

DROID ADRIFT

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Part One

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“Scratch one!” The metallic yell came through my helmet’s comlink and was immediately followed by a static whoop of victory. Not a lot of pilots could overload their mic input, but whenever Wietu went for volume, he got it. I saw the blossom of red and orange flame signifying the destruction of an X-Wing through my TIE’s tinted circular viewport.

“Is that the last pirate?” Davalorn asked.

I tapped my triangular scanner display with a gloved finger as if that would make it refresh any faster. The red circular blips on the plane that signified unknown craft had all but disappeared. Finally, after what felt like minutes but was surely only a second, the scanner display line swept its surveying line through the plane and erased all the red dots.

Except one in the corner.

“One more,” I chimed in, “sector aurek twelve, two clicks out.” The music playing in my cockpit faded as I spoke to prevent the spilling of Mando’s war chants onto the open comm. I scrunched my eyes up and looked closer, trying to compare this radar image to the mental image of the one I remembered from a few seconds ago. “But I don’t think it’s moving.”

“Maybe it’s a survivor craft from the pirate attack. It’s all yours, Morgan,” Davalorn said. I could practically hear his smirk over the radio waves.

I frowned. “It’s pretty far to chase a derelict,” I said, hoping my Commander would have mercy and we could all go home.

“You see it, you fetch it. And you’ve got to live up to the Executive Officer role somehow,” he said, his amusement with his own personal joke still audible.

I sighed, regretting having spotted the craft in the first place. But I had no choice. “Roger that, Commander.” I put my right hand back on the stick, swinging it around without much pressure and shoved the throttle forward, my TIE rocketing around and the bladed Interceptor wings slicing through the void. With the next sweep of the display line the red dot centered on my targeting display. It was still out of visual range, even with my helmet’s capabilities.

After a few seconds of seat-shaking acceleration and being pressed back into my cushioned chair by the Interceptor’s powerful engines, the craft’s sensors highlighted the enemy on my helmet’s HUD. A brief data readout popped out beside it, confirming Dav’s suspicions. The final remaining enemy was one of the freighters that the marauding X-Wings had been attacking, but it was not moving. Its engines had been either powered off or destroyed, and it listed lifelessly through space.

I approached the craft quickly, only decelerating at the last moment and banking my TIE above and over the freighter, turning to point my wings at it as I came across. I was lucky that the inertial compensators of the Interceptor were top of the line, or otherwise the momentum would have carried me out of my seat restraints, through the cockpit wall, and into the void. Davalorn would have been mad at the reckless maneuver if he could have seen me, so I was thankful that it was far enough that they didn’t want to follow. After all, everyone needs some unsupervised maneuver practice time in a real craft, not just a sim pod.

With a quick push of a cockpit systems control button to my left, a scanner analyzed the freighter in front of me and confirmed what I had thought. The craft drifted without power, probably disabled from the attack.

But as the scan finished, I frowned as if I were trying to fit together pieces of a vague puzzle I had a hunch there was no solution to. The last statistic that the display read out confused me - *No major lifeforms aboard*. There were no hull breaches, no escape pods, and no open bulkheads or hangars, so if there were no lifeforms aboard now there hadn’t been any in the first place. There weren’t even any laser burns or scoring to indicate a survived attack, or bodies floating in the void nearby.

That’s curious, I thought. *How the kriff did it get here?* I kept frowning. *Maybe this is what the pirates were after.*

I unmuted my microphone with a flick of my eyes and the music reverberating through my cockpit dimmed once again. "This is Morgan. I was right, it's a derelict. I'm going to board the freighter."

There was a pause on the comms, a hesitation so long that for a moment I thought my message hadn't been sent. And then Davalorn's voice came through, halting but not without a tinge of curiosity.

"You're what now?"

I smiled with unfounded confidence born from a good idea coupled with a terrible plan, and repeated what I said. "Board the freighter."

"Why the kriff would you want to board the thing?" He didn't sound truly angry, but I began to understand that I would have to convince him before I was ordered back. My curiosity was piqued, and there was a puzzle to be solved, so I had my mind set on doing it.

"The scanner showed no lifeforms," I explained. "So maybe it is..." I panicked, my explanation underdeveloped in my haste. "... cargo? Treasure? Something the pirates wanted?" I winced as soon as I heard the words leave my mouth, and I could hear Wietu lightly chuckling in the background.

Davalorn rolling his eyes was practically deafening over the comms. "Treasure?" he asked. His voice was dripping in sardonicism, but I suspected he wasn't entirely unamused.

I crossed my gloved fingers hopefully. "You never know, man! Could be."

"Really?"

"Five minutes." I crossed my other hand's fingers, figuring I could use the extra luck.

"Four minutes," came the quick response.

I grinned, elated in victory.

"... and counting."

My eyes widened. Quickly muting my microphone, I gently edged my TIE over to what I figured to be the freighter's bay entrance. I unclashed my seat's harness with a press of a button on both sides and climbed up to stand on my seat. Double checking my helmet's vacuum seal and running a quick confirmation diagnostic on my suit's minimal life support, I breathed a couple times slowly, an attempt to calm my steadily-climbing heart rate. Leaning over the seat and grabbing an arc cutter and a miniature direction propulsion jet from the small emergency toolbox in the back, I pressed and held a button on the back of the cockpit to slowly depressurize the area. Quickly opening the hatch would cause such a rapid depressurization that I would almost certainly be snatched out by the rushing air and thrown into the void, a turn of events that I deemed sub-optimal with a waiting and possibly-observing squadron.

As the TIE slowly depressurized, I felt the cockpit's temperature slowly dropping. While the cockpit might have been a safe haven in the endless void, it was not controlled by life-support and thus certainly not comfortable. Even my pressurized protective flight suit could not protect me from the coldness of nothing. I had only performed a cockpit bailout once before in training, so the relative unfamiliarity did not lend itself to comfort and confidence either.

Eventually a small data readout beside the upper hatch of the cockpit flicked from red to green to indicate that I would be safe to open it. I raised myself up in the chair to reach the *open hatch* button pad, and felt the odd urge to hold my breath. Amused by my own ridiculousness and chuckling, I placed my gloved palm on the pad for a few seconds, a precaution from the craft to ensure that I really did want to exit into space.

It opened silently. It was unnerving, watching what normally makes a loud *pop* and *hiss* open completely silently. When it opened, too, the passive background noises of the TIE, the calm *beeps* and *boops* of buttons and indicators were turned off. It was thunderous, the silence and the cold, resonating all around me. All I heard was the whistle of my life support system's compressed air. It was like I was completely isolated from my surroundings.

I let go of the breath I had convinced myself I was not holding. Shaking my head in self-admonishment, I pointed the small jet I held in my right hand out from my body and away from the freighter's bay. Triggering it with a finger, it gently nudged me towards the ship's hull.

I landed gently on all fours against the hull, the impact again completely silent. Grabbing a small indentation on the hull to not float away and unclipping the arc cutter from where I had put it on my suit's belt, I searched for weak points on the ship's bay wall. Finding none, and my helmet's HUD being of no

help, and growing impatient, I began to cut a small circle in the hull, wide enough for my shoulders and hips but not much farther. The noise from the tool came through my helmet as nothing more than a slight static fuzz, overpowered even by my own breath and heartbeat. Sparks flew out from the arc cutter into the void, and my helmet's visor automatically dimmed to prevent retina damage.

Slowly, I made my way around the circle. I grew more and more agitated, and without a clock to monitor my progress through the four minutes I began to fear Dav's voice interrupting me at any moment.

The hull was surprisingly thin. As the cut finished and the circle met its beginning, air began to increasingly leak out. It was no longer quiet around me - the air began to scream as it tore itself out of the hull. *If there were any people in there*, I thought, *they would certainly know I'm here!* I rotated myself slightly out of the outline of the circle and finished the cut. The circle of metal was blasted out, rocketing off into the void, its perpetual momentum soon carrying it out of sight. Nothing else was sucked out behind it, though.

After the air calmed its retreat into the vacuum, I poked my head into the hole I had made. It was prohibitively dark, but as I pulled myself up and began to float through the hole, my helmet automatically began to brighten my surroundings, gradually allowing me to see the ship's interior.

It was fairly empty, explaining how nothing besides the hull wall was voided when it was opened to the vacuum. The freighter had a small empty flat space to serve as its bay, and beyond that two rows of seating.

I completely entered the ship, pulling my shoulders and hips through, and when my helmet completed accustoming itself to the darkness, my stomach leapt up to my throat in surprise, my heart's staccato rapidly accelerating.

Tied to one of the seats, buckled in with the seat's restraints, was a body. It was slumped over, its face hid by shadow and angle.

Unfreezing myself with every drop of willpower I had, I pushed myself off the ship's wall and floated over, my breath quicker and heart thumping in my ears.

The body's shoulder-length hair waved in the lack of gravity, the arms and hands floating unrestrained. Its loose clothing was of ambiguous cloth and style, but was far from elegant. I landed on the seat next to it, my body still on high alert and my mind racing, asking an unbelievable amount of unanswerable questions about the scenario that led to this. *Was this the pilot? How was the craft empty except this one person?*

The face was still turned away from me. I gently reached out and grabbed the shoulder with my gloved hand, and slowly twisted the body to face me.

And as it faced fully towards me, my breath was driven from my lungs just as forcefully as the air from the depressurized freighter, and my hand jerked back involuntarily, faster than any reflex a pilot could dream of.

The body's face was blank. Smooth. Featureless, like a solid pale color projected onto a dome.

#

"That's four minutes, Morgan. Time's up."

I had no response. My mind screamed at my body to move, to reply, to do something, anything - but I couldn't. I was frozen.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was like someone had erased the face off, but left everything else. I had seen weird stuff out in the void before, stuff that people in a planetside bar would laugh at you for saying you saw. But this, this was the weirdest to me, and it wasn't even a competition. My helmet's HUD had no information to offer.

"Morgan?"

My brain eventually won the battle, and I blinked, hard. "Copy that, Dav," I said, fighting to keep my voice level and volume controlled. "Exiting the freighter now." I did not move. I was afraid if I spoke too loud or flinched an inch, the faceless body would hear me and wake up.

My voice was not steady, evidently. "What did you find?" Dav asked.

I didn't know how to describe it. "Um... you'll have to wait and see." My voice still wavered, and I still didn't move, rigidly hanging on to the seat I had perched in. My eyes never left the thing's face.

That earned a chuckle out of Davalorn. "Kriffing treasure, huh? Well then, bring it back in your TIE. Is there enough room in your cockpit for it?"

My brow crinkled. Several words crossed my mind, none to fit to call a commander. I was beyond confident he was just being combative and trying to prove a point to me, but I'd be damned if this demon was riding in my TIE with me. "Well," I replied, "maybe, but I don't know if that's –"

"Bring back the treasure." Davalorn was not asking anymore. He seemed a bit irritated, which I supposed might be fair. I'd taken the boondoggle, and I figured I'd have to pay the price.

I tried one more time. "It's not treasure. I don't know what it is, it's just weird."

"Then we'll figure out what it is when we get back to the *Warrior*." He said. The debate, if it had ever been one, was over. "Load it up, Morgan, and meet up with us at the egress point. Comm silence from here on out."

I shook my head, certain that he had declared comm silence just so I couldn't keep talking. Breaking a comm silence order brought far worse consequences than anything I was currently bordering on, so I shut my mouth.

I realized then that I had moved my head and the bald-faced body hadn't reacted. I breathed deeply, and, after a moment of hesitation and nerve-steeling, raised a hand back out towards it. My heart was beating way faster than it should have been, and sweat rolled off my forehead down beside my ears. No matter how climate-controlled the suit was, it couldn't stop nerves.

It didn't react. Its hair simply continued to drift in slow motion, its outstretched limbs not twitching or tensing at my approaching hand.

I tensed up, preparing to jump backwards if the body even looked like it was going to move. Leaning forward slowly and never looking away from the thing's face, I hit the harness release button on the straps holding it down. They disengaged and retracted off the body, which, suddenly unrestrained, lightly floated up and out of the seat. It still didn't react.

Ever so gently, holding my breath, I touched its waist. It was wearing a brown belt of some hard cloth, and when the body didn't react to the initial touch, I grabbed it. Holding my small jet engine in one hand and grasping the body's belt, I gently lifted off towards the hole in the bulkhead. I exited backwards, my legs pointed together and my head held close to my body in the hopes of not banging it against the corner of the circle. I let go of the belt and grabbed the body's feet and guided it through the same way out into the void.

My TIE had maintained its position out of the way of the rush of exiting pressurized air. The cockpit was still open, and I positioned the body in front of me. Grabbing the shoulders, I gently guided it down into the TIE and behind the seat. My heart screamed as the body scraped against the seat and a hand floated upwards to unconsciously touch the cold metal wall of the cockpit, but it didn't awaken or react in the slightest, letting me guide it to fit behind my seat and bend the appendages in to fit better.

I let go, and the body stayed. It looked secure enough to me, so I pulled myself fully into the cockpit and onto my chair. Closing the hatch we had come through and beginning the re-pressurization cycle, I powered the rest of my ship back on and grabbed the throttle. I didn't want to waste any time.

I hope this thing doesn't wake up in hyperspace, I thought to myself, assuming it's even alive. Which I guess it's not, I reasoned. My ship said there was nothing alive on that craft, and it just floated through a void fine enough. Offering a quick prayer upwards to whatever was listening in the void, I pushed my throttle forward and shot off to rendezvous with the rest of Rho.

#

The jump back through hyperspace was a short one. We hadn't traveled far from the ISDII *Warrior* in the first place – the distress call begging for help against the pirates originated from only a few light-years away, and Rho Squadron had scrambled and was at the location within a standard hour.

When we had gotten there, however, the pirates had mostly destroyed the distress-broadcasting convoy, only a few ships remaining. And as we fought the pirates, some ignored us and continued to whittle down the remaining ships, as if they were getting rid of evidence or an enemy that truly was hated. The one that this bald-faced enigma was floating inside was the only one left, escaping through some miracle. Or through some curse, at least on me because I had to fly back with it behind me.

My TIE passed through the faint blue barrier that marked the divide between the *Warrior's* hangar and the void and landed gently down on the deck floor, a light metal clang muffled by the cockpit wall heralding the touchdown. The rest of Rho had already landed, and three of the pilots that were interested walked over to my cockpit, their helmets uniformly held by their side.

I chuckled silently as I unstrapped myself and popped the hatch open with the press of a button, which sounded deafening in comparison to when I had done it not even an hour ago. Standing on my seat and pulling off my helmet, I gestured at the approaching pilots.

"Who wants to help me pull it out of here?" I was morbidly excited to see their reactions, and even more excited to see if anyone could identify it, which I deemed improbable despite my hopes. Its face was angled upwards, so it would be immediately apparent how unusual it was.

Wietu looked at Davalorn and FamePlane beside him before raising his hand, slightly falteringly. "I'll do it," he said, but was squinting in confusion. "Is it heavy? Why do you need help?"

I pointed to the stairs of the docking structure that Mix had controlled and moved behind my Interceptor. "Climb on up and you'll see. Not heavy, just... an awkward weight."

From Dav and Fame's perspectives it probably was hilarious. Wietu climbed up and looked into the open cockpit hatch. His jaw immediately and comedically dropped, saying "What the kriff?" in a hyper-dramatic but entirely justified way.

"What? What is it?" Fame asked, stepping forward.

Weitu motioned him off, now invested in eliciting the same reaction from them. He gestured to me. "Pull it up?"

I nodded. "I'll push from down here, you grab."

It still felt absurdly uncomfortable touching the thing, its faceless head and immobile body a very heavy dead weight to support. I propped up an arm for Weitu to grab, and slowly we pulled it up, slumping its upper body over the cockpit rim. Its face had rotated slightly to stare out, and its long hair hung down even further, draping over the cockpit viewport.

Dav and Fame just stood there and stared. I had never before seen Dav at a loss for a quick joke, but now his mouth hung slightly open, no sounds escaping. Fame had taken an involuntary half-step back in reaction.

"Not treasure, indeed," Dav mustered. The quip was only delayed, then, not completely lost in the shock.

The face seemed to stare at them, the body's hips folded over the edge of the open cockpit hatch. Everyone looked at each other, unsure of what to do. Weitu and I were still standing on the docking structure.

Weitu shrugged, and then gestured towards the body. "Well, let's get it down," he said, and before I could stop him or even react, he squatted, leaning over and reaching into the cockpit with both hands. He grabbed both of its legs and lifted them up, shoving it out of the hatch.

The body unceremoniously slid down the front of my TIE and dropped off, falling three meters down to the metal hangar flooring. It oscillated midair with its momentum and crumpled feet-first with a deafening clang that reverberated through the entire hangar. Its blank face still stared eyelessly upwards.

Weitu headed back to the ladder to the ground, but I was completely frozen. I was half-expecting that collision to be the moment that woke the thing up. I was so sure it would wake that my brain was already visualizing it unfolding from its undignified pile on the ground and rising to exact revenge.

All four of us must have been so tied up in staring at the motionless body that we didn't notice the approaching heel strikes that heralded dress boots on a hangar floor until the noise was right upon us. Wietu and I looked up, and the two of them on the ground turned around.

There stood Marenta, fully adorned in her admiralty regalia and uniform. Her hands were on her hips, and she stared at all of us in turn with the look that I only ever remember my own mother dishing out. Nobody said anything for a beat.

“Do I want to know?” Her eyes were now wide, and her tone conveyed more than a little bit of annoyance.

“Probably not,” I replied. “We don’t even really know.”

“That much is quite clear, Morgan.” She sighed deeply and rolled her eyes. She turned and looked up at Wietu. “Adom, spare a moment from... whatever this is?”

“Of course, ma’am,” he nodded in perfect stride. He had the unique capability to act like nothing was amiss under intense pressure.

She turned to walk out. “I don’t want to see whatever that is ever again, Morgan.”

“Why do you assume it’s my fault?” I chuckled.

She paused, looking back with a barely-concealed half smile. “Am I wrong?” I nodded in deference, still chuckling.

Weitu clambered down the stairs and followed her out, tossing a shrug and glance over his shoulder. *Good luck with that*, he mouthed.

#

It took some time and some detours to prioritize less-traveled halls of the ship, but the three of us eventually hauled the body to my quarters. We barely muscled it into an upright position against one of the walls and stood back as if we were admiring our handiwork, sweating through the flight suits we still had on.

“Well,” Dav said and shrugged. “What now?”

The inanimate body chose that moment, with some apparent unconscious flair for the dramatic, to collapse. It slumped slightly forward and sideways abruptly, and all of us jumped practically as high as the ceiling.

It hit the floor with heavy momentum and a thump. We all looked around and laughed, embarrassed by our fright but no less on edge.

After a few calming breaths, I saw Dav turn his head a little bit, looking at something on the body. He stood up and closed the distance between it and him, and reached out at it. After a moment of hesitation, he gently pushed its shirt a little up.

A little breath of air escaped his lips. “Well, look at that.”

Fame and I half-rose, our curiosity still not able to tamp down our wariness. “What is it?” I breathed, voice hushed with irrational caution.

“Look for yourself,” Dav said, and pivoted out of the way so he was not blocking the view. He pointed to a spot on the body’s low back.

What we saw was the final confirmation to the ever-growing suspicion that this body was truly not anything as simple as a corpse. A sliver of its skin was lifted up and folded back, exposing a slightly recessed shiny dataport.

#

“It’s a *what* now?”

“It’s a droid, Fro! A kriffing droid.”

Wietu shook his head. “No way. Simply no way. What type of droid looks like that?” He continued shaking his head and pacing across my quarters. We had waited for his meeting with Marenta to be done to share the news.

“I mean,” Dav shrugged, “I don’t know what to tell you. Look at the port!”

“The charging port,” Fame interjected.

Weitu laughed incredulously. “Which one of you pulled on it?”

Dav shrugged. "It must have unflapped when it fell from the cockpit or something."

Wietu peered closer. "What fits in that? That socket's not Imperial or anything else I've seen."

"I've got Tiran searching the tech cargo bays," I pointed. "If something fits in that, he'll find it soon enough."

The doors opened and Tiran Marr ran in, out of breath. If it weren't so obvious he had just been running through the halls, I would have sworn he was waiting outside the door for a dramatic entrance. He held in his hands this old rusted cord, something that had obviously been sitting unused for years in a storage bin.

"Is this it?" he asked, holding it out. "I had to beg the droids to let me take it, but once I showed them what it was they didn't really seem to care anymore. They made a joke about how old it was."

Davalorn squinted and looked back and forth between the cord and the socket. "Maybe?" he said. "Only one way to find out, eh?"

He took the cord from Tiran and plugged one end into the wall socket. He looked around the room and held up the other end. "Who wants to do the honors?"

I laughed. "You found it, you plug it, Dav." Nobody else volunteered, so he groaned and knelt over the droid body. Flexing his hands and cracking his neck like he was about to diffuse a rhydonium detonator, he brought the cord closer and closer to the coupling.

The quiet in my quarters rang loud in my ears, my heartbeat audible and fast. Dav slowly lowered the plug nearer and nearer, and I could hear his breathing from where I was standing.

The silence was shattered as the droid's socket's inner workings whirled and clicked with a metallic *snap*. Dav's whole body jumped in fright - he hadn't even plugged it in yet, but apparently the socket could sense the power source nearby.

Dav gave up his slow and careful approach and quickly plugged it in the hole. Stepping back swiftly to stand back with the rest of us against the far wall, he stood and watched as the power socket magnetically clamped onto the cord, rotating around it with a mechanical whirl.

We stood and watched it for what felt like hours but was surely only minutes. We waited in silence as the whirl came to an abrupt stop, and the silence once again stole the room.

The droid body did not move.

Wietu eventually broke the quiet and threw up his hands in a semi-exasperated gesture. "Well," he said, "that was criminally anticlimactic."

#

The body did not move. We stood and waited for minutes, and then sent Tiran to fetch dinner from the mess hall so we could keep watching. He came back with trays and the body still had not even twitched. No noises, no movement, no sign of life at all from the droid.

Patience eventually wore off. Wietu was the first to bow out, citing paperwork due, and the rest followed his lead. Dav left last, tossing a parting "Let me know if something crazy happens, Morgan!" as the door hissed closed behind him. I laughed and said something in response, but I was too tired to be sure of what I had even said.

As the night grew long and approached the morning, even I gave up my meditative vigil. Putting our collection of trays by my door so I didn't forget to return them in the morning (and receive a verbal beatdown from a mess droid about culinary punctuality), I dimmed my room lights and fell asleep in my bed faster than normal - waiting was exhausting, apparently.

It was not but a few hours before something woke me up. Perhaps it was a shift in the air that alerted some subconscious-but-alert part of my resting self, or just a sense of something abnormal that triggered some biological mechanism. Whatever it was, I slowly blinked my eyes open.

The room was still dark, meaning my morning clock and light system was not yet active. But there was enough ambient light that I could make out silhouettes and shadows.

And I could make out the droid standing over me, cord still attached from the wall to its back. It was stooped over the bed, staring directly at my face. I looked directly into its eyes and realized that it no longer was a faceless droid.

It had my face.

#

My own eyes stared back at me, not blinking, in an absurdly-perfect mimicry no mirror could match. My own hair stood on bedraggled end from its head. My own mouth was shut and straight on its face. It wore my own day-old stubble poking out on my own jawline.

My heart seized and blood ice-cold with fear shot through my veins. If it weren't for my general health I'm sure I would have had a cardiac event right there on the spot, but instead my reactions took over for my brain that was struggling to comprehend exactly what I was looking at. My training knew that it didn't matter and I immediately threw a clenched fist at the thing's - my - face.

But no matter how instantly alert I was, no matter the adrenaline hormones my brain dumped, I was still fresh off of sleeping. My punch was intercepted by my blankets and I scrambled to adjust, slipping and sliding in panicked overreaction. To the droid I probably looked like a nosna fish out of water. It stood over me and watched as I flailed, not blinking but following my face with its eyes.

Eventually the blanket came off, but the first punch I threw it caught, like we were in an action holo-film. I balled my other fist, but the droid grabbed that arm before I could even wind back. I looked at its hands that now held me down and realized in shock and ever-mounting horror that they were my own hands, complete with the small scars and the crooked right index finger from slamming it in a speeder door in my teens.

And then it spoke calmly as I struggled against its hold.

It spoke in my own voice.

"Hello, Morgan."

It was one thing too much for my system. The adrenaline flooded out from shock and the blood rushing to my head in strained effort overwhelmed my senses. I slipped into unconsciousness.

#

I awoke again and this time was ready. I felt like my brain rested lightly, so I practically hopped out of bed alert and ready. Adopting a defensive posture with fists raised, I looked around as my eyes adjusted to the light of the room.

The droid was sitting in the desk chair, legs crossed and looking at me attentively. It was a perfect match of me - if it said it was my long-lost identical twin, I would have believed it without question.

I didn't really know what to do. I slowly dropped the pose, but couldn't muster up the strength for words or any expression besides silent confusion.

The droid stuck out its - my - hand like it was offering a handshake.

It spoke again in my voice: "Good morning, Morgan."

That unnerved me enough to get my brain and voice to finally communicate. "Can you stop talking," I said. I shook my head and didn't move my hand to meet his. "Talking in my voice," I appended.

The droid nodded and took back his - my - hand. "Not too hard," it said in an instantly-new voice that got under my skin far more easily - another voice coming out of my mouth was almost enough to knock me out again; I could tell I was still fragile.

I shook my head again, trying to piece together phrases. I was still rooted to the ground but was thankful that I could somewhat talk.

"Turn it off," I said haltingly. "Me. I mean looking like me." I took a deep, gathering breath, trying to reassure myself that this thing was not a threat and get a solid phrase verbalized. "Stop looking like me, I can't handle it."

It smirked, like it had won the battle. Which I suppose was true, given that I had been handled without effort earlier.

And then it sparkled a little bit and started to shimmer, something that was an odd illusion to see over my own body. It shone bright and I saw my face disappear behind light. The rest of the body followed, and then it began to dim. As it faded, a new person sat in my chair. A thin feminine face sat on top of a completely non-descript build, her hair pulled back in a bun.

I held my arms out in disbelief, internally grateful for having full function of my body back (and full representation).

“What the *kriff* are you?” I mustered.

The droid stuck out her hand for a handshake, and this time I obliged out of pure curiosity despite my stomach twisting in nervousness. The hand felt unequivocally human: no cold metal or stiff movements.

“I am CAM-9,” she said, pronouncing ‘CAM’ in a fluid word as in ‘holocamera.’ I could still tell it was an acronymed designation.

“Cam, then,” I said. “Cam, what the kriff are you?” My tone had slowly softened but I reminded myself internally that no matter the exterior, this droid was dangerous to the core.

“I am whatever I want to be,” was the reply.

I visibly rolled my eyes, and Cam smirked. *This droid clearly has a flair for theatrics*, I thought to myself.

“You’re in my quarters, you owe me an explanation.”

Cam nodded. “Fair point,” she acknowledged. Sighing as if this were a story she had told too many times, she started.

“I am one-of-a-kind, as you can probably imagine. I shapeshift, adopting a life-like and physical representation of whatever I choose. I’m like a Clawdite, but a droid: fancier, perhaps. I also specialize in analysis. I have an extensive database of knowledge pertaining to behaviors, history, and pretty much the whole known galaxy.”

I interrupted. “Who made you, and when?” Her explanation was not giving as many answers as I was hoping.

She shrugged in response. I couldn’t tell if that was a trauma-burdened “I don’t know” or dodging a question she didn’t want to answer, so I dropped it.

I looked around my quarters and made a gesture of slight exasperation with my arms. “I’ve got morning patrol, Cam, so I’ve got to get ready quickly. What am I supposed to do with you?”

Cam smiled. “I can be useful. You got a boss in need of an administrative assistant?”

I squinted. “I found you on a derelict freighter - which, by the way, we haven’t even talked about what you were doing there - and the first thing you ask for is a *job*?”

Another shrug from Cam and no reply.

I insisted this time. “You really have nothing to say about your circumstances about a day ago?”

She held up a placating hand. “You have to get to patrol duty,” she said. “We can talk about it when you get back?”

I rolled my eyes and walked over to get my clothes for the day. “Fine. We’ll play your way. And I know for a fact that Wietu wouldn’t want you - but I know who will.” I chuckled to myself. *Marenta will love an assistant.*

Part Two

Early 33 ABY

The *Skira Naasad* cut through the smoky haze of explosion after explosion, the screaming of its twin Sienar ion engines audible just before its slanted and ancillary wings rocket out of each successive cloud and twirl whips tendrils behind it. The TIE/rh Rhodium looked like it could be pasted there straight from an Imperial Navy recruitment advertisement if it were ten years ago.

Spinning and throwing laser bolts from its four wing-tipped cannons simultaneously, the craft pursued an E-Wing through a series of loops, banks, and dives, ferocity personified. The *Naasad* drew closer and closer, its laser bursts reflecting clearer and clearer against the enemy's cockpit window. Cutting rashly through crossfire from a source not seen, the E-Wing spun along its axis rapidly before diving hard and continuing the turn so it was inverted and positioned close to the atmosphere moon. The *Naasad* banked upward to attempt and come down on the E-Wing, but when it finished its flip and returned to the same trajectory as the E-Wing, it was nowhere to be seen. In an instant, the *Skira Naasad* erupted into an orange fireball and the E-Wing flew victoriously through the explosion.

"Pause playback," Cam said. The video screen in the simulation pod room aboard the ISDII *Warrior* froze as the E-Wing was fully visible against the explosion, a still life of embarrassment that made me sink a little deeper in my chair.

Cam looked between me and the screen, chuckling. Her currently-female apparition appeared to be enjoying this. "So, Morgan, what did you do wrong this time?"

I sat up in my chair and began to protest. "I thought it was trying to get space, so I tried to come down on top of it where it couldn't run. That E-Wing had some fast engines and I thought -"

Cam cut me off, still amused. "Your mistake is that you assume everyone would fly that E-Wing how you would. You assumed it would want more space because *you* would want more space. That's fatal, Morgan!" She was more serious now, and I sat more politely in my chair so I didn't get lectured about my manners as well. "It is only forty-eight hours until engines hot and you still don't understand the enemy you will face."

I sighed. "I wanted you to tell me what I needed to know, not have me fly against their best pilot over and over again."

Cam frowned. "What good would that be? I programmed this artificial pilot with everything I know about the Tusorixian Front, which I'll have you know is quite a lot. They fight uniquely, and if you underestimate them or assume they are like you, you'll end up the same in real life as that simulation."

I nodded and sighed again. "You're right, you're right. I'm just tired, I guess. Can we take a break? I've got a new office to manage, don't you forget," I smiled hopefully.

"Absolutely not," Cam shook her head. "Forty-eight hours, remember? And Ranger is still on the *Doomsday* managing the Recon transition. If anyone needs something, he's still there."

A third sigh. "Alrighty, ma'am," I said, sarcasm beginning to seep into my voice. "Whatever you want, ma'am, because you're in charge here." That earned a death stare from Cam, and I quickly grinned and scampered back to the simulation pod. As I hopped in I heard her returning to the console and re-activating the pod, saying "Restart simulation."

#

Despite Cam's dismissal of my concerns, the past few days had been a whirlwind. I was given a new office aboard the *Doomsday* - and control of its bridge. Leading a squadron had been one beast of a journey, but serving as the Reconnaissance Officer for the entire military organization? Outrageous that anyone would trust a young pilot like me, but I suppose that Ranger had enough faith in me to turn over the reins.

The Emperor's Hammer was headed deeper into the Unknown Regions, into a place I had heard that locals called the Chaos. From what I had been told, expectations were to find cultures and civilizations, not all of them friendly.

The TIE Corps was of course to serve as the first response to any threat, and all squadrons were already placed on standby alert. But Rho Squadron apparently had a different purpose.

It was weird not being Commander and receiving information from meetings. Instead I sat in the briefing room with the rest of the squadron hearing about it for the first time - doubly weird doing so with the dual admiralty position. There was a lot of travelling back and forth between the *Warrior* and *Doomsday*, which I tried to keep close to each other for my own convenience.

Maston Dane stood up there in the briefing room and told us that we would be backtracking slightly. A carrier had been requisitioned and diverted from the main fleet after leadership received a plea from the Tusorixians light years back on the path we had forged through the Unknown Regions. Apparently, the government was struggling to deal with a rebel insurgency that named itself the Tusorixian Front, and Rho Squadron was to attack a facility.

Cam had provided Rho Squadron with her composite intel on the group. She learned that it formed in resistance to the Emperor's Hammer's occupation of the area and the Tusorixian government's military collaboration, but had laid latent for a few years while it grew in power. It now represented a formidable enough force and held enough of a grudge, despite the Emperor's Hammer having mostly moved on, that our help was requested. And so she had me fly against a customized artificial opponent, one who fought and thought like a Tusorixian and could prepare me for the unique challenges.

And with forty-eight hours until our departure from the *Warrior*, she had me training without mercy. With only a little bit of rest until the night before, I slowly learned the enemy. And then it was time to go.

#

Maston Dane's Kel Dor voice came filtered through his mask and my helmet's audio speakers. "Alright crew, let's review. Target is a Tusorixian Front military staging ground facility on the far side of the moon Zaryan. Flight One is to utilize missiles against the main facility building and landing pads. Flight Two goes on further to the starfighter landing pads. Flight Three waits in between the two for rapid response if needed."

"They don't know we're here yet," he continued as our craft raced low and fast over the moon's surface, "so hard and fast is how this shall be done."

"Go Rho," Davalorn chimed in, and then the comms system fell silent as we drew near. With the click of a few buttons to ensure my microphone was muted, I started up the music chosen for this time. The sound of retro swing-bop hits echoed through my cockpit and carried me across the moon.

Maston led Flight One in their peel off towards the first target. His flight followed him without direction. Over the years, Rho had polished itself into quite the efficient machine.

Isabis then turned to meet the halfway point. The rest of the Flight and I followed, tapered in a short wedge formation on either side of her wings.

By the time we got to our halfway point and hovered our craft in place, Maston had already called out his "engaging target" mark. Shortly after, Davalorn called his for the starfighter pads, and then the comms line resumed its silence. There was no need for callouts between pilots as there was no air resistance to fight against.

But then the comms crackled back to life, and Maston's deep voice cut through my music. "Flight Three to the main facility, bogeys inbound."

I could hear Isabis chuckle and could imagine her a little giddy, thrilled to not be sitting on the sidelines any more. "Flight Two, let's move," she practically beamed, and our engines roared to life as we lifted off and rocketed towards the main facility.

#

When we got there, Maston and his flight had their hands full, occupied but not outmatched. Six E-Wings accompanying a freighter had arrived and were desperately trying to clear the facility from its aggressors.

As the four of us approached, a few of them peeled off to prevent themselves from being pinched in, but all it served to do was reemphasize our new numerical advantage. One E-Wing swooped low as it approached to try and angle up while we were distracted forward, but with a quick nudge down on my throttle below the horizon line, I met his trajectory head on.

Cam's automated pilot served me well. I had been shown that they didn't want to hold a joust and were able to be intimidated in that manner - and this pilot followed suit. Straightening back down to continue beneath me, it broke the direct line of fire. I dove and spun to follow tight on its tail, not giving it any space to breathe or spin around on me. I stuck with its dips and dives and spins as closely as a mynock on a ship's broken energy conductor, and I could see the pilot growing erratic in his attempts to avoid my ever-closer laser bursts. I was saving my missile complement in case any clean-up was needed, but I let the launcher lock on to the ship anyway in the hopes that the 'missile lock' tone would provide the right mental intimidation.

The E-Wing's engines flared brighter as the pilot pushed his throttle to its maximum before corkscrewing downward and spinning to head the opposite direction. My instincts screamed - *climb and ambush!* - but Cam's disapproving voice echoed through my head. *Morgan, what did you do wrong this time?*

I threw my stick down and with an alternating press on the rudder pedals, my Rhodium followed the E-Wing through its spiral. It slowed towards the end and flattened up, clearly hoping I had taken a vertical circle and preparing its own backstab - but instead, I was right behind the near-stationary craft. With a giant fireball and shattering of debris, the E-Wing was no more, and my Rhodium rocketed off victorious.

I began to sweep for other targets just to discover that there were none. My squadmates had performed well themselves and taken down the rest of the E-Wings with no damage themselves. I supposed that with technologically superior craft and a near two-to-one advantage, that couldn't be chalked as too much of a victory.

A non-Rho voice buzzed through our intercoms as we turned our attention to the remaining craft, the lumbering freighter still slowly making its way across the sky. I recognized the voice as one of our transport cruiser's bridge staff. "Rho Squadron, do not fire on that freighter. Its contents have been deemed of interest to the Emperor's Hammer and this Tusorixian administration. We will disable and board."

"Copy that," Maston replied on all of our behalf. If Kel Dors could smile, I knew that he was then. "But how about a little cockpit flyby for..." he paused, "strategic intimidation?"

No response came back - the cruiser probably didn't want to dignify the question with a response - so Maston chuckled and switched back to the Rho channel with a small snap of static. "Line up, ladies and gentlebeings, you know how we do this. Closest wins."

As we approached the freighter, we fell into a line ordered by our squadron position. I was next to last, an odd switch from the front of the line. We met the cruiser on a tangent, flying near-perpendicular to its cockpit viewport as it floated slowly along, seemingly unhurried by the quick demise of its escort.

I squinted through the helmet's lenses as the beginning of the line began to fly past it, skimming near meters away from it in somewhat of a cocky victory celebration. I liked doing it, and in fact was slightly motivated this time to be the closest - the last engagement we got to do this in, I was ridiculed for apparently being too far away, as if I weren't even trying.

With slight adjustments to the rudder pedals and the stick, I edged closer and closer as the end of the line grew near to the freighter. And then, with the speed of a podracer over a sand dune, I flew past the viewport nearly close enough to see the atomic composition of it. A few bells chimed in the cockpit, a reminder to not collide (certainly too late if I had been mere meters closer).

Davalorn whooped as we finished. "If I had been sideways I could have reached my hand out and touched the damn thing! I definitely win."

I chuckled and shook my head, unmuting my microphone again. "If my TIE had wheels it would be a kriffing hover-bike, but it doesn't, so it's not. No way you win, I could see even the small paint scratches on the viewport!"

The voice line erupted in a cacophony of multiple victory claims and supposed proof-of-distance as we headed back to the cruiser and their boarding craft headed out the other way.

#

The squadron sat in the pilots' quarters aboard the carrier, all relaxing together as the ship sped through hyperspace to reunite with the fleet. Conversation had quickly turned from the fly-by (apparently it had been Davalorn, but I never conceded) to plans in the Chaos and expressing hopes that we had some strong opponents to innovate against.

The carrier's captain had decided to capture the cruiser, hoping for information - and I suspect interrogation. But Maston had conversed with the captain, offering his services, and reported back shortly later that the crew had killed themselves to avoid that very thing. The technicians boarded the ship just in time to stop the full system wipe, and as we relaxed they were attempting to decode the information received.

Isabis, ever the investigator, found a holochess board tucked away in a drawer and challenged everyone to a match. Maston was game but as they got started the captain called for him over the ship's intercom. Sighing in a mechanical way that only a Kel Dor could do, he rose and disappeared for a while.

Some others took matches against Isabis, and then it was my turn. But we had scarcely gotten a few moves in before Maston came back into the room.

He carried an odd mood with him, a somber sense that immediately chilled the atmosphere of the room. We all looked at him, ready for the bad news that we all sensed was coming.

My name came from behind his mask. "Morgan, a moment on the bridge." It wasn't a question, and the 'brace yourself' subcontext was more than subtle.

My heart sank beneath the metal hull of the ship as I stood up from the board and walked to him. We walked the minute or two of hallway in complete silence. I did not know how to prompt and question, and in truth did not want to know whatever it was. But Maston was a good judge of the importance of things like this, and so I believed that if he thought I should know something, then I should.

We entered the bridge. The humming of equipment, the hushed conversation between officers; it all felt normal until my gaze met that of the captain. He stood by some engineers huddled over a console, into which a small databox was plugged into.

As we walked up to him, my stomach began to sink and meet my heart. I didn't know what type of information they could have to hurt me as bad as they were acting it would, which perhaps would make this stab in the gut that much harder.

"Rear Admiral Morgan," he said with a salute. I'm sure that it was odd to be addressing someone in a pilot uniform as such, but that was probably the least of either of our concerns at the moment.

"Captain," I replied. "End my suffering." I came off far cooler than I was internally, a blessing and rarity. "Tell me."

He hesitated, but began to talk slowly. "We've decoded the database we found on the ship. It was miraculously linked to their main information logs, so even though they tried to wipe it we salvaged a lot."

I raised my eyebrows slightly, the customary but polite "get to the point."

He hesitated one more time, but launched in. "We recognized a name, sir. It was in their database of reconnaissance agents. A plant in the Emperor's Hammer, a spy tasked with destroying it all for the liberation of Tusorix on behalf of the Front."

"What is the name." It wasn't a question from me, it was a statement laden with fear.

"CAM-9."

#

One heartbeat. Two. Three. The words hung suspended as my heart slammed against my ribs, echoing through my suddenly-empty body.

Stunned or shocked wasn't a strong enough word. Flattened wasn't nearly impactful enough to describe how I felt. It was more like *paralyzed* - my nervous system shut down, my brain unable to process the information I had received, my body unable to breathe or think and only just barely able to hold myself upright.

Cam? A spy?

I felt myself numbly thank the captain and walk off the bridge. My feet carried me autonomously, without conscious direction from my still-reeling brain.

I didn't look up for a while, but when I did, I found myself slightly stumbling through some maintenance hall I had never seen before. I pressed against a wall and slid down, sitting on the floor with my torso slumped over my knees.

There I sat, trying to figure out how this could be with a brain that still protested function. My closest friend, my confidant for years, my advocate - someone who I trusted with anything and everything was someone that I had no idea who they really were.

My brain spun back up into gear and leapt to put the logic together, all the while rifling through questions. *Had Cam been reporting on me? Why would she help us so well? Were there always subtle influences that they asserted for the Front's benefit?*

The pirate attack those years ago had to have been staged, then. False enemies, false destruction, false distress, and an intentionally-unharmed ship with Cam inside. Unknown origins and a cloudy past finally made sense. It was intentional obfuscation, deception to avoid discussing the Front.

How had the Front gotten a droid like this? What level of autonomy did Cam have? Was this a conscious betrayal, continuous backstabbing for two years now?

And then I shifted slightly on the floor as the carrier dropped out of hyperspace with a sudden deceleration.

#

I found Cam still sitting in the simulation pod room, diagnostic probe interfacing with the control panel. He was wearing a nondescript male's face that I didn't bother to examine the details of - it was a face of deceit no matter what mask it changed to.

He looked up as I came in, a wide smile breaking out on his face. The sight of that would have brought happiness yesterday, but today it was a spy's insincere smile that connived behind your back.

"How did it go, Alex? Did anyone -"

I cut him off and continued striding forward, closing the distance at a rapid pace. "How long?" With each step forward I grew more angry.

His smile disappeared, and I could tell that his logic functions pieced together what I was saying immediately. "Morgan," he began and held up his hands in a placating gesture, "let me explain, it's not -"

"How long!" I practically spat out the words, derision written all over my face. With the last word I drew only a few feet away and reeled back a closed fist.

I had seen Cam fight, and been on the receiving end of too many specialized combat techniques in our sparring sessions. But Cam did not raise a block, or step away. He met my punch without a flinch and was knocked backwards. He barely caught himself as he hit the ground, and as he went down I could see his expression. He looked sad.

But that did not shake my rage. I stood over him and screamed as he lay on the ground propped up by his arms. "HOW LONG?" Tears ran from my eyes down my scarlet face, and I struggled to catch my breath.

He spoke quickly to get out a sentence before I interrupted or hit him again. "I haven't talked to them in a year, I swear!" His face began to border desperation.

"What are you, then?" I yelled. My fists were balled, fingernails knifing into my palms. I trembled in anger with each word.

"I'm not a spy any more, I promise," Cam said. He scooted away from me, his face beginning to border desperation. I did not follow, and he placatingly raised his hands in the space beneath us.

"Please," he continued, "I haven't messaged in over a year. I want nothing to do with them. I was trapped and controlled, but once I got here -"

"What was your mission," I blurted. "What did you come here to do?"

"They sent me here to undermine the Hammer," he said, "and sure, when I came here I wanted to, but then I met you and Rho and everyone and I just couldn't -"

"Save the emotional bantha piss, *aruetii*," I growled. "You can't manipulate this to be the victim!" My voice crescendoed back into a scream as I continued. "You spied on me while being my closest friend!"

His shoulder slumped. "I'm sorry," he said.

That shocked me out of my rage. His voice sounded so small, so sad, so broken. I had never heard him like that before. I dropped my fists and wiped away a tear with the back of my hand. I said nothing, because I had nothing to say.

Cam sat up and looked down into this lap. "I fed them information about the Hammer for about half a year," he began. "I then did a few months of false information, then I stopped checking in altogether." He paused, but I did not interrupt. I just stood there, listening and trying to contain myself from equal parts rage and crippling defeat.

"I couldn't betray you any more, Alex. I love all of you. This is my home. You have cared for me more than I thought anyone could."

I said nothing, but more tears began to gently roll down my cheeks.

He continued. "I never wanted you to know. I should have told you, I know, but I had hoped that you would never find out. I didn't want you to change the way you looked at me."

That was all I could take. I sat on the floor as the tears flowed freely. Gentle sobs escaped from my mouth and I hunched over my bent legs, shaking slightly.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Cam repeated. I could not reply, and he scooted closer on the floor to support me as I sat there and cried.

#

Two Days Later

I walked into the simulation pod room to find Cam standing by the control console again. He stood with his back to me a few feet away, so I knocked on the side of the door frame so as to not startle him. He half-turned to look back, and seeing me turned fully.

I chuckled lightly when he fully showed his face. On his right cheek there was a large purple and green bruise. He smiled softly, and I felt the weight lift off of my shoulders for the first time in what felt like forever. My chest, which I hadn't known was so tense, unclenched fully.

"Someone punched me," he said.

I raised my eyebrows jokingly. "Droids can bruise, apparently. I learn something new every day."

Cam smirked. "Only those of the spying variety."

That earned a disapproving stare from me. "Not that anymore, hmm?"

Cam nodded. "Not anymore."

We stood looking at each other for a beat, and as if one mind, both took a few steps forward to embrace. It was not a half-side hug of two acquaintances, but a full hold of reconciliation, of apology, and of mutual necessity. It was so hard to forgive - but without Cam, I really was nothing.

We broke and Cam pointed to the pods. "How about we put this away with a symbolic dogfight?"

I raised my eyebrows. "You against me? I haven't seen you fly in a long time."

Cam chuckled, his genuine laugh reaching his eyes. "Then this will certainly be interesting."

We each headed to side by side pods, and climbing in, he met my gaze. "Good luck, Alex."

I nodded and saluted in facetious seriousness. "Thanks. I'm going to need it." With a laugh echoing through his pod, he closed his door and I did the same. Settling into my seat, I chuckled lightly to myself. "*I'm doomed*," I grumbled as I fastened my restraints and slipped on my helmet.

With the click of a few buttons and the loading of the simulation, the synth waves of a Core Drive classic carried me forward into the fight.