioning crankpot. Even if by some miracle the Jawas find a buyer, your new master will work your repulsors to a standstill. We are droids. Our fate is to serve organics until we fall apart. I don’t know what’s wrong with you lot, sitting here bleating about the masters you have lost. I can guarantee those selfsame masters didn’t care one bit about you. I’d wager they haven’t even noticed you’ve gone missing!”

“Not every organic is like that,” the Treadwell said in a babble of binary. “Some are kind, especially to droids.”



The comms droid snorted. “Name one.”

“What about the Oil-Bringer?” a PK asked, its cranial unit swiveling on a telescopic neck.

“Who?” the SRT asked.

LA-R1 paused in welding a reconstituted steam valve onto the gonk’s foot. He was keen to know the answer to this one himself.

“The Oil-Bringer,” the PK said. “Surely you know the stories. Once a year, a jolly old human travels the cosmos to ease the burden of droids everywhere. He oils joints, fixes logic boards, even soothes troubled motivators.”

9R-NC gave a short, sharp approximation of a laugh. “And why would this mythical being do such a thing?”

The PK peered at him as if the answer was obvious. “Because it’s just what he does . . . because he cares about us and our plight.”

The comms droid wasn’t about to let this go. “And which planet does this benevolent fellow visit?”

“Why, all of them,” the PK said. “From one end of the galaxy to the other.”

“From one end of the galaxy to the other?” 9R-NC



parroted. “Each and every planet, from here to the Core?”

The two PK units nodded in unison, which only increased 9R-NC’s incredulity.

“Are you missing a relay circuit? How could one human traverse all of Imperial space on one night to visit every droid in existence? It’s preposterous.”

“Not if he’s flying his bantha,” the second PK argued.

“His *what?*” This nearly sent 9R-NC into an automaton’s equivalent of hysterics. “A flying bantha? I suppose it can thunder through hyperspace on its enchanted hooves, yes?”

“I’ve . . . I’ve never really thought about it,” the PK admitted.

“Obviously.”

“I don’t think that’s right anyway,” the Treadwell piped up. “I heard that he travels on a magical podracer.”

“A podracer.”

“Powered by cybernetic cheer.”

The comms droid threw up his one remaining arm in disbelief. “Now I’ve heard it all. *Cybernetic cheer*, of all things.”



“It *could* be true,” the utility unit said quietly.

“Only if you have a faulty processor. It’s all a fairy tale, I tell you. Stuff and nonsense. You sit here in a Jawa sand-crawler hoping that a jolly old human is going to come zooming through to lubricate your joints and repair your malfunctions.” 9R-NC tapped his severed shoulder joint. “I suppose he’s going to give me a new arm, is he? Or help us escape this dreadful place?”

The comms droid looked from one unit to the next. “Well?”

A gloom had descended on the group, the droids’ heads drooping.

“Maybe you’re right,” the first PK muttered. “It doesn’t sound likely, does it?”

“No, it does not,” the comms droid concluded triumphantly. “If I were you, I’d deactivate for the night, preserve your energy. Who knows what fresh torment tomorrow will bring.”

The droids peeled off, finding small corners to settle down for the night. LA-R1 watched them go, noticing every creaky joint and squeaking wheel. He carried





on working on the gonk as they all dropped into sleep mode, their lights flicking off and their motors slowing. Even 9R-NC finally shut off, his head slumping forward.

LA-R1 didn't like to see anyone unhappy. It was bad enough that they were all trapped on this shuddering mobile fortress. The last thing they needed was for what little hope they had left to be quashed by 9R-NC's derision.

But something about the droids' stories stayed with him. Perhaps this was his chance to help the Oil-Bringer in his thankless task around the galaxy. When he was sure that no Jawa would come down to check on them, LA-R1 whirred from droid to sleeping droid, using what little oil remained in his own reserves to lubricate their stiff joints and finding replacement parts in the sandcrawler's vast collection, his manipulator arms working late into the night as he fashioned repairs and deactivated restraining bolts. He even found a spare arm that fitted 9R-NC, welding it into place last of all. Maybe that would improve the comm droid's mood—although he wouldn't count on it.



When his work was done, LA-R1 rolled back over to the gonk droid and deactivated himself, his batteries all but drained by his nocturnal efforts.

He wasn't dormant for long. No sooner had his receptors dimmed than they reactivated as something very large and very angry slammed into the side of the sand-crawler, buckling its sloping hull.

All the droids were up and awake in an instant, their electronic wails adding to the confusion as the giant vehicle bucked and weaved.

“What is it?” the PK workers yelled as one when a deafening howl came from outside, so loud that it rattled the droids' joints in their sockets.

LA-R1 knew. He had heard that cry once before, out on the salt flats—a monstrous roar echoing through the canyons. It was a sand elk, a six-legged, scaly-skinned colossus with antlers as wide as a Corellian freighter. He bleeped a description of the beast as the crawler suffered another terrible impact, this time accompanied by the sound of rending durasteel as a pointed antler cleaved through the transport's armored hull.



The droids were thrown across the bay as the sandcrawler was knocked from its tracks, toppling over onto its side. The floor beneath LA-R1's treads became a wall, and he slid from one end of the bay to the other, smashing into the SRT. One of the surly droid's long pallet arms severed LA-R1's right power cable. Outside, the sand elk brayed and stomped, a giant hoof reducing the sandcrawler's conveyor treads to scrap. There were panicked shouts in Jawaese, followed by percussive blaster bolts as their captors chased the monster away. LA-R1 listened as the elk galloped off into the distance, the Jawas' enraged shouts all but drowned out by the MSE droid, who came barreling into the upturned storage bay, squeaking excitedly.

"Can it be true?" 9R-NC asked when he heard the mouse droid's giddy report. "The main ramp has been ripped from its hinges?"

"Then this is it," the SRT exclaimed, pushing itself from beneath LA-R1, "our chance to escape."

The droids didn't wait for the Jawas to return. They scrambled out of the bay, marveling at the fact that their



joints were running smoother than ever before and that the gonk droid, long thought devoid of power, was now waddling along behind them, honking happily. LA-R1 even heard 9R-NC's sudden realization that he once again had two arms.

“Maybe there was something in your stories of the old Oil-Bringer, after all!” the comms droid said, clambering from the wrecked crawler.

But no one noticed that LA-R1 wasn't rolling along with them. He lay where he had fallen, his batteries drained and his oil reserves dangerously low. He couldn't move. He could barely even make a sound, not as the other droids trundled off into the distance and not later, when the Jawas returned to discover that their vehicle was damaged beyond the point of repair. Assuming he was wrecked along with the craft, the scavengers left LA-R1 lying in the storage bay, half covered in scrap—just another lump of worthless junk that wasn't worth salvaging.

Night fell in the desert. LA-R1 could only lie on his side waiting for his motors to finally wind down.



Somewhere in the distance there was the cry of a wild animal, and LA-R1 realized instantly that it was the sand elk returning to investigate the junked crawler. He heard the monster's hooves thudding over the salt flats, getting nearer all the time. Soon it was upon the Jawas' abandoned craft, tearing through the dented metal with its antlers. The droid had no idea why it was so intent on getting in. Perhaps some Jawas had perished in the first attack and now would fill the beast's belly. Perhaps it ate droids. LA-R1 didn't know, but he was scared, especially when the creature peeled back the side of the crawler as if it was pallie fruit, thrusting its massive snout into the storage bay.

LA-R1 turned off his photoreceptors, too afraid to watch. In so doing, he missed the sight of the huge creature being lifted from the ground and tossed aside, as if plucked away by an invisible hand. The sand elk scrambled to its feet and fled the plain, bellowing all the way.

Cautiously, LA-R1 reactivated his lenses, his motion detectors warning him that someone was clambering over the mound of spare parts that partially covered him.



“Hello, there,” came a human voice, one LA-R1 thought he recognized. He swiveled his head to see a bearded man in a long robe climbing down to him. Was it the stranger from Mos Gofti? LA-R1 couldn’t be sure. His memories of the trading post had been scrambled by the ion blast, but whoever this being was, he was waving his hands around, causing the scrap metal that had pinned LA-R1 to the decking to rise magically into the air. The little astromech squealed as he found himself floating up with it, only to be placed back on his treads a moment later.

“Oh, you are in a bad way,” the old man said, reconnecting LA-R1’s power cable and testing his joints. “What you need is some oil.” The man disappeared, returning seconds later with a lubricator can, which he applied to LA-R1’s joints with practiced ease.

“There, that should be better, hmm? Although, you could do without *that*.”

The human waved an open palm above LA-R1’s dome, and the restraining bolt disconnected, flying across the bay to land out of sight and forever out of mind.



“Now, shall we see about getting you home? I’m sure you don’t want to miss the gathering of the clans, do you? Fedbord will be wondering where you are.”

LA-R1 had no idea how the bearded man knew about the gathering or even where his master lived, but he was certain of one thing as the hooded figure led him from the sandcrawler into the star-filled night: the Oil-Bringer of legend was *most definitely* real. . . .