

THE MORGAN CHRONICLES: HAAR VEMAN BUIR

Chapter One: Haar Echoy

The Search

31 ABY

One Month Before Command

“*No chance in the void you’d catch me doing admin work.*” CAM-9 chuckled dramatically, her current female officer’s face alight in glee. “That is a direct quote, is it not?”

I fixed her with my best approximation of Frown’s withering stare and said nothing, only causing Cam to laugh even harder and more genuinely, pointing at me and alternating clutching her chest and slapping her knee. Her empty metal tray she insisted on getting even though she didn’t eat rattled on the table when her leg bounced up high enough to hit the bottom.

We sat together in the corner of the ISDII *Warrior*’s mess hall. Cam’s raucousness drew glances from other pilots, but they all moved on quickly, eager to not spend too much time under the watchful gaze of the ladle-wielding mess droid, who violently insisted on a spotless hall and spent half its time throwing hateful glares at the partitioned bar section as if it violated the basic sanctity of his domain. Which, I suppose, wasn’t far off from the truth.

But Cam was right, as always. When we first started dealing with the Ishtari, I was not ready, and I had said that. Dreamed of the command, of course, but wasn’t ready. And now it was upon me, and I was suddenly unsure if I was prepared. At least I had a massive heads-up, no ‘sudden plunge into the deep end of the void’ like some describe.

Of course, when Dav told me he was offering it to me, I told him I needed some time and went to Cam to talk it through. And equally obviously, she already knew. I was hoping that in between fits of laughter she’d feel inclined to dispense actual advice.

My hopes were quickly granted. “Well, whatever you think, Marenta thinks you’re ready.”

An endorsement from the Big Comm (as she was affectionately known – her nicknames ranged from ‘WarMom’ to ‘Big Comm,’ and even to ‘Sus’ for unknown reasons) was welcome news, was confidence-building and reassuring. Because surely if I performed poorly some amount of blame could be deflected to her?

“Do you think I should do it?” I asked. I was not sure which answer I was hoping to hear.

“Oh, absolutely,” came the quick reply. “Few are more fit, even by purely objective metrics. Lead by example and all that.” Cam chuckled, a foreboding portent. “Who better to lead the squadron than its pilot with the worst record?”

I sighed, not without amusement. Her advice had pivoted straight back to ribbing. “We’ve been over this, Cam, it’s not possible, it’s not true. I’ve spent the most time in the sims since the Ishtari out of the whole squadron—”

– “marginally incorrect,” Cam interrupted –

“and you can see my progress and skill plainly.” I paused, confused. “How marginal?”

“Eight percent. Dav’s got eight percent more missions in that time frame.”

I pushed my chair backwards and stood up smiling. “Rectifiable margin, huh? I’ll start right now.”

Cam shook her head, so I didn’t begin to walk away. She sighed, brushed falling strands of hair out of her face and behind her ear, then said, “I’m glad you came and found me, because I was going to need to find you.” I didn’t move, and she nodded her head at my empty chair. I sat back down. The air around us almost tangibly heavied, something yet unspoken weighing upon it.

“I didn’t want to tell you this, because I love how you’ve come to peace with it. But at the same time, it doesn’t feel right to deprive you of the information and opportunity.”

I narrowed my gaze, not aggressively but clearly communicating that the run-up was not helpful.

She sighed again. “The Rebel pilot who led the attack on your family is en route to our prison facility on Ghenna.” She raised her hands, warding off potential comments that I was not prepared to make. “No advice, no advice from me. That’s on you. Just a piece of information I thought wrong to hold on to.”

“I thought they were all dead?” I breathed out the words, slightly rocking backwards from the shock of the announcement.

“Apparently not,” came the reply.

I dropped my head into my hands and sighed. So many things to think about, to decide, to choose. But I could at least start here.

“No. I appreciate the information, but I can’t see any good coming of it. We’ve been down that path, and we dealt with it. No sense in reopening the doors we close, right?”

Cam cast her eyes downward and nodded, golden waves falling back off her ear into place to frame her face. I floundered in place, unsure of what I had just said. Did I make a wrong decision? It seemed that Cam thought so.

I stood up suddenly, startling her. I started a sentence, and couldn’t form thoughts. Her reaction had shaken me more than I expected. I started another sentence, and stopped. All I could get out was “Alright. Sims.”

And so I went, walking away from the silence and the confusion and the pain.

#

An explosion rocked my cockpit. An X-Wing splintered and blossomed into orange fire, the shockwave radiating against my shields. An A-Wing flew into my sights, and a squeeze sent it the same way. I weaved through the dogfight, dodging Nebulon fire to the tune of deep, throbbing, Corellian vocals. My automaton wingmate’s voice cut through my music.

“Don’t forget to protect the *Paramount*,” he reminded me. His voice rang false, as if he weren’t experiencing the stress of the battle right next to me. Which, to be fair, he wasn’t.

I had indeed forgotten to protect the *Paramount*. It was a corvette, so it would surely be fine if one of its fighter escorts strayed a bit far from field and shot random ships not attacking it.

A status update flashed onto my screen, urgently advising me that “The *Paramount* has been destroyed.” “Primary mission objective failed,” a monotonous voice said.

The pod opened up at the angry mash of a button, and I jumped out, boiling with sudden frustration. I tore my helmet off, revealing a flushed face scrunched in sudden fury, hair matted with sweat, eyes blind with rage. I reeled backwards, and brought my helmet behind me, aimed for a wall. I threw my arm forward, but an iron grip caught it. I looked to my left in shock, and there stood Cam, her hand grasping my arm and giving no ground.

“I think that helmet is somewhat important to you, let’s not damage it in a moment of an absence of rationality.” She let my arm go, and I dropped it to my side. I stood there, panting. She looked at me deeply, penetratingly, and then her face began to shimmer. She grew taller, grew fuller; her hair shrunk into golden waves and curls, and her uniform morphed into a flight suit.

I found myself looking back at me.

I sighed. “Kriff, do I look that bad right now?” My face was still red, my mouth hung agape, still panting, and my hair stood at odd angles.

Cam chuckled. “Yup.”

“Okay, shithead. I didn’t need you to agree.”

“Never going to lie to you, Alex.”

“Then tell me the truth.” The true question lay bare.

She sighed, never looking away from me. “He knows something we don’t. We need to go to prison.”

#

Ghenna hung lifeless in space, a barren hunk of ice and rock in the Setii system. I woke up in the bunk of the captain's quarters of the YT-2000 we had requisitioned from the craft pool aboard the *Warrior*. Cam's voice must have been what awakened me, as I realized halfway through a sentence that his now-male voice was talking over the ship's interior comm system.

"... approaching Hinnon, the satellite city. That's our first stop. The Complex comes next."

I groggily arose, wiping my eyes with the palms of my hands and yawning wide. I looked around for the non-uniform clothes I had brought along, a smooth blend of military and civilian in dark colors. They were not on the ground where I had left them, and neither were the uniform or flight suit I also brought.

Cam's voice flickered back alive over the intercom. "Your clothes are hanging in the closet by the fresher. Wear the dress uniform for the visit, or at least this part."

I rolled my eyes. Cam either knew me too well, or was creepily spying on me with some unknown camera while I slept. Or perhaps both.

I walked to the closet and pulled out the undergarments and the dress uniform, admiring the medals pinned there, the precision stitching, and all that could soon be changing on it. I slid it on, straightening the rank insignia, and walked into the cockpit just in time to hear Hinnon hail us.

"Unidentified YT-2000, this is Hinnon flight control tower. Please confirm ship registration ID and purpose of visit."

Cam cleared his throat obnoxiously, earning a questioning side eye from me, and toggled the comms on, meeting my glance with a slight smile forming. "I copy, Hinnon flight control tower." His smile grew large and unmistakable. "This is the YT-2000 *Homeward Bound*, authentication code 2.1.12.1.9.14. We are on your schedule, on official and registered Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet business."

"Copy that, *Homeward Bound*. I see you on my docket here. Please stand by for instructions."

Cam flipped the switch to mute, and his smile grew into a chuckle. "Just like old times, huh?"

I fixed him with an amused and fake-disappointed look. "Hopefully not just like them."

Cam rolled his eyes. "You don't appreciate my humor enough."

The flight officer interjected before I could retort further.

"*Homeward Bound*, you are cleared for landing in Bay Three. Welcome to Hinnon."

#

The inside of the orbiting city was more spectacular than I would have guessed. The gleaming halls, plush carpets, and soft lights emitted by floating droids were not what I had expected as a first and last stop for raw materials mined by prisoners on the surface below.

We were escorted by security officers and a protocol droid through the domed halls towards whatever constituted the government area of the city. The people we passed began to more frequently have uniforms on, or bearing some evidence of wealth or power.

The protocol escort, whose name I had already forgotten but Cam certainly had not, finally stopped. "Governor Paskir's office is behind these doors. He is ready to see you!"

Cam nodded in thanks, her now-feminine form inclining her head in thanks. "Thank you, BA-1A." I rolled my eyes internally. Of course she remembered.

"It's my pleasure, madam and sir." The droid gestured, and the doors opened. The security and the droid stayed outside as we stepped through into a large antechamber.

The doors slid silently to a shut behind us as we stared into the room. Fountains dotted the massive indoor garden, lusciously overflowing with greenery, light gravel paths crossing from bench to bench, cutting between hedges, trees, and garden beds. Artificial sunlight beamed from a roof so high it was hidden behind the convincing glow of light.

The soft crunch of footsteps heralded the arrival of Governor Paskir. He came into sight and smiled, his stunningly white teeth splitting his dark face, his robes a regal purple and gold. His thin frame

was visible even under his no-doubt burdensome clothes, but he walked elegantly, gracefully pacing himself.

“Welcome to Hinnon, Captain Morgan!” He saw Cam, who was wearing a similar uniform to me. “And who might you be, madam?” He stopped in front of us.

“Commander Cam, Governor. Thank you for having us.”

I raised an eyebrow, unnoticed by Paskir but almost certainly noticed by Cam. *Commander, huh.*

“My honor indeed to be visited by representatives of the Fleet. It’s been a while since we had company like yourselves. I mostly only get administrative investigators now, making sure I run a clean station.” He chuckled and winked.

I politely reciprocated his laugh. “Thank you for your hospitality, Governor, and I’ll reassure you that we’re not here for any investigating. We merely seek a favor.”

“Of course,” he replied, his smile shrinking slightly. “Anything for the Emperor’s Hammer.”

Cam stepped in, probably to avoid me saying anything stupid or untactful. “There is a prisoner we’d like to see.”

Paskir looked confused. “That is all?”

“Well,” she continued politically, “we’d also love a tour. We use so many of your various nano-technologies and don’t come to visit enough.”

Paskir beamed, his face crinkling from the sudden reversal. “I’d be honored, Commander, to do so myself.” He held his arm outstretched, an invitation for Cam. She accepted, and Paskir led her forwards, towards the garden. “My shuttle is this way.”

Cam looked back over her shoulder, grinned silently, and raised her eyebrows. *Jealous?* she mouthed at me.

I shook my head, grimaced, and fell in line behind them.

#

As much as I wanted to despise it, Hinnon definitely impressed. I had imagined it as a dingy, decrepit, and infested den, processing their intricate technologies in the slummiest of areas. Instead, everything was polished to perfection, with no hint it was a staged facade. Healthy workers operated machinery in bright rooms, residential quarters outmatched anything on Tusorix, and common areas meticulously clean yet still inviting. The interior of the station was somewhat open, allowing for speeders or slightly larger craft to fly about. It reminded me of the holos Balain had shown me of Sundari, but more tightly packed and cylindrical.

I silently marveled as we passed through the city, Paskir enthusiastically explaining the sights and stories to Cam in the front seat of the speeder next to the droid driver. I sat quietly in the back of the speeder, wondering if he even knew she was a droid.

We eventually made it through the shining city to where Paskir’s personal method of descending to the surface was kept, a small spacecraft with a designated driver on duty. We all debarked from the speeder, but Paskir did not walk with us towards the craft.

Cam turned and asked, seemingly confused, “Are you not coming with us?”

He shifted on his feet, looking uncomfortable. “I must leave you here,” he said, holding a datapad the droid driver had just passed him, his tone full of regret and apologies. “There is a meeting I must attend that just came to my attention. I hope you find what you are looking for, and thank you for indulging me on my tour, Commander and Captain.”

“Thank you,” Cam replied, “for your hospitality. I’m certain our leadership will be glad to hear how well you are doing here at Hinnon.”

Paskir nodded his thanks, and climbed back into the speeder, rocketing off the way we had come. I immediately turned to Cam, already smiling. “Commander Cam, is it now? That’s news to me.”

She chuckled, shrugging and turning to the spacecraft. “Field promotion, I suppose. Drastic times call for drastic measures.”

I rolled my eyes and followed her up the extended ramp into the blue-painted craft. The driver, assumedly already educated as to our destination, entered the cockpit, and we were off to the surface.

#

The light layer of powder snow on the prison's main landing pad shot outwards from the force of the shuttle's repulsorlifts, spraying the unguarded entry door against a hill that led into an underground complex. The shuttle settled in smoothly as Cam and I stepped down the ramp extended from the rear. The cold was mercilessly shocking, but the walk was swiftly over. The doors opened as we approached, revealing guards in thick gray and green clothing, blasters in holsters and batons in hand. They flanked an obviously high-ranking official, self-assured, confident, and well-fed.

"Welcome to the Complex," he said as the doors slid shut behind us. "I am Warden Delfa. I understand you are delegates from the Grand Admiral?" He turned and began to walk down the dim hallway, no longer illuminated by the starkly bright outside.

Cam looked at me with a pointed expression, clearly indicating that it was she who should do the talking once again. "I am Commander Cam, and this is Captain Morgan. In answer to your question, more or less," she said, "but we also have our own more personal mission."

Her comment earned a backwards smile from the warden. "Who is it you seek?"

"He's a relatively recent addition to your institution, Warden. Mavol Vobil, a New Republic pilot."

"Ah, I know the one," the Warden nodded. "Could I interest you both in refreshments before we get to business?"

I cut in because I knew exactly what Cam would say. "No, thank you, Warden, I'm afraid we are slightly pressed for time."

Cam interjected, glaring sideways at me the whole time. "But, Warden, we would love to hear more about the Complex while we walk."

"Of course," he replied, undaunted, and began his no-doubt rehearsed speech.

#

The Complex was indeed, as Delfa had described it, efficient, at least certainly in the way of energy-efficient illumination: wall-embedded lights gave off just enough light to be able to see, but nothing more than that. Cold gray hallways intersected in mesmerizing patterns, open blast doors at each and every one patiently lying in wait for the palming of a lockdown button. Descending a level, the walls became lined with cell doors and patrolled by more guards, and, we were told, descending further the industrial areas of the Complex began to dominate, mines where precious materials were extracted for Hinnon's use and export.

We stopped our tour outside a door on the third level down. The Warden turned to us. "This is where Vobil is. Do you need guards with you in there?"

Cam chuckled. "No sir, I think we're more than capable of defending ourselves if something goes wrong."

Delfa nodded. "Even so, guards will be outside the door. Call them if you need anything." He stepped back from the door and we took his place. "Best of luck in there," he said. One of the guards hit a button on a panel beside the door, and it slid upwards. Cam and I stepped into the red-lit room, and there sat the pilot.

Chapter Two: Haar Aru'e

The Enemy

The door slammed downwards behind us with a loud bang, and a locking mechanism inside shifted. The pilot, a human male, much older than myself, looked up. For being in the prison for only a few days, his condition seemed rough. His hair stuck out at odd angles, his face was grimy, and his neon green jumpsuit appeared tattered and torn. He looked at Cam first, and then his eyes flicked to me. A cynical smile cracked his dirty face, a fatigued sigh escaping from in between unclean teeth.

"Of course. Of course, of course, of course," he said. His voice was raspy, sounding clogged and distorted. Cam and I said nothing, standing still and silent. He sighed again, and his shoulders dropped, his head looking down. "You look a little older than I remember."

The rage and tension I thought I had buried deep roiled upwards uncontrollably and suddenly. I took a step forward, fists balled tight. "That's because it's been seven years since you saw me in a mission briefing. As a target!" I grated out through a clenched jaw.

The pilot didn't flinch, and Cam put a calming hand on my shoulder. My body seemed to sag a little bit, and I relaxed my fists.

The pilot looked up again. "Come for revenge, Morgan?"

I smirked. "Six months ago, I would have asked the Warden for a torture session. Now I just want information."

"In a minute." He held up his hands placatingly. "Have you seen the place now? It's wild, isn't it."

I was dumbfounded. He almost seemed to be trying to use the attack as a shared bonding experience, clearly not understanding something fundamental about it that would certainly separate us two over it. "Yes, I saw it," I said haltingly. "I've been there. How did you? Everyone seems to be under quite the persuasive impression that you were dead."

"Missing in action, you mean. We were all hidden, taken off the radar for more... discrete missions. Your mission was a great opportunity for us to disappear. It's a lot easier to be a special operative if you don't exist anymore."

"How did you end up here?" I was still slightly dizzy.

The pilot nodded. "How, indeed." He shifted in his seat, as if he were settling in for a story. "We – I mean the New Republic – had heard whispers. Stories, warnings, threats of a force brewing in the Unknown Regions. An Imperial threat, larger than the warlords we were used to, amassing and gathering untold strength and unknown horrors. I was transferred, by whose authority I still don't know, and the Princess told me what I needed to do. And, it turns out, I found ya. Or, rather, you found me. I hope she finds out that she was right all along."

"You were captured?"

"I stumbled upon a patrol. I was outnumbered. Spent a couple months floating from prison to prison, and now I'm here."

I crossed my arms. The conversation was leading nowhere, I didn't even understand half of what I was hearing. 'Princess?' I'd think the man was a raving lunatic if his speaking wasn't so measured. "Finish the story. Why am I here? How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't for sure. But we knew you weren't dead. We were told you were offworld. Chandrila? Something like that." He shrugged.

"Did you know that my wife and infant daughter were there?" I bit out.

He sighed and looked down. "We've all done terrible things, Morgan. It doesn't mean they sit well on our souls."

I repeated my question he had dodged. "How did you know I was here? With the Emperor's Hammer?"

"We knew the Imp who ran things at the Morgan place had some ties to some large remnants, we just couldn't figure out which. So when I was captured by a large remnant, I guessed that you'd be here. I made sure in my file there was something about that mission, and I knew it would be found by someone."

I glanced at Cam, now understanding how she knew to come. The pilot continued. "Morgan, I'm sorry about your family. It was not our intention to —"

My patience was worn too thin. "Repentance doesn't forgive you in my eyes, you scum. You best hope to not find yourself at the gate of an after-life right now is to tell me what I'm here to learn."

Cam had stood still and silent for the entirety of the meeting, but shifted on her feet now. I braced myself, anticipating.

He looked me in the eyes for the first time. "I want to make amends. Or at least as much as I can. We've all done horrific things, and I have a chance to heal part of a wound that I caused."

He paused, catching his labored breath. "You're not the only one who survived the mission. It was too closely tied with our own disappearance, so we didn't let anyone investigate further. Nobody besides us knew you or he still lived."

"Who." It was not a question.

"The family friend, the tutor."

I was stunned. It was like I had been punched by a gundark in the chest the way my breath escaped me.

The pilot continued.

"Balain, right?"

#

Of all the names, of all the people to survive, that was the least anticipated. I thought the reason they had presumed me dead was because they confused my body with Balain's, but it turned out neither of us were dead. The Rebels must have been exceptionally worried about their new death-cheating operators to not close either of those two loopholes.

I was shepherded numbly back to the ship by Cam, my mind a screaming cacophony of thoughts, desires, and confusion. I barely heard the pilot telling us where he thought Balain was. I barely heard the Warden saying his farewells. I barely noticed Cam walking me back to the shuttle, and I barely felt our pilot lift it off from the pad. It was funny how much these types of things seemed to affect me, shake me out of my ability to even cognitantly function.

I still hadn't found myself by the time we got back to Hinnon to exchange the shuttle for the *Homeward Bound*. Paskir must have still been occupied in his sudden meeting, as we went directly to the hangar and took the *Homeward* out, and drifted off of the landing pad. She took us far out enough, placed her open palm on the navcomp port for a brief moment, and then pulled the hyperspace lever.

I think it was that spiral of the infinite that brought my thoughts back into my brain, brought myself back into my body. I think that simultaneous familiarity and impossibility of familiarity of the beautiful cosmos reconnected my broken internal pieces and patched me back into operation. Flying seemed to heal whatever was wrong with my brain.

Cam seemed to sense that I was back. "He's on Bakura. Or that's at least what Vobil thought. They had been keeping tabs on him, but did not think him a big enough threat to eliminate. More useful this way."

I chuckled mirthlessly. "And to think I've been so close to him this whole time." I sighed. "That's a long way from Naboo, how do you think he got there?"

Cam paused. "Probably by a spaceship, that's my bet."

I conjured my most disapproving look I could and fixed it on the side of her face. She intentionally looked straight ahead, not smiling or turning. I looked away, slumped back into my chair. "I feel exhausted."

"You know, Morgan, my humor is very highly developed for a droid. You should appreciate it more." She laughed, finally breaking the stoic face. "We'll be there in 10 hours. Go take a nap."

"You gonna get us there safely?"

"That's my plan."

"Wake me thirty minutes before we get there."

She laughed again. "That's no nap, that's a hibernation!"
I chuckled too. "It's what I need."

#

My dreams were full of forgotten memories, stitched together in nonsensical patterns. Practice missions I was coached through by Balain blended into speeder races over beaches and lakes, which I was suddenly swimming in as a child, my parents lounging on fancy floatation contraptions with attached sunshades. And then it was me and Alexis on the chairs, and a covered bassinet in between. Somehow, even in my dream, my heart began to ache.

The human brain can do some wonderful things. These were memories I didn't know I remembered, recollections suppressed perhaps on purpose, buried by time and trauma. But they resurfaced in my dreams where I couldn't fight them away, when I was the most vulnerable.

She smiled at me, and my dreamself's defenses were shattered. It was beautiful to be able to see her again, even if it was a trick of the brain. But was the beauty any less real?

My dreamself smiled back, and suddenly I wasn't in my body. I was above, and out, looking down on us both, but I could still see her voice say "Alexandre."

"Alex."

"Alex."

"Alex."

"Alex."

I was shaken awake.

Groggily, I sat up. "What do you want?"

Cam frowned. "You to get your ass awake. We're here."

#

Halfway through the descent down the atmosphere, when the ship was shaking the most and the cockpit viewport was engulfed by the fire of reentry, I figured out what was bugging my still half-asleep brain.

"I thought I told you to wake me up thirty minutes before we got here."

A still-female Cam looked at me and nodded. "I tried."

"You tried?" I was puzzled.

"I shook you for about ten minutes before you woke up."

"So you were still late even if I woke up when you came in."

She pivoted in the pilot's seat to face me fully, a half-smile only partly disguising her worried eyes. "You know, you're really focusing on the wrong things here, Alex."

I smiled too, keeping up the charade of an argument. "I don't want to debate my sleep habits with a robot who doesn't even recharge."

Cam was saved from having to come up with a retort (which she almost certainly already had hundreds prepared for every possible course of conversation) by Bakura control.

A fatigued man's voice filled the cockpit. "Identify yourself, incoming vessel."

"*Homeward Bound*, code 2.1.12.1.9.14," she replied. Clearly, her patience and manners were expended on Hinnon.

The reply was equally as brief.

"Salis D'aar City, Pad 14."

"Roger."

#

It was a dump, in both senses of it. It was a dingy port in a dingy part of town, and was also situated right next to what seemed to be an unsanctioned community dump. Cam and I stepped down the ramp into the

surprisingly clear air for the area and moved to the exit of the docking bay across the packed dirt ground, compressed by millions of ships landing over the certainly countless years.

We dropped off credits at the unmanned kiosk at the front, above which a large sign dictated in bold letters that no droids were allowed without proper documentation and paperwork.

“So,” I asked Cam, “what’s that about?”

Her blue eyes briefly blinked twice, assumedly accessing the absurd wealth of knowledge she carried. “Droid uprising,” she said, “several of them. Several uprisings, I mean, not several droids.”

“Yeah, that’ll do it.” We continued walking out the docking bay and turned into the road. Shops lined the sides, small plain buildings with the occasional dark alley scattered between. Foot traffic was minimal where we were, but I could hear the raucousness of a more busy part of town nearby. We turned unanimously in that direction.

“Luckily, I don’t look too much like a droid,” she continued. “And I won’t trip any scanners. I’m special.”

I smirked. “Are ya now. Let’s not get an inflated head over here, tinny.”

Cam glared, her furrowed brow barely hiding a smile. “I’m not made of tin, Morgan. I really am special.”

The road we were walking down widened into something of a marketspace. Hasty pop-up storefronts lined the sides, the proprietors loudly hawking their wares or services, smells wafting from the stalls attracting hungry pedestrians. Cries advertising food and local crafts reverberated off of the now-tall walls, amplifying the sound even greater than it was. Cam and I pushed our way through the exotic crowd, brushing past aliens of types even I had never seen before. The clothing ran the gamut, ranging from fully concealing to barely threads. I was suddenly glad I wasn’t wearing my dress uniform – not only would I be absurdly out of place in the marginally above the poverty line crowd, but I would probably not still be in possession of all the shiny bits on my chest.

We wove our way through the tangle of people side by side, neither with a faint clue of where to go or what we were looking for.

“Mystery droid then, huh?” I laughed.

“What?” Cam couldn’t hear me over the noise.

In the crowd, surrounded by all the organisms and droids, there was a lot of accidental bodily contact – but this was definitely intentional. It was a forceful tap on the shoulder, not an inadvertent bump. The tapper brushed past me, and walked onward, past us, quickly and beginning to pull away. Their cloak’s hood was pulled high, the billowing back disguising shape and figure. I nudged Cam and, without conversation or solid reason, we both began to follow before they were lost to the crowd.

#

The crowd in the streets eventually began to thin, but the cloaked figure’s determined walking pace did not relent. We wound our way through block after block of gradually less-frequent stalls, the buildings growing shorter and closer together – alleys were now the irregularity. Shouldering corners with very little leeway, they forged ever onwards, never tossing a glance back.

The cloaked figure turned another corner. We had kept the distance between us to about ten meters, not wanting to attract attention from the crowd with our obvious following act. We shouldered the corner a few seconds behind the figure, but when we came around we were only faced with an empty street. The light was suddenly dimmed, the air heavier and muggier. No pedestrians were in sight, and the streetlamps flickered irregularly, casting the road in flickering, deep, shadows.

I turned to Cam and shrugged. She winked at me, mouthing ‘*watch this*’ silently. Her blue eyes flickered to a red-orange, and she squinted down the street and slightly to the left and right. She then silently smirked, and let one of her eyes return to their icy hue. ‘*That alley,*’ she whispered, pointing to a small crack between two buildings on the left. It was so obscured in shadows I might not have noticed it if I walked beside it.

We silently walked the twenty meters or so to the edge of the alley. My hand found a rest on my holstered blaster pistol, which I silently drew and readied, and Cam crept like a loth-cat, tense and ready to explode into action. But when we rounded the corner, my blaster leveled and Cam's hands up in some unfamiliar martial arts form, the figure was just standing there, five meters back from the entrance. Their hood was still up, and their hands were away from their body, which they began to lift towards their face. The hood was slowly pulled back, revealing their face - but I already knew who it was.

"It's been a while, Master Morgan," Balain said.

Chapter Three: Haar Veman Buir

The Real Father

Even though I knew it was coming, and my brain had begun to piece together the inevitable, it was still shocking. I knew he was still alive, but to actually see him standing in front of me, with his smile unchanged over the years, still drove the breath out of my lungs a bit.

“Lose your tongue since I saw you last, Morgan?” he chuckled heartily.

He looked older than I would have thought. His previously-shaven face was clean, but it was creased and darker. His hair had completely grayed out of his previous color, and he seemed a bit thinner. But he still carried himself regally, posture unflagging and shoulders still broad.

It seemed that I had lost my tongue. My reliable arsenal of quick witticisms I had honed my fast verbal draw with failed me, and so I stood and stared, mouth agape. My brain eventually convinced my legs to take a few steps towards him, covering the meters and holding my arms wide. He embraced me back with a gentle yet firm thump on the back. His physical strength seemed to have not waned in his growing age.

I stepped back when I felt his arms loosen their grip, and continued my staring, which was now accompanied by semi-disbelieving head shakes and small noises that conveyed nothing but astonishment and confusion.

“Surprised?” he asked.

I rasped out a laugh. “A bit.”

“Well, she’s not surprised.” He pointed to Cam, returning the laugh.

“She always knows everything,” I chuckled, but didn’t take my eyes off Balain. It felt like if I stopped looking for even a second, he would disappear and the dream I was in would lift its convincing veil. I was even afraid to blink.

“She’s a clever one,” he winked. “Let me know you were coming and everything.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t inflate her ego any more than it already is. Two days ago she was more or less unranked, and now it’s apparently Commander Cam.”

Balain slipped past us and peered down both ways of the alley. “Let’s walk and talk, kids. Don’t want to stay in one place too long.” He began to walk the way we had come, his pace slower than when he had been avoiding our pursuit.

#

We followed our previously-trodden path for a moment, but turned off of the main street before we re-entered the marketplace. The buildings became obviously residential, shuttered and barred windows letting light slip through the cracks and beam into the road below. Those vast minority of those left open gave insights and glimpses into the apartments or homes, the evening lives of the Bakurans.

Balain wore his hood up, concealing his face again. He explained as we walked.

“I’m something of a petty criminal here, you see. Steal my food and wares to get by. I don’t want the marketplace vendors seeing my face, because I’ve paid them all a visit at some point, I’m sure.”

I walked behind him, next to Cam. “Did you not have some money in accounts somewhere?” I asked.

“It’s been seven years, Morgan. That ran out a while back, even though there was a lot. Staying off the New Republic’s radar was hard enough even when they think you’re dead. I’ve been diligently protecting myself.”

I grimaced and shot a look at Cam. “Well, it turns out that they didn’t think you were dead. That’s how Cam and I found you.”

He frowned. “The Rebels knew I was here? I must not have done as good of a job as I had thought.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” I said, “they knew I was alive too. Apparently we weren’t worth it, which is quite the hit to my self-esteem.”

The joke got another laugh out of Balain. “So they knew both of us, and were keeping track of me? Who told you how to find me?”

“One of the pilots we captured. This is where he last heard you were. Luckily you move slow, I suppose.”

“And then,” he said, pointing at Cam over his shoulder, “your friend here told me you were coming.”

I frowned. “I heard you say that earlier. What do you mean?”

Cam stayed quiet, so he responded. “*Two one twelve one nine fourteen* mean anything to you?”

I thought hard for a moment, and then shook my head in disbelief. “That’s just ridiculous. Who taps into incoming flight calls on the regular?”

Cam smirked, breaking her silence. “A paranoid man, that’s who,” she said.

Balain shot a look back at her, and then at me, before looking forward and turning onto another side street. “Your girl uses strong words, but she’s not wrong.”

“Not my girl,” I said. “Not anyone’s anything.”

“What’s your story, then?” he asked. “Fellow pilot?”

Cam smirked. “Something of the sort. I flit between occupations.”

“She’s not a pilot,” I chuckled. “She’s a droid.”

“Well,” Balain said, scratching his head underneath his hood, “that’s the fattest load of bantha fodder I’ve ever heard. Look at her! A *droid*? Hah!”

Cam looked at me, her eyebrows raised. I knew immediately what she was asking, and I nodded, already internally amused by what I knew Balain’s reaction would be. With no fluid transition, no gradual shift, there were suddenly two Morgans behind Balain, with identical nonchalant clothes and slightly unkempt hair, walking in lockstep with arms swinging in rhythm. Cam tapped Balain on the shoulder. He looked back, and his eyes widened immediately. He stopped walking and turned around fully, his widened eyes shooting back and forth between the two of us rapidly.

“Well,” he shrugged and turned back around. “I stand corrected.”

#

The rest of the walk to Balain’s apartment, about half a kilometer, was a little more muted. The conditions of the buildings worsened, evidence of occasional debris fallen from cracked walls laying on the uneven sidewalk pavement and streetlamps at best barely bright enough to attract the crete-moths. Lights from the windows of apartments gradually dimmed and eventually all but disappeared, buildings looking more and more abandoned with each block.

Balain’s building was no exception to the trend. The hinged door hung crooked off its frame and squeaked a symphony when he eased it open. Stepping over a fallen beam that was hopefully not structurally relevant, we walked up the stairs.

“I’m on the third floor,” Balain said. “But don’t let the rest of this building fool you, I’m not slumming it too bad.”

I shot a glance at Cam, who had long since removed the Morgan disguise and reassumed one of her standard faces. “*I was fooled*,” I mouthed, my eyebrows raised in amusement.

We paused outside his door, which was barely in better condition than the one on the building’s exterior. Balain pulled out a metal rectangle from a pocket in his cloak, a makeshift keycard of sorts. “Are you ready?” he asked, shooting a smirk backwards.

“Did you always have this secret flair for the dramatic?” I chuckled.

He ignored me and pressed it against a slightly-faded part of the dark wood. With a muffled clunk and the sound of metal sliding, the door shuddered in its frame. Balain grabbed the doorknob and, instead of twisting and pushing, he drug sideways. The door slid into the wall without protest, revealing Balain’s unexpectedly non-humble abode.

The room immediately visible through the entrance was neither wooden nor ramshackle like the rest of the building would predict. Instead it was metal, shiny and shimmering, that laid on the walls,

behind the minimal furnishings and decorations. Shelves of physical books and datapads comprised the majority of the furniture, only a chair or two to occupy floorspace. No windows stood to provide natural light, but stark overhead lights shone so bright the shadows of the shelves and seats were precise and crisp.

"I'm the only tenant in this building anymore," Balain said, as if it explained everything.

Cam chuckled, her first time saying something in a while. "I do believe we found where all the money went."

"It wasn't too bad," Balain shrugged, "at least financially. Installation was a pain." A slight hint of a smirk disrupted the waves of wrinkles in his cheek.

I stared as we stepped over the threshold together. "Surely not," I said, shaking my head. It seemed too much for one person who sought to maintain what he seemed to think was a low profile.

"Fine," Balain said, letting his full smile out. "It's a joke, I didn't do this." He paused, exercising the dramatic flair again. "I wasn't the original occupant of this apartment. I... acquired it." He scratched his neck all around.

"Made such a good friend that they just up and left the place to you?" I prodded jokingly.

Cam chuckled and pointed to behind one of the bookshelves. "He probably made that *good friend* with the A280CFE blaster behind that bookshelf." She turned around the room, her eyes the reddish-orange color that belied internal intricacies. She pointed at another shelf on a different wall. "Or the E-11 behind that one."

Balain stared at her in slight disbelief. "I've seen a lot," he began to say, and shook his head before turning into the doorway into the next room and walking through it. From the other room we heard him chuckle under his breath, "*droid* my ass."

She looked at me and smirked. "I could keep going, you know."

I frowned. "I know, smartass. But you don't have to, we all get it."

She resumed a straight face and pointed to another, then another. "Some generic DL pistol behind that one, a sniper behind there..."

I walked away chuckling, following Balain and leaving her to her obnoxiousness. He stood at a counter in the other room, turned away from me facing a pair of burner tops. He was brushing something off the countertop and into a pot. My boots sounded against the metal floor, announcing my presence to him.

"So where did you find her?" he asked, his tone of voice low and quiet.

"It's a long story. Pirate fight, derelict ship, abandoned cargo. It was the most fun and action we had in months, being stuck out in the middle of nowhere."

"You know what she is?" he asked.

"Yeah, a droid." I didn't know the point of his question.

"A pretty special one, don't ya think?"

I frowned. "That's obvious, yeah. Unique and talented, and a great friend." I was confident that Cam could hear it all, despite our lower volumes.

Balain paused, still busying himself with the pot and a heater he pulled out of a cabinet. "More than a friend?"

I was taken aback, barely able to hold my voice low. "The fuck? A droid? You're insane, Bal. We don't like each other like that, we just get along well!"

He held his hands up, still holding the pot, whose contents threatened to leak out. "Just asking, Morgan. Man's gonna be curious."

I glared at him, but not without humor. "Sounds like *you* need some companionship if that's all you can think about."

"She can... morph into anything and anyone?" It was a question, but anyone else would have said it as a statement that stood on its own with its implications. The air in the room almost tangibly grew heavier.

"Yes."

He got even quieter. "Has she... you know?"

I looked down at my hands resting on the countertop. “No. She wouldn’t dare, she knows what it would do to me.”

“Has she seen her?”

“We went to the Estate. Pictures there, yeah.”

“You don’t have any?”

“I have nothing but a bracelet and the helmet.”

Balain beamed, his mood rebounding. “So you did find the helmet.”

“Still wear it,” I said, nodding. “New paint job here and there, and updated internals, but same helmet.”

“That’s kriffing amazing, Morgan. I’m so glad that the pod was apparently indestructible.”

“That’s how I found the EH, too. Arams left a message and a map in the pod.”

Balain sighed and rubbed his face. “You know it was his fault, right? If you went there, you must have known.”

“Yeah, I know. Quite a shock,” I said. The conversation was like a roller coaster of emotions, from light-hearted to traumatic on the flip of a chit.

Balain placed the pot on the heater and turned it on. He gestured back to the other room where Cam still was. “While this cooks, come and tell me about everything. I’ve missed too much and need to be caught up.”

We walked in together to the other room, where we found Cam halfway through disassembling and reassembling the A280 rifle next to a bookshelf shoved away from the wall. She looked up innocently, meeting our stares without changing expression.

Balain and I sighed in unison.

#

Seven years had passed between our last meeting and now, and while that was a fraction of both of our lives, it was perhaps the most impactful seven years. I went from mourning wanderer to militant joiner; Balain went from tutor to apparently-successful underbelly dweller.

We talked straight through the meal he had prepared, and for hours after it. He asked me questions about my seven years like it was a testimonial hearing and lives were on the line. I told him about my years-long odyssey from Naboo all the way out to the Unknown Regions in the dingy freighter. He asked about my battles, so I told him about the Ishtari attack on Tusorix, about the random sorties against rag-tag pushover pirate groups and ex-Separatists, the deadly mission in the Ishtari tunnels, and the impending mobilization further into Ishtari territory.

He asked what type of TIE I flew, and if I liked it. I spoke highly of the TIE Avengers, and told him about my custom music system. I told him how much I loved having already flown Avengers in the sim pod at the Estate and how it definitely helped me become a better pilot. He asked about life aboard the Star Destroyers, about the leadership and history of the Emperor’s Hammer, about my visit back to Naboo (carefully, because the topic still held emotion for the both of us), about my career, from cadet to Executive Officer, from sub-lieutenant to captain.

I told him about Rho Squadron’s rise, our amassing skill and influence. I told him about the ISDII *Warrior* and my squadmates, about Dav and Adom and Marenta. We talked about how I had been quickly promoted from Flight Leader to Squadron Executive Officer, and the ranks that came with it all.

And then I told him about my opportunity. “Davalorn is stepping down,” I said, “and he thinks I’m ready.”

Balain nodded, his hands clasped together in thought. “Do *you* think you’re ready?” he asked.

I breathed a light chuckle. “I’ve certainly always thought about it, but now that it’s time, it seems a bit daunting.”

“You certainly seem proud of your squadron, and it would appear to me like a natural succession of events.”

“I just don’t know if I’m truly ready to lead a whole squadron. There’s a lot of administrative duties, a lot of responsibility that I’m not an expert on.”

Balain nodded again. “This might sound cliché, but I think that the best person for the job might be someone who isn’t quite ready for the job. You’ll have something to live up to, something to work to – and that will keep you honest and diligent.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I sighed. “It’s certainly exciting, the idea of leading forward a squadron like Rho.”

“Onward to bigger and better things,” he said, standing up and stretching, his shirt lifting slightly to hint at an unnaturally fit torso for a man of his age. “On a different topic, do you have food on your ship?”

I laughed, and saw Cam smile in her corner of the room. She had stayed quiet the whole conversation. “Nothing besides nutrient rations, I’m afraid,” I said, standing up with him. “I’m certain whatever you have here would be a lot better.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll cook something else up, it’s time for another meal. Y’all ever had jedirf?”

“Never even heard of it.”

“It’s a local delicacy. Sort of a sweet bread, with some native fruits here and there.”

“Let’s hope it’s better than rehydrated protein loaves,” I smirked.

“I’ll guarantee it,” he chuckled, and walked into the kitchen.

#

We stayed at Balain’s bunker (it couldn’t in good faith be called an apartment) for the entire next day, relaxing, catching up, and joking around. He told me stories of his adventures, of how he escaped (it turns out that he also was not at the Estate that day), his travels, and his slightly less-than-legal escapades.

But eventually we exhausted our tales. It would seem impossible to run out of things to say to someone you hadn’t seen in seven years, but we managed somehow. The silences between stories became more and more obvious, the time more occupied by only the sounds of the atmosphere regulation systems.

The next morning was our last for that trip. My brief leave was near-spent, and the fees for the spaceport pad were mounting. Balain came out of the kitchen with our breakfast and a bag I hadn’t seen before. It was a dark brown color, and was clasped closed with a bronze hook. Placing the plate of some planetary specialty new to me, he sat down in his own chair and unclasped the bag, glancing up at me as he did so.

“A parting gift, Morgan.” He pushed other objects aside in the bag and pulled out a holoemitter. It was dinged and lightly stained with age, a dark dirt barely visible in the machined seams and the emitting apparatus. He held it and reached his hand out to me. “You said you had none, and that didn’t sit right with me. It’s the only one I’ve got, but there’s no debate as to who should have it.”

I took it from him and turned it rightside-up. Brushing whatever grime I could out of the emitter, I keyed the side button to show the photo. The wavering blue image was cast upward, larger than I expected. I had to hold my arm farther out to see the whole photograph simultaneously.

When my brain caught up with my eyes, it felt as if my heart dropped a little bit of itself down into my stomach.

A blue holographic Alexis held a blue holographic Ava right in front of me. They were posing inside an office in the Estate, and each wore a smile as wide as their own faces.

No words came for a long while. I wasn’t sure how long I stared at the photo, rotating through emotions like an internal roulette wheel.

When I eventually found my voice again, it came as a breathy chuckle. The wheel had settled on a bittersweet.

“I remember that day,” I said quietly, the slightest of smiles creasing the sides of my cheeks. “It took an hour to get Ava to smile like that.”

Balain smiled at me and nodded. “What did we have to do? Did you stand behind the photographer with a toy?”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t enough for her.” My smile grew, but didn’t quite touch my eyes. “I had to make a complete fool of myself first. She had me dancing in circles behind the poor man. He probably thought I was unwell.”

“She was so hard to please, wasn’t she.”

“She demanded the best of us, that’s for sure.”

We sat in silence then, unsure of how to proceed. Eventually I collapsed the image and pocketed the emitter.

“Thank you,” I said. “I would say you don’t know how much it means, but I think you do.”

He nodded, slightly and silently.

Cam stood up from her chair in the corner. “The spaceport just messaged, Alex. Our credits we gave them are spent up, and we’ve got one hour to clear the pad.”

I looked from her to Balain, who smiled at me. “Go on, Morgan. You don’t want to have your ship impounded and be unable to return to your squadron.”

“My squadron, huh?” I laughed. “I could get used to the sound of that.”

Cam walked to the door and pressed a button next to it. The bolts through the door retracted, magnetic and mechanical locks alike disengaging with clicks and metallic rings. The door swung open, and Cam stepped through.

I walked to the threshold, and turned around. Balain stood there, the breakfasts now bagged. He walked forward and handed them to me, and I passed them on to Cam.

He looked long at me, as if he were studying my face.

“Ret’urcye mhi, Morgan.”

I stared at him blankly, but not without humor. “You know damn kriffing well I don’t understand Mando’a, Balain. Never understood why you speak it, either.”

He cracked a smile, rearranging his increasing wrinkles. “Perhaps we’ll meet again. That’s what it means.”

“There is no *perhaps* about it, Balain. I’ll be back.”

He nodded, and I stepped backwards, over the threshold of his bunker and into the hallway. With a twinge of a smile and slightly glistening eyes, he reached and gently pressed the button. The machinery in the door clanked and reverberated, and the dual-sided door edged closed. With a final *schunk* of a sliding bolt, his bunker was once more disguised in the slums.

#

Majyce
Epilogue
Day One of Command

I sat at my desk in my new office. My first order of business was to change the artwork that stood as the only decorations in the room. Mounted on the walls now lay photos of my ship, the *Skira Naasad*, a group squadron holo that was somehow already out of date, an image of rolling Naboo plains, and an in-progress Rho patch design that he had strong-armed Davalorn to facetiously sign. The picture of Alexis and Ava lay in the top drawer of the desk, but perhaps one day it would make it to the wall.

My desk lay almost against one wall. The plaque on the front read “Rho Squadron Commander Morgan.” In the center of the large desk was an embedded datapad.

But in front of that sat my helmet. I saw my own reflection staring back at me in the reflective eye-pieces, distorted and morphed. The journeys and adventures it had accompanied me on were too numerous to begin to count, starting when I was just fifteen. Each successively new paint job covered the last, but the history was there, the experiences and fights all there.

Black and blue paints were to the side of the helmet, with brushes and other tools beside those. I had asked the uniform staff to not update my helmet for the promotion, saying that I would take care of it.

I sat there, staring at the gray and black design that was on it. Two gray TIE Corps logos adorned the forehead, centered around the Executive Officer symbol on the middle crest. Stylized gray tears ran from the corner of the eyes to the rebreather pipe holes, beside which stood Rho Squadron patches.

Opening up the paints, I began to cover parts of the design, painting over one of the Corps crests and the now-commander middle crest pattern. Slowly, I covered the gray tears with blue, and likewise recolored the other Corps logo. I took blue paint and dotted it around the eyes of the helmet. The pattern looked good, so I put it for the top of the helmet too.

And then I paused. I closed my eyes and pictured the House of Morgan crest in my mind. It had been years upon years since I saw it last, but it stood as starkly in my eyes as if it were embossed on the desk in front of me. In the place of the covered Corps logo, I slowly, meticulously, carefully painted the thin thirteen-sided shape with the traditional Naboo iconography inside. Over that lay a Futhark letter ‘*m.*’

I put down the brush and closed the paints, pushing them to the side of the desk. The helmet stared back at me, its new matte blue highlights standing in contrast to the shiny black of the rest of it. But the repainting felt different this time. It felt as if a part of me that had been missing for years had come back, a part of me I knew was gone but couldn’t assign a direct name. No wounds were healed, but a wave of peace seemed to settle in. My ancestors flew with me in the Morgan crest, their culminating descendant carrying the House’s standard into battle.

Content, I sat back in my chair and exhaled, relaxing my arms to the metal armrests. The light jingle of a gold bracelet hitting the armrests was the only noise in the room.