

Ewok Hunt

by EF Zwibble

The chair was an expensive one, of real nerf leather hand-stitched by skilled workers, with 21 built-in massage functions and an insulating cup holder. Jansen especially liked the cup holder. It could keep his warm milk warm for hours, even when he was called away on business. He could leave to do his work, confident that when he returned he wouldn't be faced with a cold goopy mess covered in a nasty milk-skin. Skin completely ruined everything. Even scooping it out never solved the problem - there were sometimes still chunks in, and even the threat of a slimy congealed encounter was enough to put a man off of milk for weeks. Only making a brand new cup would do, and it was such a waste of milk. Jansen had gone through a lot of milk before he got his chair.

Jansen raised his mug to his lips and closed his eyes, taking a slow sip. *Ahh, just right*, he thought to himself. It didn't get any better than this.

The door chimed, breaking in on his reverie. "Come," said Jansen reluctantly, opening his eyes. His reflection in the viewport greeted him, still holding his "Galaxy's Best General" mug. Jansen turned around smoothly (his chair had an excellent turning radius), but was greeted by nothing other than the usual sight of his tastefully-decorated office and wide desktop. That was odd. Perhaps whoever had been outside hadn't come in after all. He turned back to the viewport and started blowing bubbles in his milk.

"Ahem..."

Coughing loudly to cover up the sound of his bubbles, Jansen spun around to see who had made the noise. "Oh my, terrible cough I have here, must have caught the Talonian Flu that's going around, oh dear, cough cough..." he trailed off as he was once again confronted with a seemingly empty office.

"Er, here, General." From around the edge of his desk limped Brigadier General Cornelius into view. His usual respectable stature was halved, as he was bent at the waist into a most uncomfortable-looking position.

"Good grief, man, what ever has happened?" Jansen, staring in horror, nearly forgot to return the lopsided salute the Brigadier General gave to him - or at least to his knees. "I thought you were on leave!"

Cornelius turned somewhat red about the ears, although whether from embarrassment or impeded blood flow due to his cramped stance, it was impossible to tell. "Well, sir it's like this ... I've never had a very good back, and nowadays I throw it out whenever I have to bend over. The problem is, I have to bend over every morning to tie my shoes. And, well, this is the result. I requested leave to try and get it sorted out, but nothing I've tried seems to help."

Jansen nodded, blinking a few times, and attempted to act as if this were all perfectly normal. "I, uh, see, Brigadier General. And what did you have planned for the future? I suppose we could have your quarters refurnished to, er, reflect your current state..."

"Oh, no need for that, General, sir. It'll straighten itself out after a few days. But as soon as I have to fasten my shoes again, well, here I am again. I've tried using droids, but they always get their digits tangled in the double knots. They weren't made for such work."

Jansen nodded again. He too knew that droids had their limits - he'd long ago given up trying to program one to make the perfect cup of warm milk. "What about Velcro? Droids could surely handle that." Cornelius looked askance - well, more askance than his current pose normally dictated - at Jansen.

"With all due respect, sir ... Velcro? I hardly think that's dignified enough for an officer of the Imperial Navy."

"Oh. I suppose not." Jansen sighed, his gaze wandering around his office as he pondered the problem at hand. It lighted upon a holo of the fleet he had hanging on the wall. In the foreground hung the Chimaera, proud and stern against a backdrop of stars. The Chimaera ... LaForge ... ewoks ... that was it! Jansen grinned triumphantly. "Brigadier General, I think I know just what you need ..."

Colonel Jagged Fel reached a hand into the package before him and pulled out a tempting buttery round, gorgeously browned at the edges and packed full of the finest milk chocolate chips. He spent no time admiring the cookie's symmetrical curves, however, choosing instead to devour it in one bite, releasing an orgy of taste into his mouth. *That Zwibble sure does know how to bake*, he thought, as he went back to work at his console. *Let's see now ... Zwib colon-P score plus 500, Vort colon-P score minus 500...* His door chimed. "Mmpfh," said Jag.

Into his office stepped a grizzled man in an army lieutenant's uniform, one eye covered with a patch, the other a keen gray. His short-cropped hair was sprinkled with a few bits of gray itself, but his bearing was ramrod straight and the lines of his uniform indicated a fit and muscled man underneath. He snapped off a salute with the ease of one who's done it countless times before, and stood waiting. "You called me, sir?"

Jagged returned the salute. "Mmpf, mm mmp." He swallowed hastily. "That is, yes I did, Lieutenant. Please, take a seat."

"I'd rather stand, sir, thank you."

"As you wish." Jagged folded his hands and leaned forward. "I called you here,

Lieutenant Mercenary, because I need you to lead a secret mission from the General himself. You have been with the Empire for many years, and your expertise is going to be needed. Your XO is also imminently suited for the undertaking. As such, I've selected Hornet company to carry the mission out."

Mercenary stood a bit straighter, flushing proudly. "Thank you, sir. Hornet will do its best." He paused, but Jagged didn't continue, instead examining his fingernails and lowering his eyes. Mercenary noted the change in his CO's stature, and warning bells went off in his head. "Sir, you can be straight with me. If it's a suicide mission, I can assure you that --"

"Oh no, no, not that. It's, er..." Jagged searched for the best way to phrase things, but gave up. "We need you to go capture an ewok."

Mercenary's usually granite expression faltered. In all his years in the Empire's service, he had become to be known as an unflappable, steadfast man, who could retain his cool even in the hottest of situations. The absurdity of what Colonel Fel had just said managed to shake even his iron composure, however. He blinked a few times, and then sat unsteadily, not used to the uncertainty rushing through him. "Maybe I'll take that seat after all... An ewok did you say, sir? Is this some kind of joke?"

"I'm afraid not. I've got orders here from General Jansen to capture an Ewok for the Master-At-Arms. I can't imagine what Brigadier General Cornelius could need with such a pet, but orders are orders." He handed Mercenary a datadisc. "The op is fairly straightforward. We don't expect much if any resistance, but word of this shouldn't get out to the general fleet, just in case." Personally, Colonel Fel thought the precautions were less about security and more about keeping face. He could only imagine the amusement such an announcement would generate. It wasn't his place to speculate, however; orders were orders. He gestured to the datadisk in Mercenary's slightly wavering grip. "You'll find the mission parameters within. You'll leave as soon as the company's ready - we've no time to waste. I've got every faith in you, Lieutenant."

Mercenary could only manage a mumbled "Thank you, sir," before he stumbled out, shaking his head in disbelief. He had always thought Hornet was well-trained and ready for anything, but this was one scenario he had never even considered. An ewok-hunt ... He straightened his shoulders, forcing resolve. He'd faced down crack rebel troops, Wookie commandos and even a mother Krayt dragon before, and had never lost his reserve. Was one little ball of fur going to give him second thoughts? Of course not! After all, how hard could it be to hunt a teddy bear?

"How hard can it be to hunt a blasted teddy bear?" exclaimed Private Karma Arnor, wiping the sweat off of his brow. "We've been out here for two days now and we still haven't seen so much as a fuzzy little tail!" The other members of Hornet Company,

spread out around him in the dense jungle of Endor's moon, didn't respond, but there were a few mutters of general agreement.

"Can it, Private," ordered Mercenary. "We'll find one soon enough. Sooner, if you quit complaining and focus on looking." Despite his crisp - some would say hash - tone, the Lieutenant was generally pleased with the way things were going so far, despite the lack of ewoks. His company was painfully new, with most members just out of the academy. Even his XO, a very capable officer, had only been assigned a few months ago. This was their first real mission together, and although their inexperience was showing through, it was nothing time couldn't fix. The company was starting to get annoyed, however, and that could lead to sloppiness. Night was falling as it was, so rest would likely be their best option. "Company halt," said Mercenary into his comlink. "That's it for today, lads. Set up camp."

Hornet Co quickly set up their few tents and broke out the rations, then settled down to a quiet dinner. Second Lieutenant P'hargat was trying to teach the company a few phrases in Ewokese, with so far little success. "No no no, it's 'y'bbY yubbiyib ubby yub,' he was saying. "The emphasis goes on the end of the syllable of the first word." He shook his dark head.

"Yibby yuubbbbeb yuuby yeb?" hazarded a young man with open features and generous freckles.

Mordon P'hargat's dark brown eyes sparkled merrily, and he laughed. "You just said something like 'I am needing of the newest underclothes,' Logan. Not a bad phrase to know, I suppose, but I wouldn't throw it about lightly."

"Well, I don't see how it makes any sense," said Private Ewing, his dark features rendered even darker by a scowl. "You just keep adding more syllables to the end."

"That's what's so fun about Ewokese - it's a polysynthetic language, which means you sort of make up words as you go along by connecting various bits to your basic root word." Five blank faces staring back at him made P'hargat realize this wasn't going anywhere. "Ah, forget it. When we find our ewok, just try not to be too intimidating and let me do the talking. The last thing we need is him running away because he thinks you're on an underwear raid, or something." Even Mercenary chuckled at that, though he stood as he did so, brushing loam off of his knees.

"I've got first watch tonight. It's an early morning tomorrow, so you should all turn in soon. We've covered more ground today than we planned, and if we keep up the pace, we should be able to get out of here as soon as possible. And if any of you scares off our ewok by asking him for his underwear, I'll have your hide. Just let Mordon do the talking and we should be fine." He faded silently off into the dusk around the camp, heading to the watchpoint with stealthy ease.

The others quickly packed up the remains of dinner. "Say, Mord, how in the

Emperor's name do you know Ewokese anyway?" asked Private Arnor. "It's not exactly common knowledge."

"I took a course in it at the Academy," explained Mordon, picking up his empty ration wrapper and putting it in his pack. "There was this girl who was taking the class, and I wanted to get to know her, so I signed up too."

"Awww," chorused the the others in unison. "And did you learn how to say 'I wuv you' in Ewokese? Did you stand outside at night under her window throwing rocks and spears and making presents of stormtrooper helmets?"

"Enough, all of you, or I'll tell the first ewok we see that you all are here to marry his daughters and pledge your blasters to his service. I'll even help you come up with traditional ewok names for the kiddies. Just don't invite me to the wedding - ewoks traditionally serve roasted Yuzzum brains and ovaries." He stuck his tongue out, and then turned and crawled into his tent.

"An ewok bride, eh?" said Arnor, rubbing his chin. "I prefer tall women myself, but that might be something for you, Logan. At least she won't be taller than you when she wears heels."

The diminutive Private rolled his eyes. "Ha ha, very funny. Remind me to sign you up for one of those Wookie mail-order-bride services when we get back. If you want tall, tall you'll get ..."

Mercenary heard their voices fade as they too entered their tent for the night. Once again relative silence descended over the darkened jungle, with only the occasional hoots of nocturnal winged creatures echoing through the trees.

Mercenary waited his few uneventful hours, then went to wake Private Feldercarp to take the next shift. As he bent down to open the tent flap, he felt something prick at the back of his neck. He reached up to brush it away and froze as his hand came into contact with a crude but sharp spearhead, attached to a shaft running back into the darkness. He let out a cry and spun around, wrenching the spear from the owner's grasp, but before he could complete his circuit there was a sharp crack and a blinding pain in his head, and then everything went black.

Mercenary awoke uncomfortably, his head still throbbing. The pain intensified when he opened his eyes, but he forced them to remain open until they had adjusted, and looked around. He was trussed up neatly, and laying around him were the other members of Hornet Company, similarly bound. A faint flickering white light was emanating from a panel overhead, set into a ceiling of familiar gray - duracrete. The rest of the room was the epitome of nondescript. There was no furniture or windows, and the door was a smooth dark gray square set flush in the lighter gray wall by Mercenary's feet. The door

looked like a solid piece of durasteel, and with the rugged, thick lines of the walls, the Lieutenant guessed they were in some kind of bunker.

Mercenary heard a noise, and turned his head to see Second Lieutenant P'hargat waking up. His fatigues were muddied and torn, but he seemed relatively unharmed. "I've got some good news and some bad news, sir," he told Mercenary. "The good news is we found our ewoks. The bad news is that they found us first."

Mercenary wiggled over to P'hargat, working furiously at his binds. "Ewoks did this?" He snarled to himself. *Taken captive by a bunch of teddy bears! You must be losing your touch, old man.* He rolled over on his side, presenting his bound hands to P'hargat. "See if you can work these loose." He prodded LaDart with his bound feet, but the private remained out cold. He had a nasty bump on his temple, but at least there didn't appear to be too much blood crusted on the wound.

Before Mercenary could get a good look at the others' conditions, the door hissed open, and in marched a group of ewoks as professionally as their stubby little legs could manage. Eight of them were wearing various bits of stormtrooper armor, Mercenary realized with a start, including a few with ridiculously large helmets perched atop their fuzzy shoulders. Most of the others made do with belts, looped over their shoulders to be made fit.

The ewoks formed into two columns, and through their middle marched a ninth, in the most complete trooper outfit of the bunch. There was the helmet - with eyeholes drilled in near the bottom, Mercenary realized - along with a groin piece worn as a sort of chest plate. Shoulder pieces made upper leg guards, and pieces of what looked like the trooper bodysheath served as wrist- and ankle-bands, brown fur sticking out in tufts above and below. The ridiculous figure marched up to Mercenary and stopped, looking down on him. "Aren't you a little short for a stormtrooper?" he snarled, then spoke over his shoulder to P'hargat. "See if you can find out what they want."

The ewoks reacted instantly when P'hargat opened up with a stream of yubbs and yibbs, breaking formation and running around excitedly the way Mercenary had expected from the beginning. The leader, however, stood fast, addressing P'hargat in muffled squeaky tones from beneath his oversize helmet. P'hargat's eyes widened, and he rattled off a few more questions, which the ewok leader didn't seem to mind answering.

P'hargat turned back to his Lieutenant. "Evidently the reason we couldn't find any ewoks out in the jungle is that in this area a lot of them have moved in to the old abandoned complexes left after the battle of Endor. This group's got some sort of mystical admiration for us Imperials, as far as I can tell - hence the odd getup."

"Well if we're so revered, then why are we lying tressed up on the floor? This is not my idea of a warm welcome."

P'hargat got an odd look on his face. "She's apologetic about that part, sir."

"She?"

P'harget nodded towards the mini-trooper in front of them. "Her, sir. She says they had to sneak up on us because they weren't sure of our affiliation, or reaction. They'll let us go if we promise not to attack and leave somebody behind, because they only need one of us."

"What on this green humid moon do they need one of us for?"

"To, er, change the lights, sir. Some of them have gone out, and while they've found the spares, they can't reach the panels to change them. Their leader tried it last week and got himself a nasty injury. So they sent out a party to capture a human to do it for them, since we're the right height to use the stepladders."

Mercenary snorted in disbelief. "Capturing someone to do a task just because he's of the right height? That's ridiculous! I have never heard something so preposterous in my life!"

"Preposterous it might be, sir, but I think we can turn this to our advantage. They seem eager enough to embrace Imperial ways - maybe we could set up a sort of exchange. That way the Master-at-Arms can get all the ewoks he wants, and all we have to do is send someone down here every do often to change the lights. I bet Commander LaForge would give us all a medal. He always has to go through hoops to snag some ewoks for his parties, but here we have volunteers. They could even cater!"

Mercenary stared at his XO, disbelief etched across his features, images of ewoks in chef hats dancing through his head. "You're proposing that we set up an exchange program with a bunch of ewoks." P'harget nodded, seemingly unconcerned by the absurdity of it all. Mercenary scowled. The problem was, he couldn't see an inherent problem with the plan. It would fulfill their mission, and he too knew of the resources that could be saved if LaForge had easy access to the furry little blighters. He sighed. "Very well, P'harget. Let them know we agree."

"Yes sir. Sir, permission to volunteer to be the one who remains behind? I'm having a bit of trouble with the dialect here, and I'd like to see if I can stay and improve."

Mercenary shrugged, unable to shake the feeling that this was all a bad, absurd dream. "Granted, Second Lieutenant. Now get us out of here."

"With pleasure, sir." He turned back to the ewok (*Or was it ewokess?* wondered Mercenary) and made a few gestures and chirps. Their diminutive captors set to work immediately in a fuzzy enthusiastic rush. Mercenary just closed his eyes. The mission couldn't end soon enough.

Jansen sighed contentedly, sipping at his warm milk and allowing himself the luxury of putting his feet up on his desk. The mission had exceeded beyond his wildest dreams. Hornet had returned with not one, but five ewoks - one for each day of the work-week for Brigadier General Cornelius, whose back was already better. Evidently they stored quite comfortable under the bed and were already housebroken. Another shuttle was already on its way back to Endor's moon to pick up another load, and officers were clamoring to get assigned to the cushy light-changing duty offered there. LaForge was ecstatic, already drafting plans for ewok engineers, as they were ideally suited for working in cramped crawlspaces. Rumor had it that the Supreme Commander himself was harboring plans for an elite ewok infiltration unit. After all, who would suspect a teddy bear?

Jansen took another sip, glancing down into his milk as he did so. He froze, his lips still coated in a rich white mustache. There, floating vilely in his creamy white milk, was a hair. It was too long to belong to anyone with a regulation haircut, and looked too thick to be human ... there was only one possible source: an ewok. Jansen howled, his scream echoing down the corridor. It reached the ears of three young ewoks, who were bathing carfree in this luxurious new liquid they had found. It was white and rich and left the fur as smooth silk, and there were boxes upon boxes of the stuff...

Fin