

THE MORGAN CHRONICLES

Chapter One

31 ABY

Red lasers streaked past my cockpit, crimson light illuminating the dim interior. LC Adom Wietu's voice came a split second later.

"Rho Five, you've grown a tail, an A-Wing."

"Roger, Ten, I noticed. I'm busy, can you deal with it?"

"Copy, I'm engaging."

I watched on my radar as Wietu slid in behind my aggressor and then turned to my task. There was a X-Wing one klick ahead, trying to escape atmo and jump, taking with it valuable data. I was to intercept and destroy, with Wietu as backup in case things went sideways, as they just had. We weren't expecting a second to materialize out of the clouds, but Wietu would deal with it.

The X-Wing came into range. I held my breath, waiting for the perfect moment and maneuvering behind it. I pressed my thumbs down on the trigger. spurts of emerald green energy shot from my TIE Interceptor, speeding towards the X-Wing. My hesitation proved harmful, and my shots missed, passing through where the X-Wing had been moments before. The X-Wing began jinking and spinning, throwing itself into a series of complicated spirals and loops in an effort to deter me. I stayed with it, following its patterns, but I was always a moment too slow. Our trail of four fighters lit up, each shooting at the one in front. My staccato shots all missed by fractions of seconds, but they were getting closer.

"Five, I can't hit your tail, it's following you too tight. Break left and fly predictable for a moment and I'll vap it."

"Negative, Ten," I replied, not taking my eyes off of the X-Wing. "I'm close to getting him, I can't break off now! If I do, he'll escape."

"We have time, Five, break left!"

And then I figured it out. The X-Wing had a pattern: after each series of spins and loops, it slid a little bit to the left, dodging any shots that had been placed in anticipation of its emergence from the loop.

"Ten, I've got him. Try to scare my tail off, and watch this."

The X-Wing began another pattern, throwing the ship into taxing turns and loops, spiraling high and corkscrewing down. But this time I didn't follow tightly: I reverse throttle hopped, our chain of four fighters breaking, and pulled up, leveling off. The X-Wing was not where I had expected, however, and my heart skipped a beat. It was within arms reach of my dagger wings.

"Ah, blast it," I whispered.

"Five, break left, your tail is right behind you!"

"A TIE sandwich, eh?" I chuckled, humor in the face of doom, and squeezed the trigger. My viewport filled with blinding light, and then my TIE exploded and everything went dark.

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The words "SIMULATION OVER" on the screen accompanied the hiss of the simulation pod opening. I stepped out, pulling off my helmet. Feeling an odd combination of dejection and elation, I asked nobody in particular, "Did I get him?"

Another pod behind me hissed, and from inside, someone said, "Yes, yes you did, dammit." CM FamePlane stepped out of the pod, pulling off his helmet, all grins.

I beamed, satisfied I had shot him down. "You were the X-Wing? I should have known, with all those spins and loops!"

"Well, you hung with me. They must be teaching you well."

Wietu stepped out of his pod, helmet already off, looking unamused. "Not well enough to follow advice, eh? I have more flight experience, you should have trusted me." Then he cracked a smile. "Nice flying anyhow."

I shrugged, grinning sheepishly. "But I got him, didn't I?"

Another pod hissed open, and Davalorn stepped out, tugging off his helmet. "And I got you."

I laughed incredulously, throwing my arms above my head in disbelief. "The commander deigns to fly with us! Nice to see you down here, sir, and nice flying."

He smiled. "The same to you, Morgan. You three get cleaned up and report to my office at 1600. I want to talk about what happened. Nothing bad, just conversation, working out the team dynamic."

We all snapped to attention, saluted, and made to leave. "Wietu, can you stay back for a minute?"

He did, and Fame and I kept walking. I broke the silence first.

"In all honesty, I'm surprised I was able to keep up with you. You were pulling maneuvers I hadn't seen from anyone."

He laughed. "All it takes is logging hours in the sims, figuring out what can do what. And then remembering."

"It's more than that and you know it. I practically lived in a sim pod for years of my childhood, outscoring SkyStrike graduates every other day. You just have an innate skill that nobody else has."

He grinned sheepishly. "I appreciate it, but I still think you should spend some more time in the cockpit. How about this: run a combat sim tomorrow, as a benchmark of progress. During IS4, log hour after hour. After IS4, run the same sim and see the improvement."

I turned to him and shook his hand. "You've got a deal."

He solemnly returned the handshake.

"How did you know I was going to reverse throttle hop instead of flying right behind you that last time?" I asked.

He smiled. "I didn't know what you were going to do, I just knew you were going to do something. So I changed it up, hoping to give you a bit of a scare."

I stared at him. "A bit?"

He clapped me on my shoulder. "You're gonna have to walk the rest of the way yourself, I have a meeting with Marenta before ours with Dav."

I winced and laughed. "Good luck! Don't make eye contact, she'll stare into your soul!"

Fame chuckled, saluted casually, and walked off.

Four minutes later, I had to fill out my first incident report.

#

"Incident report number 5476aIR." The medical droid talked in a flat monotone, which somehow failed to disguise its disappointment in my conduct. It placed a datapad in front of me. I looked at it and sighed. Another long form.

This whole misconduct incident thing was indeed warranted, but not my fault in the least. Someone wearing an unfamiliar uniform had muttered something to me as I passed. I had stopped, and since he didn't care to repeat it to my face, I made sure he couldn't comfortably repeat anything for a couple of days. The punch even hurt my knuckles, but it didn't matter. His lackeys proved the age-old adage "safety in numbers," and I was shortly thereafter whisked away to the medical wing.

Nothing was going to make this datapad go away quicker than me filling it out, so I grabbed it and began. "Name?" *Alexandre Morgan*. "Rank?" *Commander*. "Position?" *SQXO, Rho 5*. "Call Sign?" *ossus*. And so on.

My facetious manner dissipated like smoke when the datapad asked me to relay the details of the incident. His comment had not been entirely indistinguishable, and I had caught a couple words. He had said something about my family.

I had no clue even how he knew about my family. My family's death at the hands of the Rebels is not a public fact. I've shared my past with only the closest of comrades, namely Wietu and Dav, and they certainly wouldn't spill that which was told in confidence.

In short, my parents were killed during a Rebel attack on a residential area on Naboo. The Morgan Estate, our massive mansion, was razed to the ground. The Rebels were targeting hiding Imperial officers, and callously killed my family in the process. That's why I became a pilot for the Empire, to combat the Rebel's fire with fire. We work to protect the innocents, to restore order and peace and justice in the galaxy, to save families from the terrorists.

A knock at the door shook me out of my reverie, and Davalorn walked in, looking exasperated.

"C'mon, Morgan, I let you out of my sight for two seconds and you punch a guy? You're an Executive Officer, not a street brawler!"

"Sir, he talked about my family."

Dav looked at my bruises, put his hands on his hips, and sighed. "I'm sorry. Had you told him?"

"Of course not."

He sighed again, this time deeper. "I understand your reaction, but it doesn't do many favors for Rho or the *Warrior*. With Imperial Storm coming up, we need everyone on their best behavior." He raised an eyebrow. "And that comes from example."

I looked down. "Yessir, I understand. I shouldn't have risen to the bait."

He clapped my shoulders. "They've put you on patrol duty for a standard month. That'll eat into time available for your participation in IS, but you'll manage."

"I'll make it up to you. I'm sorry, sir."

He smiled. "I know. Forget about the meeting today and heal up. And after IS, we'll talk about this more."

I smiled. "Alright." He threw a salute and walked out. I hurried through the rest of the form, took the small bacta patch the medical droid offered me, and walked back to my quarters.

Tomorrow, I'll do the sim, I vowed. Tomorrow, I will become a better pilot.

I sighed.

After patrol duty.

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Chapter Two

Thirty-One Days Later

“Attention, brave pilots of the *Warrior*. This is your commodore speaking.” Vice-Admiral Marenta’s voice came blaring through my helmet’s comm system. I winced and quickly reached for the volume control on a panel inside my TIE Interceptor’s cockpit.

“Blast, lady, you don’t have to yell so loud,” I grumbled, then shot a panicked look at the mute indicator. It was solid red, so my voice wasn’t transmitting. I sighed, glad I wasn’t going to be instructed to inspect the airlocks.

“Welcome to Zaadja. Silwar’s forces await us, including his flagship, the *Challenge*. Silwar is the only obstacle between us and the title of Imperial Storm 4 victors, so we need a resolute victory to be in the best position possible.” She paused for dramatic effect. “This is a simulation, yes, but fly like your lives are in balance. Do not fail me, pilots, and victory shall be ours.”

Her voice cut out and was replaced by Davalorn’s on the Rho frequency. “All flights, engage as normal. Fly well, Rho. Make each other proud to be here.” His voice then joined Marenta’s in silence, leaving me only with the muted scream of my engines. I cracked a smile at the briefness of his message, and began my pre-combat ritual.

I was a slightly superstitious pilot. This tendency pervaded much, to where in the mess hall I ate to which of the two pillows I slept with was on top. It also extended to flying. Not once did I hop in the cockpit and fly off to make the galaxy a safer place without performing my small ritual. I would sit down and strap in, tapping the bottom of the flight seat eight times, reminding me of my beginnings as Rho Eight. I’d brush my hands over the top of the interior of the cockpit, click my heels against the side of the pedals, and be off. Shortly before engagement, and strictly against Imperial regulations, the music would be turned on, piping through my helmet’s speakers. A bit of tinkering with the program allowed the music to automatically decrease its volume when the comms were activated, so, most of the time, it wasn’t a detriment to my battle awareness.

Today’s queue was not even a queue, just one song on repeat, the new “Rho Squadron Anthem,” a collaboration between myself and Dav. I slid the small disk into the jury-rigged input, exhaled, and let the rhythmic percussion carry me into the fray.

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My dagger wings sliced through the void, gliding with the soar of the melody, diving with the decrescendos, lasers blasting in sync with the percussion. X-Wing after X-Wing and TIE after TIE fell to my spurts of green energy. Ships danced together in intricate swirls, loops, and dives. To the casual observer, it would have seemed chaotic, a giant cloud of swarming starfighters, occasionally dotted by explosions and streaked by trigger-happy turbolaser gunners. To me, though, the order was occasionally obvious. This was music. Ships followed choreographed routines and exploded on musical queue, performing their maneuvers like dancers obedient to a cosmic will. But, of course, there was no cosmic will asserting itself over this battle. It was just a simulation.

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“Rho One, do you see that? Bearing .28, four clicks out, coming in slow.” Wietu’s voice dimmed the Anthem.

Dav replied instantly. “Copy, Ten. ID?” I hastily turned my music off. This seemed important enough to draw attention mid-dogfight, so perhaps it was important enough to listen to the conversation without interjecting fluctuations of blaring horns.

“Affirmative. Transmitting data feed now.”

I looked at my display, and my heart sank. Four of the five Challenge Commanders had decided to join the party late.

Dav recognized them too. "Legion, Xylo, Honsou, and Stryker." He paused for a moment, long enough for me to wonder if my comms shorted out. But then he continued, saying "Five, Seven, Nine, Ten, with me, open comms on frequency .420. All others continue."

I adjusted my comm system and sighed. *Well, I thought to myself, this will be a hell of a way to go. The five of us taking on four of the best of the Challenge. Thank Ronin this is a sim.*

Dav, Fame, Wietu, Tiran, and I broke out of the dogfight and consolidated, assuming an attack formation. Dav spoke up after another brief pause, and I smiled in anticipation of another short speech.

"You all know why I wanted you with me. We can do this, I kriffin' know it. They may be outstanding pilots, but they aren't a *team*. We train together every day while they are mired in paperwork or training separately. If we fly as a team, as a *squadron*, they're purrgil fodder." He laughed. "I just told Marenta to give Silwar a message. I asked her to tell him, *Watch this. And go ahead and think about who you'll put in the four vacant commander spots you're about to have*. So now we really have to get them."

We all chuckled, appreciative of the humor in the face of impending doom.

"Fame, you're the quickest. You call the target."

Fame barked a quick laugh. "Have you flown with Morgan recently? I shouldn't have shared all my secrets, have him call it."

Dav hesitated, but acquiesced. "Alright, Morgan. Call it."

I didn't hesitate. Time for revenge for our one Chalquilla Cup loss.

"Legion. Get Legion."

#

All five of us angled in on Legion's TIE Interceptor, the distance closing quickly. He began evading, throwing his ship into near-impossible loops and drifts, but one can only run from five coordinated hunters for so long. Even with his unprepared friends trying to screen for him, he didn't last longer than a minute. But we had lost the element of surprise and our tactics lay bare.

Wietu laughed. "Ha! Scratch one Commander!"

I smiled. "Honsou's next. Make Silwar mourn!"

We pivoted, targeting Honsou's lumbering TIE Punisher, but the resistance had stiffened. Tiran's voice came in, sounding panicky. "Xylo's on my tail, I can't shake him!"

Dav, ever the master of maintaining control over a scenario, began to dish out orders. "Alexandre, Wietu, pressure Xylo. I'm on Stryker. Fame stay Honsou."

I immediately turned to Xylo, his X-Wing somehow remaining evasive while shooting too close for comfort. Against coordinated fire from two craft, Xylo's shields began to fall, but Tiran didn't appear to be doing much better. Every burst of red lasers that Xylo sent got closer and closer, until one finally got through.

Tiran's left wing sheared off and he spiraled away before exploding. In his elation Xylo must have been distracted, as he flattened out his series of dives and spirals with Wietu behind him. His X-Wing followed Tiran's explosive example.

"Scratch Xylo, but Tiran's down," Wietu reported.

Dav sighed. "Status on Honsou?" A massive explosion to my left, Honsou's payload exploding in his ship's fiery death, lit my cockpit in near-blinding light, and Dav continued. "That answers that. Stryker remains. Let's mop him up and go –"

His comms squawked and cut out. I cut my ship to the left to see a T-70 X-Wing spiraling through a fireball, already shooting at Fame.

The three of us who remained needed no instructions made, the time we'd logged together in practice making us a seamless unit. The time these two had chosen to spend on me in instruction had shaped me to fly with them as a singular group, not three individuals. We all scattered and got ready for whatever maneuver Fame would call. Stryker, even with his firepower and shields, had no clue what he was trying to take on.

Fame broke the concentrated silence to call out our move. "Double Cor Slip, Weitu and Morgan against me."

The Corellian Slip, a typical maneuver for the Rebels, was a favorite of ours. It was especially risky, as our shieldless Interceptors couldn't handle even a glancing shot, but that only served to surprise the opponent. The idea of the Cor Slip was for a ship with an especially persistent tail to line up with a friendly craft, as if to joust with it. At the last second, the first ship would climb, revealing the second friendly that was lined up and ready for a shot on the pursuer. It was rare, however, to be able to destroy a shielded X-Wing on one pass, so Rho had developed the Double. The second friendly would also pull up after taking a few shots, revealing an unexpected third.

I threw all my power to the engines, creating distance between myself and Fame. Wietu followed, and once we were far enough he drifted and turned, lining up in front of Fame and the pursuing Stryker, about two clicks out. I got behind him, threw a salute he couldn't see, and grinned. *Time to end this little party.*

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Wietu accelerated, his Interceptor rocketing off like a Trandoshan after Wookiee pelts. I followed suit, spinning my ship to align with his and dodging stray red lasers from Stryker. *Now all this depends on how much attention he's paying to his radar*, I thought, and laughed to myself. *Nobody really pays attention to it anyways.*

When the two clicks became one, Fame called out. "All yours." Wietu's lasers began to spit their energy at Stryker, caught unawares by the sudden appearance of a different Interceptor. He shifted his attention from Fame to Wietu, but facing Wietu's onslaught of lasers splashing against his failing shields, he decided to dive. It was too late for Wietu to adjust, so he overshot and began to loop around. But it would be over before he fully turned.

Stryker, having dove, presented himself as quite a large target to me, the surprise within a surprise. I dove with him, my Interceptor pointing at him from the top. It only took three shots for his X-Wing to lose a wing and spiral uncontrollably before exploding. I exhaled a breath I didn't know I was holding, elated and proud.

Marenta's voice came over all frequencies, this time not nearly as loud. "Their starfighters are down. Well done, pilots. Bombers and designated escorts remain for further instruction, everyone else back to the hangar."

What remained of Rho formed up and flew towards the *Warrior*, Fame throwing a couple of elated flips and spins into his approach. Upon entering the hangar, the sim pods ended the simulation and opened. I stepped out, tugging off my helmet, and saw Dav and Tiran already standing outside of the bank of pods Rho was using. Dav spotted me and laughed.

"Nice flying, Morgan!"

I smiled. "Did Silwar ever respond to your message?"

He laughed again, but shook his head. "No, but we definitely taught him and the *Challenge* quite a lesson about the might of the *Warrior*. All that remains is a bit of fleet tactics and bomber runs before Zaadja is ours."

Behind me, everyone else began to step out of their pods. Fame emerged, spotted me, and smiled. "Good flying, Morgan."

I nodded back, "Same to yourself. I'm just proud I didn't die like these two chumps over here," I joked, giving Dav and Tiran each a playful punch on the shoulder.

Dav laughed again. "It's not my fault! I took my eyes off Stryker for one second to make sure that that explosion was one of them and not us and somehow he slipped behind me."

Tiran echoed him. "Xylo was too determined, there was nothing I could do!"

Wietu stepped out of his pod and joined us. I threw him a salute and grabbed his and Fame's shoulders.

I grinned. "Well, we all did well. Some of us made quite the sacrifice, but we all did well." I paused for dramatic effect, then slowly continued. "Now, let's settle this argument. Let's all, one by one, tell each other how many kills we marked."

Tiran smiled and said, "I know I won't win, so I'll start. Two."

Wietu nodded. "Three. But two of them were Legion and Xylo, so that has to count for something."

Dav chuckled. "Sure, your three is better than my three. That's fair."

Fame and I turned to each other, the final two. It all depended on how many Fame had gotten in the chaos at the beginning.

He exhaled, letting loose a short laugh and a shrug. "Alright, I'll play my cards first. Got six. If you hit more than that, you deserve it."

I smirked, savoring the moment. "That's high, Fame. And it's not every day someone gets higher." Another dramatic pause. "But today is one of those days. Eight."

Fame whistled and clapped me on the shoulder. "Well done, Morgan. I've clearly given you too much advice, but I promise I'll get over this very personal insult." He winked before turning to Tiran, adopting a somber attitude with his helmet clasped in both of his hands. "I'm sorry, sir, but I regret to inform you that we have a custom after each engagement, one you're unaware of because we haven't been doing it during Imperial Storm previously, but I think now is a great time to change that."

Tiran groaned and said, "What's that?"

Fame grinned. "First round is on the lowest of us!" Without missing a beat he turned to the exit and ran out, yelling behind him, "See you slugs in a minute. I'll save a good booth or two!"

Dav sighed audibly. "I guess we'll be debriefing over drinks."

"I know you're excited for that," I laughed. "You don't have to act disappointed."

He chuckled. "I already sent the others to the debrief room, not anticipating this turn of events. They got vaped early, and I didn't want to make them stand around in here." He turned to Tiran, grinning. "I'll go get them and bring them to witness Tiran's generosity."

Tiran threw his hands in exaggerated exasperation. "Fine, fine. Let me change out of this," gesturing to his sweaty flight suit, "and then I'll head down to the bar."

Dav nodded. "Let's all change. Morgan, would you walk with me?"

"Of course."

#

We walked in silence for a moment, getting out of earshot of the rest of the pilots. Once we were alone in the hallways of the *Warrior*, Davalorn spoke.

"Good job on the kill count, Morgan. That must be the highest of all the *Warrior* pilots that engagement."

I smiled, always appreciative of praise. "Thank you, sir."

"I'll cut to the chase here. Imperial Storm is effectively over, so we need to talk a lot about a lot of things. As my XO, I value your opinion greatly. I've been gathering ideas for general squadron improvement, and I'd love to run some of that by you for your thoughts."

"Of course, sir, anything I can do to help."

"But, Alexandre, I somehow sense you've got bigger fish to fry right now."

I paused a bit at the switch from my last name to my first, but I took it as a signal of a more intimate conversation and proceeded. "I've decided I need some leave time. I'm going to ask for about ten standard days, starting as soon as possible. There are some things I need to... investigate."

Dav waited a beat to make sure he wasn't interrupting before asking, "Is this about the incident?"

"Yes, it is. I need to learn. I need to learn how he knew and what he knew." I paused again, struggling to find the right words. "I just need to reassure myself of the facts."

Dav stopped walking. I looked up and saw that we had made it to my quarters without me noticing. He looked down and then to the side, obviously thinking of what to say. "Alexandre, I'll fill out

the paperwork. I'm not a big fan of what you're doing, but I understand you need this. For personal closure, for seeking answers, whatever it may be. Just be safe, I need a good XO right now."

I grinned and asked, a bit mockingly, "After my performance today, do you not think me capable enough?"

Dav smiled back and said, "I have no doubt. See you in a minute down at the bar." He tossed a salute and walked away.

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The *Warrior's* bar was a converted corner of the pilot's mess hall, partitioned with low-light curtains hung from the ceiling to the floors. Its existence flew in the face of every Imperial and EH regulation, but Marenta deemed it beneficial for morale and allowed its continued existence, and the mess halls were not included on inspections by Upper Command. Stepping in from the huge, luminous, stylistically stale mess hall to the dim bar gave every pilot a sense of tangible relief, the transition between duty and relaxation visibly represented and appreciated.

I parted the curtains at the entrance and looked around the surprisingly spacious room. Whoever had initially set this up had managed to make this corner of the mess feel as large as the mess itself, with seating enough for most of the pilots (all of us could fit if people got a little more cozy than they would normally while sober) and a different flooring, probably some mat covering the mess floor. The bar, during IS tended by the first death in the most recent simulated engagement, was a rectangular isolated island surrounded by stools, which in turn were surrounded by empty floor space. A ring of booths hugging the curtains around the perimeter of the room. After a bit of searching, as the dim lights obscured and shadowed the booths, I found the two Fame had staked out for us. He spotted me too and gestured for me to come to the one he was sitting in. The new recruits and those who were more friendly, Cray, Squid, Bronx, Chudan, Rotarg, Vraal, and Recon, of whom the vast majority had joined Rho within the last two weeks and still wore Lieutenant bars, were crammed together in one booth, entertained by CPT Jarion, who had pulled up a stool from the bar to the end of the booth. The stool was decidedly too tall, almost as tall as the table itself, but Jarion perched upon it gracefully, no doubt relating an enrapturing story of past adventures in the EHTC. He didn't fly much nowadays, and was about to head off to the Reserves, but would always be remembered as a valuable addition to the squadron for his years of passive experience and occasionally riveting tales.

I sat down at Fame's booth alongside Dav, Wietu, and Tiran. They already had a water set out for me. Wietu looked up, smiled, and said, "Ah, the man we were talking about!"

I slid into the booth. "Really?"

"Yes, honest! Seeing as you don't drink, which is weird in its own right, I was wondering the odds of you ordering for me and letting me have it so it falls to Tiran's tab."

I shot a glance at Tiran, who raised an eyebrow, somehow conveying the entire message "*Are you kriffing kidding me? Get a load of these nerf herders*" in one gesture.

I barked a quick laugh. "First off, I definitely think that's against the spirit of the punishment, Wietu. But also, Tiran, just be glad you're not the poor guy stranded in the bar." I gestured at a lieutenant I didn't recognize who was stuck behind the bar. "That's why you don't die first."

Wietu played crestfallen momentarily, but smiled and winked. "That's not what we were talking about, though. Dav was telling us you are taking a brief leave."

Dav raised his hands defensively. "I didn't know if you were coming down here, and that's pretty important information for these guys to know."

I gestured reassuringly, "I don't mind it at all, that's fair. And yes, I'm requesting ten days. I hope I can be back sooner, but we'll see."

Fame patted me on the shoulder. "We'll miss you, Morgan. Perhaps I'll catch up on some sim training while you're gone! I certainly need to!" He laughed raucously, but quickly stopped when nobody joined in.

Tiran was more interested in the training regimen than laughing. “So how did you get so much better so quickly?”

I gestured to Fame after taking a sip. “Fame told me this, and I’ll pass on the wisdom. I ran a combat sim as a benchmark of current ability, then spent hours upon hours every day in every sort of sim exercise before taking the combat test again. The progress will be visible, I promise. It worked very well for me, at least.”

Tiran nodded, saying, “I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks for the advice, the both of you.”

“It’s the least I can do.”

Fame laughed. “If Tiran also becomes better than me –” He turned to me and pointed fake-menacingly, growling, “which you’re not, by the way, we’re dueling when you get back –” he turned back, “I will be unendingly pissed.”

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Dav knocked on my door early the next morning, but I had already packed and gotten ready. I opened the door with a hiss and found him holding paperwork with clearance codes on them and a comlink.

“Morning, sir,” I said, accompanied by a casual salute.

“Good morning, Morgan. I have here anything that you’ll need if you’re stopped, including paperwork with signatures, details on your cover story, and an emergency comlink. This buzzes to Marenta, so, you know, use sparingly.”

I cracked a smile. “I’ll try to avoid that at all costs, don’t worry.”

He chuckled. “Do you have a blaster?”

“Of course,” I replied. “And, best of all, this one I got quite legally and didn’t *steal* from our Wing Commander.” I fixed him with a pointed stare. “I requisitioned it from the armory, and they were very nice and cooperative. Although, this one is not quite as nice as that DE-10 was...”

Dav raised his hands in mimicked exasperation and disbelief. “Don’t look at me like that, that was not my fault. Doc has crazy ideas sometimes.”

I laughed and said, “Sometimes! I hope I don’t have as much fun as you had on that adventure, otherwise I might not be coming back.”

He grew serious. “If anything goes wrong, contact Marenta. We’ll come and get you instantly. The EH can’t be losing pilots like you.”

I sighed. “Yessir. I do understand. Will you walk with me to the hangar?”

He smiled. “Of course, Alexandre.”

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Not much conversation was had on the walk to the hangar, the slow realization that I was going off alone stifling any desire for conversation. I missed the bland halls of the *Warrior* already. Visiting Naboo and seeing that which I avoided for so long felt like a punishment, but I couldn’t do without this trip. As Dav guessed correctly, I needed closure. I needed to know what happened, not just what I was told happened. I needed to be reassured why and how my family died.

We reached the hangar, and what lay inside caught me genuinely by surprise. A YT-2000 freighter, in excellent repair, sat there, receiving final diagnostics from Mix, Rho’s chief mechanic. I chuckled at Mix’s obvious contempt for the bulky freighter crowding her hangar meant for small and sleek starfighters.

Dav laughed at my amusement with the situation, and said, “Her name’s the *Homeward Bound*. Or at least it is for this flight.”

I turned to him and raised an eyebrow. “Clever. Poetic and clever.”

Dav smirked. “That one’s all me, Alexandre. And it’s not clever, it’s really pretty obtuse.”

“Well,” I replied, “As long as she won’t strand me in the middle of nowhere I don’t care about her name.” We had reached Mix. “Speaking of which, will she strand me, Mix?”

He turned, unamused and scowling. “Of course not, sir. She’s been in the EH’s service for quite a while, but she’ll do the job getting you inconspicuously into Naboo without a problem. At least, better than flying a TIE Interceptor there. Which would take a while, of course, because they don’t have hyperdrives. This baby, whatever they are calling her now, does, so it’ll be quicker. And you won’t get shot down trying to land, which is pretty important. If you tried to fly a TIE down to Naboo you wouldn’t make into atmo with all the –”

I interjected, trying to stem the apparently unending tide of words. “Thank you, Mix, for your hard work.”

He nodded, still frowning. “Now don’t go and waste it by crashing the thing! Bring her back with no scratches, and only then I’ll be happy.”

Ignoring a light snicker from Dav, I assured him there would be no damage. “Don’t forget, Mix, they did train us to fly the YT series, if only for sheer practicality as there are so many of them out in the galaxy.”

Mix nodded, clearly not listening, then walked off, perhaps to find his droid counterpart Nix to complain to about the *Homeward Bound*.

Dav sniggered. “Mix? Happy? That’ll never happen!” We broke out into genuine laughter, earning a backwards glare from the receding mechanic.

Still chuckling, I walked to the top of the ramp. “Don’t burn the place down while I’m gone. And don’t let anyone fly my TIE, except maybe Fame if he has to. But don’t do it.”

Dav smiled. “Nobody will touch *Octavian*, rest assured. Fly safe, Alexandre. Come back in one piece, please.”

I threw him a casual salute. “Yessir. I’ll be back before you know it with answers to share.”

He saluted back, and watched as the ramp slid up. He called out quickly, right before it sealed close. “Be safe!”

I replied, “I promise!” But the ramp had already closed with a clang, and my reply only echoed down the halls of the *Homeward Bound*. I sighed, still facing the ramp and Dav, and stood like that for a minute before turning and walking down the meticulously cleaned hallways. I thought to myself, *This would never pass as a mercenary’s ship if inspectors got inside, it is way too organized and clean*. I sat down in the pilot seat in the centered cockpit and started the engines. The ship vibrated with energy, systems booting up at the touch of a button and the swing of a lever. I slowly began to ease the large ship out of the hangar, rotating to take one look at what I was leaving behind.

Davalorn still stood where he left me, watching my lumbering departure. I saluted, and somehow he saw me. He returned it crisply, a salute so precise it would have made General Frown proud.

I smiled, then swung the ship around and out the hangar. All of the necessary hyperspace calculations had already been installed into the navicomputer, so I maneuvered far enough away from the *Warrior*. I paused, breathed, and placed my hand on the lever. I sighed and pushed it forward, the starlines accelerating towards infinity, hurtling me into the swirling beauty of hyperspace.

Chapter Three

Two Days Later

I awoke to the sound of the navicomputer beeping. I groggily sat straight up in the pilot's chair, which had rotated around to face away from the rest of the cockpit, confused and discombobulated. I was sure that I had fallen asleep in the bunk and set an alarm for well before I was supposed to exit hyperspace.

"Ten minutes before breakout," my copilot said.

"Alright, thanks," I replied, still half-asleep.

I did an almost comical double-take. Copilot? It was just me on the ship! I spun the chair around, my eyes wide, and saw who sat in the seat beside me.

The ever-enthusiastic General Frown half-turned to look at me, wearing his eponymous visage. His cool and collected demeanor, with his ramrod posture and piercing stare, starkly juxtaposed my weary slouch and unkempt hair. I hastily stood up and smoothed over my mercenary's disguise chosen for this mission, tight pants with a yellowed shirt beneath a thin vest, and saluted.

"Sorry, sir, I was unaware you would be joining me."

Frown said nothing. I held the salute. He finally turned back to his controls, and said, "Go shape yourself up in your quarters."

Confused, I walked through the circular corridors to my quarters, passing empty recreation rooms and holds. I hastily freshened up and got my act together, grabbing the comlink to Marenta and the blaster from the armory, which I slid into my holster high on my left hip. Decidedly contrary to my limited handheld firearms training in the EH, I wore my guns backwards, allowing me to draw across my body more comfortably instead of the standard "same hand, same hip" approach.

Checking that everything was in order, I walked back through the ship, and upon seeing who occupied the copilot's seat, I chuckled and sighed, a bit amused and a bit exasperated.

Marenta stared back at me, her resting face even more disapproving than Frown's.

"Kriff, Cam. Why would you do that to me?" I asked, hands on my hips.

CAM-9 switched back to one of his standard Imperial officer looks, this one a stocky and intimidating male. "I really had you, didn't I?"

Cam was a unique specimen of a droid, a shapeshifter that projects tangible holograms of people, either acquaintances of his or generalized fictitious characters. Nobody knew what Cam really looked like as he always was mimicking, or even what pronouns to assign it (my personal rule, as I found Cam first and spent the most time with him, was just going with whichever person it was mimicking at the time). After finding Cam on a mission, we became fast friends, and when Marenta posted a notice about needing a droid assistant, Cam decided he was ready for an official role within the EH instead of loafing around the hangars and Rho's quarters.

For being a droid, one with programming and logic circuits, Cam was remarkably ingenuitive, witty, and independant, the latter quite clear as it seemed to me that he was shirking his duty to Marenta for an adventure. He could hold conversations and emotions, and he was a real friend.

I gave him a hug, praying that this version of Cam would not crush my ribs. "You gotta stop doing this to me! One day it'll be the real Frown and I'll think it's you. You'll get me put back on patrol duty for disrespect!"

Cam laughed a big, booming laugh. "How've you been, Alex? It's been a while since we last really talked, maybe before even IS4!" Cam was the only "person" who got away with calling me that. I think he did so only to bug me, because I repeatedly told him nobody called me that anymore before I realized he would not relent.

I nodded, saying, "It has been quite some time. I've been well! I'm sure you saw my performance at Zaadja, but that was a highlight."

Cam smiled. "I did see a replay, and practiced my flight efficiency analysis on you. I've got some pointers, if you want 'em."

I shrugged. "I wouldn't mind, especially any advice you have on duels. Fame has deemed my performance a personal offense and wants to reassert his dominance."

That got another huge laugh out of Cam, and his infectious mood caused me to laugh at my own joke.

"I'll take the pointers later, though. How did you get away from Marenta?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"As soon as I saw your leave forms, I told her I was going to analyze each pilot's performance at Zaadja to advise each commander how to supplement exercises. I advised her it would take slightly longer than a standard week."

I chuckled. "What if she actually wants those analyses, though?"

Cam winked. "They're already done. Took about three hours after I perfected the program with your performance."

"But who will be her assistant?"

"Oh, she's grown to be a big fan of that EVA thing your fellow Rho member Cray made." He smiled, a bit forlornly. "At least that makes it easier for me to sneak away."

I frowned. "Sorry to hear that, but I'm sure you're better than it. Or at least funnier," I laughed.

Then the *Homeward Bound*'s deck shuddered, and the planet of my birth eclipsed the viewport.

#

Seeing Naboo again after all these years reminded me of my childhood, my adolescence, my family, and of the last time I had come this way. I grew somber. Cam sensed this, shifting into a slightly more comforting persona, one of a short pale woman, one who she thought might be more calming than the bulky officer.

Naboo from space always used to take my breath away. Green fields and forests covered the entirety of the land, separated by deep blue oceans. Sweeping clouds blanketed much of the planet, covering it from view, but much of the fundamental and transcendent beauty remained. That beauty now was tainted by tragedy, and I didn't enjoy it as I used to.

"Let's, uh... let's go down," I said quietly, walking over to the pilot's seat and grabbing the controls. I silently pushed the *Homeward Bound* down to the planet, entering the atmosphere.

#

The Faamirk spaceport had not changed in the five years since I had last seen it. A flickering energy gate surrounded a small control tower that also housed international customs and a token security force. Nobody ever flew into Faamirk, or "The Swamp" as the locals called it, because it was solely residential. The richest families on Naboo lived out in The Swamp, spread out in a climate-controlled section that kept the humidity down but preserved the luscious scenery. Massive mansions sprawled across clearings, separated from one another by hundreds of clicks of beautiful jungles. There was no city of Faamirk because, with the transportation available, it was easier to hire someone to fetch what you needed from Theed. Essentially, Faamirk was a suburb of the entirety of Naboo.

The Morgan Estate was a twenty minute hovertaxi ride from the spaceport. I rented a small blue open-topped taxi, preferring to drive myself. Once you have the autonomy of a craft, it is unsettling to relinquish control of a vehicle to a stranger. Cam slid into the passenger seat, her slender frame, now donning similar garb to me, was slightly dwarfed by the large seat.

"Ready to see the Morgan Estate, Cam? Or at least what remains?" I asked Cam.

She turned to me, a worried expression on her face. "Alex, are you sure you need to do this? I could go myself instead of you. I have a feeling this is going to be harder than you think."

I looked at her and nodded, resolute. "I have to. I just need to confirm what I already know."

Cam sighed. "Alex. This is going to be hard."

I turned back to the controls, slightly annoyed. "Cam, I've been here since then, you know.... I'll be okay." I slammed on the accelerator before she could say anything further, and we turned into a blazing blue blur.

#

Two minutes before we arrived, we were hailed and stopped. An Faamirk Police Force officer stood on the ground and waved us down. Beside him stood a Naboo Park Officer, and a speeder was parked nearby. A small booth had been erected, obviously intended as permanent but built on a small budget. I glanced at Cam, who nodded, and put the taxi down in front of the FPFO.

He spoke gruffly, but not rudely. "You guys here for the Memorial Museum or passing through?"

Cam responded before I even began to think. I trusted her to be able to come up with the right responses because of her advanced programming. I suspected she had already evaluated the FPFO and calculated probable dialogue trees, ready to say what needed to be said to get us past the FPFO. Which apparently wasn't going to be too hard at all.

"Yes sir, we would like to visit the Museum." She tilted her head slightly downward. "Is there anything we need to do for you, sir?"

The FPFO stared at her for a moment, then stammered, "Um, no, ma'am, head right that way." He pointed down a winding and illuminated path without taking his eyes off Cam.

"Thank you, sir." She subtly elbowed me, and I slowly drove off.

The FPFO waved, then shouted after us, "Enjoy your day!" The Park Officer, not having said anything, looked, amused, at the FPFO, and then our view was obscured by a turn in the path.

I turned to Cam, laughing. "You're way too good at that, *ma'am!*"

Cam giggled, making me laugh even harder. "Use that power for good, not evil," I managed to get out.

And then the taxi crested the final hill, and the preserved rubble of the Morgan Estate lay before us.

#

We rode in silence down to the complex, which consisted of the mess that lay upon the foundation of the mansion behind a massive blocky building, assumedly the Memorial Museum, hiding whatever lay on the other side. The path wound around to the front of the museum, and I slowly drove the taxi along it. I was stunned at what had been done in the last five years. The property was maintained perfectly, the landscaping as flawless as it had been when I was born. But the Estate was collapsed, blocks of permacrete all that remained, the more expensive materials not able to survive the Rebel attack.

We came to the side of the Museum and turned the corner to the front. Cam sighed, and my heart stopped. Five marbleized figures stood in a line, unidentifiable from this distance and angle.

"Cam, is that us? My family?" I leaned forward, squinting hopefully.

She sat up straight. "Alex, please listen to me. If you do this, you will not –"

But I was not listening to her. I shot the taxi towards the row, and her comment was lost in the wind. I passed by the end of them and drifted the taxi around to face the row.

They were not of us.

Each of the statues wore a Rebel flight suit and clasped a Rebel flight helmet in both hands. Each stood triumphantly, lording their barbaric victory over the Morgan family. Beneath each statue a plaque read, in large font, "May Their Sacrifice Go Unforgotten."

This was not a Memorial Museum for the Morgans. This was a Memorial Museum for our murderers.

#

I opened the taxi door and stepped out, face frozen in disbelief.

Cam, still seated, looked at me, imploringly. "Alex, please."

I slowly walked towards the Museum, passing between two of the statues. I could feel my anger beginning to rise, my blood set on a slow boil. Cam caught up and opened the doors and I walked through silently. A short bubbly NPO greeted us after Cam stepped through.

“Welcome in! If you hurry, you both could catch the tour of the Museum and the old Estate, they just left!”

Cam nodded in thanks, and said, “I think we’ll just look around ourselves, but thank you.” She flashed the NPO a large smile and turned to usher me in the direction of the exhibits, but the NPO stopped us.

She peered at me. “Sir, you look similar to one of the traitors, the man of the middle generation. Alexandre.”

Cam laughed and responded instantly, obviously having already predicted this comment. “That’s what everyone always tells him, so we decided we’d come up and see for ourselves!”

The NPO backed up, allowing us to continue, but didn’t stop staring until we rounded the corner into the first exhibit.

The five exterior statues were mimicked in miniature in this heptagonal room, but separated and each against their own wall. Behind each was projected holograms, detailing each’s service to the Rebellion and New Republic and pictures of moments of their lives. I stared numbly at each in turn, then shook my head, disgusted.

“This is so wrong, how could they have it so messed up?”

Cam looked at me, her face wracked in pain. “Alex, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have let you see this.”

I turned to her, still shaking my head. “I need to see this. See how the Rebellion is corrupting so much, even to manipulate the truth.” I turned to the entryway to the next room, which was dimmed, its contents invisible from this angle.

“Alexandre, do you trust me?”

I looked back at her, surprised. “Of course, Cam.”

“You do not want to walk into that room. It will... I don’t even know the word for it. It will cripple you.”

I turned away, but did not walk through the door. “Cam, you of all people know I need this. You know me more than I know myself.”

She said nothing. I turned back and saw a tear slide down her cheek. She looked down at her feet, and her voice cracked. “Alex, I know. And I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Cam. These Rebels have lied to me and the public, and I need to see the extent of their deceptions.”

She shook her head and looked up at me, eyes watering and red. “You’ll only find pain in that room. Please don’t.”

I held her gaze for a beat, then turned away. “I have to.”

I walked into the room and saw what sat in the middle of the darker room. My whole body collapsed. I fell to my knees, salty tears welling in my eyes. My arms lay limply by my sides, all my muscles losing the will to function.

In the center of the room sat an illuminated pentagonal dais, slowly rotating around to present each side to the entrance.

Upon the dais sat five coffins. Above the coffins, holograms projected five faces, staring down.

The face of my infant daughter looked down at me.

I sank to my side, curled up on the floor, and silently sobbed, descending into memory.

#

Chapter Four

4 ABY

The courtyard in front of the Royal Palace in Theed was crowded shoulder to shoulder, people even lining the roofs of the buildings surrounding the courtyard. Gungans and Naboo partied side by side, celebrating the death of the Emperor with fireworks, streamers, and cheering.

My three-year-old self stood, holding my mother Apari's hand, and Alachor, my father, clasped her shoulder. The three of us, alongside our servants, stood on a platform extended from our speeder, parked high above the scene. My mother sighed, and ushered us all back into the speeder. The driver shut the top, and Apari sighed lengthier and deeper. She turned to my father and said, "This is not the Naboo I know. The Empire will recover and come and crush these fools, but until then I fear for us."

Alachor nodded, his deep baritone a counterpart to Apari's light and high voice. "In the meantime, we will do what we can. I can make some calls once things settle down, get some people to come in and help us. Or us help them. We'll figure it out."

Apari nodded, laying her head on his shoulder, visibly composing herself. "That's right. We'll figure it out."

#

14 ABY

Instructor Balain stood in front of thirteen-year-old me, droning about some substance that could almost magically seem to heal even grievous wounds.

"Bacta, Master Morgan, can heal blaster burns, blade wounds, and even aid in stabilizing after loss of limbs. Full submersion in a tank of bacta has semi-magical effects, saving those who seem to be not far from death, but bacta also comes in smaller doses, like a small patch that —" He paused. I looked up from my doodles.

"Are you even listening, Master Morgan? How can you expect to learn without listening?" He smiled authentically. "What are you drawing?" he asked, genuinely curious.

I smiled. "Just TIEs."

He frowned, mocking. "Have you no creativity? You've drawn nothing but TIE fighters for the past cycle!"

I laughed and shrugged.

He sat down across from me. "What do you know about TIE fighters, Master Morgan?"

I frowned in concentration. "They're fast and cool. They're what the Empire uses against the Rebels."

He chuckled. "Master Morgan, you're going to need to know a lot more than that if you're ever gonna fly them." He reached and got a small datachip out of his bag, sliding it into a datapad and holding it out to me. "Here's a little reading for you. Basic specs, variations, and everything else you need to learn to appreciate the TIEs even more."

I took the datapad. "Thanks, Balain, I'll read it all."

#

16 ABY

"Master Morgan, close your eyes. I have a surprise."

Balain put his hands on my fifteen-year-old shoulders, guiding me through the corridors of the Morgan Estate.

“Don’t run me into a wall,” I laughed.

He chuckled, directed a left turn, and stopped.

“We’re in my study, aren’t we,” I asked.

“Very well done, sir. That situational awareness will serve you well in this surprise. Open your eyes.”

I did, and saw what sat in the corner of my study. A state-of-the-art TIE simulator pod, like what I had seen in holograms of Star Destroyer schematics, stood there, mounted on its stand that allowed it to rotate and spin freely.

I stood, stunned. “Balain, where did you possibly get this?”

He chuckled. “An old man’s gotta have his secrets, right?”

I patted him on the shoulder. “C’mon, you’re not old, just aging. You’ve got twenty more years in you, I’m sure.”

“If you say so, Master Morgan.” He nodded to the sim pod. “Hop in, I’ll direct the sim from outside. You’ve read enough, all I could find you, so it’s time to get you flying.”

I climbed the small ladder and slid through the open cockpit, closing the hatch after me. I sat in the pilot’s seat, already acquainted with the controls, but still stunned by the simple beauty of the interior. I brushed my hand along the insides, touching buttons, knobs, levers, and readout displays. At a push of a button from Balain, everything turned on. Red lines illuminated words next to some of the levers, but I already knew what would do what.

I sat still for a moment, trying to figure out a proper thing to do upon my first time in the cockpit. I clicked my heels against the side of the pedals, and opened the comm system.

“Balain, do you copy?”

“Loud and clear, Master Morgan. But look behind the seat, there’s something else.”

I craned my neck and was stunned for the second time that day. A TIE pilot’s helmet sat there, polished and new as ever. A hysterical disbelieving laugh escaped from me, and I grabbed it, sliding it over my head.

The HUD was almost instantly overwhelming, but at the quick and decisive flick of my eyes most of it disappeared.

“Another thing you’re glad I taught you, eh?” Balain asked, his voice now coming through the helmet.

“I can’t imagine flying with all that in my face,” I laughed. “It’s better now, and yes, I’m glad I’ve learned all of this.”

“What program do you want to start with, Master Morgan?”

I didn’t even hesitate. I had dreamed of this every night for the past three years, and knew what I wanted.

“Balain, queue up a dogfight above Naboo. Put me in a TIE Interceptor, please.”

“Figured you’d say that, you’ve always had a thing for the squints. Good luck up there, sir. Go get the Rebels. And remember this, son.

Death comes on dagger wings.”

#

17 ABY

It was midnight. I stepped out of the pod, just having finished a precision bombing run on a covert Rebel facility in Coruscant, and quietly walked down the halls, passing darkened room after darkened room, my sixteen-year-old feet doing their best to remain silent.

I rounded a corner, and at the end of the hall saw a meeting room door opened and illuminated. Curiosity piqued, I crept down the hall and up to the door, peering through.

Surrounding a circular table sat five uniformed people, instantly recognizable as Imperial Naval Intelligence officers in their white cloaks and hats, typing at datapads and consoles. And Alachor was sitting with them.

Feeling especially bold after the successes of the night, I composed myself and opened the door.

Instantly, the NavInts were on their feet, blasters drawn and leveled. Alachor remained seated.

“Gentlemen, holster your weapons. And meet my son, Alexandre Morgan.” He looked at me and gusted to an empty seat next to him. “This was meant for your mother, but she’s asleep now. Come, sit.”

I walked, looking each NavInt in the eyes, acting bold but internally grateful that their training drilled them to not have hasty trigger fingers. I sat down next to my father.

“Son, we have a lot to talk about.”

I looked him in the eye. “Clearly,” I said, eliciting a chuckle from one of the NavInts, the rest already back to their work.

“What are they doing here, Father?” I asked.

“Alexandre, we must all do our part for the Empire, however fraught the situation might seem. I’m playing host to these fine gentlemen, and this Estate is now a sort of headquarters for this sector’s intelligence. I trust these officers, and they trust me. By extension, they trust you. So you must not tell of these men’s existence, as there are Rebels everywhere, especially here on Naboo.

What were you doing awake at this time, son?”

“Dabbling in precision bombing.”

One of the NavInts looked up, the one who had chuckled. His nameplate indicated he was named Arams. “Where? Yavin, Dantooine, or Bespin?”

I stared at him. “You all supplied the pod?”

Alachor laughed. “Did you think Balain could simply acquire a sim pod from thin air? But clearly he’s teaching you well if you could deduce that.”

Arams nodded to me. “Yes, and you’re welcome. But which one?”

“None of those,” I answered. “Coruscant.”

The rest of the NavInts looked up and laughed. Arams chuckled again, looked around, and then back at me. “Surely not. 50% of Skystrike second year students couldn’t finish that run successfully.”

I shrugged. “Well, I did.”

Arams frowned. “You finished it? What did you score?”

“56,063.”

They all laughed. One of the others, chuckling, looked at Alachor. “Sir, you’ve raised quite the comedian.” Then the laughter slowly died as they saw I was not laughing along.

“Oh, kriff, he’s not kidding,” Arams whispered. “How many times have you practiced it?”

I kept looking at him. “That was my third run.”

The silence was palpable. All the NavInts were staring at me.

Alachor piped up. “I don’t get it. Is that high?”

Arams looked at him. “Sir, that’s higher than 90% of Skystrike graduates, those that even finished. And he started that run today, the Skies get years.”

One of the NavInts whispered, “I’m suddenly very thankful we got him that pod.”

Arams turned back to me. “Mr. Morgan, let me give you a list of sims to run, ones you haven’t done before. Report first run scores to us in a week, and then we’ll talk again.”

Alachor rumbled, “Don’t presume so much of yourself to go ordering my son around, Arams.”

Arams held his hands up. “Apologies, sir. Mr. Morgan, with your father permitting, we’d like to see what you can do.”

Alachor looked at me, and I at him. He and I, despite the relative distance he kept from me, could still communicate nonverbally.

I turned back to Arams. “Let’s see the list.”

#

One week before the Annual Faamirk Gala was set to occur, I was told it was to be hosted at the Morgan Estate. As a twenty-one-year-old, I preferred to be kept more abreast of occasions, but I understood that I missed the news because I had probably been hiding in the Pod, as Alachor now termed it.

I had continually impressed Arams in the Pod, earning high marks in sim after sim, consistently scoring within the top 85% of Skystrike. Eventually we ran out of relevant sims and I branched off, honing specific skills and practicing whenever I could. This success also greatly pleased Balain, who took personal pride in my achievements and viewed my success as dependent on his facilitation of my childhood love, which admittedly was true.

Apari had had a suit designed for the Gala, a blend between Coruscanti and Naboo designs. To me, it looked suspiciously Imperial, with neat pleats and sweeping cape, but when I tried it before the day on I was quite impressed with myself.

The day of, Apari helped me into it, dishing out compliments dotingly. Alachor stepped in briefly in his own identical suit to make sure he was wearing it the same as I was, and then disappeared, presumably to shuffle the NavInts far away from nosy crowds.

Later in the evening, the guests began to trickle in. My parents greeted everyone at the doors, and the servants floated around the crowd, offering drinks and appetizers. That left me in an awkward spot, as I was not to serve nor greet but introduce myself to already-entered guests as the adult son of the hosts.

Walking up to strangers was never my preferred method of introduction, but it apparently was what must be done. I introduced myself with a simple, "Welcome in, ma'am and sir, I'm Alexandre Morgan," which was normally responded with "Oh, Alachor's son!" or "Oh, Apari's son!", followed by a "Please tell your parents what a marvelous job they have done for this Gala."

"Of course I will," I'd answer, "Enjoy your evening!"

And then I'd walk away, scoping out my next victims, concentrating on not talking to anyone twice.

I walked up to an old man and his wife talking alone, and the routine conversation began.

"Welcome in, gentlebeings, I'm Alexandre Morgan. Thank you for being here."

"Oh, Alachor's son!" said the man. "We all expect great things from you! Please tell him what a fine job he's done here."

"Of course, sir. Enjoy your evening!" I bowed and turned to find someone else.

And then I saw her.

Perfection incarnate in a flowing pink gown, making her way across the floor.

I intercepted and bowed facetiously. "Welcome in, ma'am. I don't believe we've met before. I'm Alexandre Morgan, welcome to my humble home. Or at least my parents' humble home."

She smiled, and approximated her best curtsy in the large dress. "We haven't met, I would have remembered. Alexis Cusgate. Walk with me to the food?"

"Of course, Miss Cusgate. Right this way." I offered my arm, and she took it.

#

The low-hanging moon illuminated the tree line in front of us, casting the rolling hills behind the Morgan Estate in a pale blue light. Alexis lay on her back, her head in my lap.

"Are you ever going to ask me to marry you? It's almost been a full year."

I chuckled incredulously. "Are you secretly telepathic?"

She sat up suddenly and looked at me. "What?"

I sat up on one knee and pulled out a box. "I decided to do things old-fashioned, with a real ring. Alexis, would—"

She interrupted. "Yes, Alex, and I thought you'd never ask." She laughed and hugged me.

"I didn't even get to say my line, baby!"

She laughed even harder, then pulled herself together and stood back up in front of me. "Okay, okay, say your line if you want to."

I looked her in her eyes. "Alexis, would you do me the greatest honor of my life and be with me for the rest of eternity?"

She smiled, tears welling in her eyes. "Of course I will, Alex."

I opened the box and took out the ring. It was a simple ring of jionite, its natural luminescence dispelling shadows across her entire arm.

"On the inside," I told her, as I slid it on her finger, "reads 'Forever, My Love.'"

Tears now ran openly down her face. I leaned in, and our lips met.

#

23 ABY

"If you had told me a year ago I would love someone more than Alexis, I would have laughed in your face."

"And now?"

"When I first saw that baby, I fell in love deeper than I thought I ever could have."

Balain nodded. "It's a beautiful thing, fatherhood, and a beautiful thing, your daughter Ava."

"I would die in an instant for her, without hesitation or regret. It's like nothing else matters now."

He looked at me. "You're going to be a good father, Master Morgan."

"I hope, Balain."

#

24 ABY

Alachor's voice came through my helmet. "Son, I need you to do something for me. I need you to take a quick trip to Chandrila."

I squeezed off a burst at an X-Wing and watched it spiral into a giant wroshyr tree. "What for?"

"You'll be briefed by video en route."

I killed the sim and climbed out of the Pod. "I'm twenty-two. If I'm going on a mission, I need to know in advance what to expect to see if I even want to do it."

He shrugged. "Fair. Just a simple dead drop, datachip we've been compiling of Rebel troop movements through this sector. Outskirts, not Hanna City, and there's such a little Rebel presence there now it'll be easy. And you'll be leaving silently."

I sighed. "Departure?"

"As soon as possible."

"I'll leave tomorrow."

"Fine."

I walked past him to the door to go make preparations.

"Alexandre."

I turned back around.

"Be safe, son. We love you."

"Take care of Alexis and Ava while I'm gone, alright?"

He nodded. "I will."

#

She hugged me, her embrace warm and comforting.

"Do you really have to go?"

"I do. It'll be quick, I'll be back within the week."

"Come back safely, Alex."

“You know I will, I won’t have any problems. I’m too good to have problems.”

She quietly laughed. “Don’t be cocky, Alex.”

“I’m just trying to make you not worry about me. In fact, I should be worrying about you.” I raised an eyebrow. “We both know how extraordinarily unhelpful my parents are with young children.”

She laughed again. “Just watch out for yourself, please.”

“Always, my love.”

#

The holoprojector in the common rec room of my ship fizzled and switched from podracing to an emergency news broadcast for the sector, the anchor’s urgent tone catching my attention.

“There has been a bombing in the city of Faamirk on Naboo, a wealthy residential neighborhood.”

My heart sank instantly. I knew where it was, and I knew how it happened. The Rebels had found the NavInts.

“The FPF reports that the massive explosion left fifteen dead; five Imperial officers, five Rebel pilots, and the entirety of the Morgan family, who had been housing and concealing these Imperials.”

But I wasn’t listening by then. I sprinted back to my quarters and grabbed my comlink. I keyed it on, fumbling with the controls in sheer panic.

“Alexis, can you hear me?”

Silence.

“Alexis!”

Silence.

Tears began to stream down my face.

“Alexis, please.”

Silence.

“Please, Alexis, please answer.” I backed up against a wall and sunk down, a little ball in the corner of my room.

“Please, no, not like this.”

I fumbled again with the dial.

“Father?”

The now predictable silence sealed their fates. Alachor never went anywhere without his comlink, and if he didn’t answer, then it was true.

I blindly ran back to the cockpit, but there wasn’t much I could do. The freighter was already in hyperspace, heading back to Naboo. I recalculated the route, searching for a more efficient way, but there were none.

I had to sit there helplessly, my leviathan hauler crawling towards the planet where my family had just been murdered.

#

Twenty hours later, I was there. I landed the hulking ship on the outskirts of my property and ran out, sprinting towards the Estate, hidden behind a hill. I ran up it, paying no heed to my burning thighs, and crested the hill.

What lay before me seemed impossible, seemed fake.

The entirety of the mansion was leveled: nothing stood erect. Piles of rubble lay upon the ground, some still smoking from the explosions.

I began to move forward, but movement caught my eye. Countless men, dwarfed by distance, crawled up and down the piles, searching through them for bodies, or valuables. And so I laid there, staring at my ruined house, becoming angrier and angrier.

The Rebels had seen fit, in weeding out the Imperials, to destroy not only my house but my entire family. My infant daughter, my wife, my parents – murdered by the Rebel scum. To sit there and see the damage the Rebel bastards had done to my house, my family, and my life was beyond torturous.

And then the sun set, and the men went away.

#

I approached the rubble, anger slightly subdued by time. Piles of permacrete lay warm, but nothing besides that remained. No evidence that this was ever a real home, one lived in by generations and loved the whole time, remained.

I began to pick through whatever rubble I could, looking around the big chunks and digging through the smaller ones, hoping that some evidence of anything would surface. And then I saw a rounder boulder, slightly gleaming in the crepuscular evening. I approached it, slowly realizing it was not a boulder at all. It was the Pod.

I brushed away the grime covering it, revealing the chrome finish. The hatch was facing outwards, so I entered the manual override and pulled it open.

On the pristine inside lay my TIE helmet, on its side. And on the inside, a small datachip.

I grabbed the chip and helmet and shut the Pod, and made my way back to the ship. I passed by the smoldering ruins in which my family had been murdered, but I wasn't sad anymore. The rage, which had abated, began to slowly climb, a creeping sensation boiling up from my low chest.

Once on the ship, I plugged the chip into the projector. Arams' face appeared. He spoke urgently, looking around hastily.

"Mr. Morgan, they've found us. The Rebels. And we're not gonna get out in time, they're going to blow us to smithereens. They have air forces and ground forces closing in. I'm sorry about your family, but there's nothing we can do. It's too late for all of us." He paused.

"But not for you.

Morgan, you've shown great piloting prowess, enough for me to trust you with this."

His face disappeared, replaced by a map of the galaxy, slowly zooming in on a line, starting at Naboo and ending somewhere uncharted.

"Follow this chart, and you'll find a group in desperate need of your piloting skills." He smiled. "Not that they don't have enough pilots already, but they can always use more."

He paused again. The man's life was a ticking chrono, but he still had time enough for dramatic pauses.

"They're called the Emperor's Hammer." He looked away, pointed and said something indistinguishable to someone off-screen, and looked back. "Join Rho. They fly the squints last time I checked, which I know you like. There, in the TIE Corps, you can make a difference."

He saluted.

"Avenge us, Alexandre Morgan."

Then he reached down, and the recording ended.

#

29 ABY

It had taken quite a while to find the EH, with the chart being out of date and all. The end of the line led to a system the EH had been in three years ago, and it took that much and more to track down where they had gone since.

The EH moved in total secrecy, which explained why Arams had an outdated map. But it was only a matter of time before I found them.

A TIE, on patrol around the three Star Destroyers hung in low orbit, settled into formation behind me and to my left.

“Unidentified craft, this is Commander Wildfire. State your name and business immediately or be destroyed.”

I raised my eyebrows, keying the comm. *Cheery fellow, can't wait to meet him.* “This is Alexandre Morgan. I was sent by Navy Intelligence Officer Arams. He had a map to you. I'd like to join up.”

The resulting silence was terrifying. I faced three Star Destroyers in the same freighter I had left in, with only a hope they wouldn't blow me out of the sky.

“Alexandre Morgan, you may proceed to the hangar of the ISD *Warrior*. Come out of your ship ready for interrogation and loyalty examination.

Welcome to the Emperor's Hammer TIE Corps.”

#

Chapter Five

Present Day

I slowly rose off the floor and dried my face. I gave one final look to the caskets. Mine had rotated towards me. That was the only curiosity that remained, because the rest of the truth had begun to make itself apparent.

The next room was smaller and had holoprojectors on the walls, explaining the events of the night. But there was nothing the displayed words told me that I didn't already suspect.

"The Morgan family had harbored the Imperial officers for an estimated eight years, beginning around 16 ABY. They provided their house as refuge for the officers, who are thought to belong to Naval Intelligence. This would have allowed for the Morgan Estate to serve as a center of operations for the sector, gathering intelligence and possibly reporting back to a larger Imperial Remnant.

Eventually, the New Republic realized that its efforts in the Chommell Sector were suspiciously underperforming and sent a small task force to eliminate the disturbance. The investigation took years as the Morgan family were quite skilled at disguising the officers, despite hosting several social functions.

In 24 ABY, the task force, composed of Captain Joyton, Lieutenant Commander Corael, and Lieutenants Poltan, Cra'kez, and Felst, found the Imperials. But when they began to encircle the Morgan Estate, it became evident they would not be able to coax the Imperials out, and they would not go down without a fight.

Tragically, when the New Republic task force entered the house, the Imperials decided their information was too valuable to possibly fall into Republic hands. The Imperials detonated a series of high-class explosives throughout the house, destroying all evidence and killing not only the Republic task force and themselves but the Morgan family.

Alachor and Apari Morgan, their son Alexandre, his wife Alexis, and their infant daughter Ava, were all killed, all paying the price of Alachor and Apari's treachery and the actions of the Imperials."

Cam had followed me into this room. I looked at her, and she nodded.

I gusted at the words. "That's the truth, isn't it?"

Cam nodded. "Alex, I tried to tell you."

I sighed. "And now I've joined the very thing that murdered my family."

She looked at me silently.

"I've seen enough. I'm heading to the ship."

I walked out the way we came, not seeing anything in barely-contained rage.

"Where will you go?" Cam was following me.

I didn't answer and realized I had no idea. I couldn't stay here, I couldn't go back to the company of murderers, and I couldn't magically start a new life out of nothing.

But I would figure it out on the ship.

#

I sat hunched in the communal rec room of the freighter, elbows on my knees and face in hands, occasionally passing my fingers through my hair. This was my famous "back the kriff off because I'm thinking really hard" pose, well known by most of Rho. Cam certainly knew what it meant, but decided to interject anyway, walking into the room, still as the female officer in civilian clothes.

"Alex, do you want to know something about yourself?"

I looked up, eyes still blurry and rimmed red. “Sure, Cam.”

She smiled. “You continually evade expectations and probability. My dialogue trees for you, never occur as predicted, your flight analyses never reflect your patterns next flight.

You are, in short, an extraordinary person who has been put through extraordinary times. You’ve risen to the occasion again and again, besting yourself continuously and buoying your peers up with you. I’ll offer one bit of information, and then ask you something. The Emperor’s Hammer is not the Empire, by any stretch of the imagination.”

She paused.

“What is this YT-2000’s current name?”

“*Homeward Bound*,” I answered, slightly confused.

She nodded, turned, and left.

I sat there bemused for several minutes, pondering what she meant.

And then I realized what she was insinuating, what she wanted me to understand, and what she wanted me to do.

She was pointedly asking where my home was, and I knew that she was right. She meant to show me that the *Homeward Bound* would not carry me from the EH to my home, because Naboo was not my home anymore.

My home was the EH, and my home was on the *Warrior*, and my home was with Rho.

#

Two Days Later

I settled the *Homeward* down on the conspicuously empty hangar. Cam and I stepped out, looking around. At the very end of the hangar lay an odd little ship, like a TIE Interceptor but slightly larger, with wings extended backwards. I instantly recognized it from the Pod: a TIE Advanced, more commonly referred to as the TIE Avenger to avoid confusion.

The sound of TIE engines approaching drew my attention away from the solitary Avenger. The noise grew and grew, and then they came into view. Eleven Avengers rose into the hangar bay and, slowing down, moved towards me, settling down in the Rho slots.

Dav climbed out of the closest, and upon seeing my puzzled face, burst into laughter. “It appears that we both have a lot to explain, Morgan! Welcome back!”

“What’s the deal with the new TIEs?”

“Let’s walk and talk.” He shouted back at Tiran to get the rest of the guys into the debriefing room and that he’d be along in a minute. Cam indicated she’d be with them, to which I nodded. Dav began to walk, and I fell in beside him.

“So, how was it?” he asked.

“No, you first, Dav.”

He chuckled. “Fine. We just got back from patrol duty. These were for our outstanding performance as a squadron. Yours is the one sitting there in the corner. Think of a name for it.”

“Alright, I’ll think of something. How are they, the Avengers?”

“They handle like an Interceptor, shoot like a Brute, and take hits like a Star Destroyer. With shields and hyperdrives, these things are amazing.” He chuckled. “They don’t have the sentimentality of the squints, of course, but they are a dream come true.”

He looked at me, becoming a little more subdued. “What did you find?”

I looked down, hands in my pockets. “I, um, I had it all wrong. It was the NavInts who bombed the house, erasing evidence and killing everyone.”

Dav was stunned. “What? That’s impossible, why would they do that? How do you know?”

“There was a museum there dedicated to the Rebels who were coming to get the NavInts. And, um, that’s where my family was buried. In one of the museum rooms.”

He put a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. We stood there in the hallway, him looking at me, for a while before he said anything.

“Alexandre, I’m so sorry. That’s too much to bear for anyone.” He sighed, and kept walking. “They think you died that day, too?”

“Nobody knew that I had left, and I suspect that they think Balain was me. We were roughly the same height, and there also wouldn’t have been a lot left of anyone to tell apart anyway. Naboo tradition wouldn’t have allowed for much meddling with organic material, also. It’s an odd sensation, seeing your own casket.”

“How did you come back? If I found out the thing I was fighting for killed my family, I would never be able to.”

I chuckled. “Cam helped me with that one. We’re not the Empire, we just want what the Empire wanted. And neither are those NavInts, they acted on their own discretion.”

He nodded. “Very well said. And I assume the officer you punched was Intel? That would explain that.”

“That’s what I’m guessing.”

He nodded again. “If you need to talk about this more later, I’m always here. For now, let’s get to the debriefing. We’re just going to be talking about the Avengers and trying to come up with some new dogfighting ideas. Get yourself dressed, and think of a name for your Avenger!”

I stopped outside my quarters, and saluted. “Yessir, I’ll be there shortly.”

He returned it, and walked on. My door opened with a hiss, and I stepped inside. I changed into my uniform, but there was no need to think of a ship name. I had already decided.

There was a nice Mandalorian phrase Balain had taught me. ‘*Skira Naasad.*’

‘Vengeance Sated.’

I would never forgive the Rebels, even though they weren’t the ones who had killed my family. But the blinding, blood-curdling rage was gone.

And now, a more level-headed pilot would deliver death on dagger wings.

#