

A blaster, hot and heavy in his hand.

A mug, ceramoplast warmed by the sweet, sugary, fragrant drink they'd prepared that morning.

A burning, aching bruise at the base of his skull, throbbing with pain.

A pillow beneath his head, cloyingly soft.

A young boy with narrow, soft cheeks and shocked blue eyes, lying on a floor spattered with his own, steaming blood.

A young girl, sprawled on the apartment's plush carpet in the other room, her chin in her hand and her nose pressed into a new digireader.

Morgan blinked, and the corner shop tucked into the steam and dirt of the Coruscanti streets faded from his mind. The apartment sharpened before him, his senses snapping back to the present, and all the cloying luxury contained within. It was Life Day. Hell, Morgan could hardly even say the holiday's name without chuckling. Not in a funny way, either. No, the very idea of "Life Day" was undoubtedly the biggest, juiciest slop of thrice-fracked banthashit ever served up to the galaxy. A day for self-righteous bastards to talk about the values of charity and giving, while getting blind-ass drunk on Csillan Gold, and peddling off fifty-cred kark made by Corellian wage-slaves to all their bosses, wives, and teeny mistresses. From the time that he was a little kid, through all his years on the streets and in chains, Life Day had been nothing but a sick joke.

Yet, here he was. Sprawled over the sofa far earlier in the morning than he would have liked, staring into the depths of a mug of hot chocolate. The damn thing wasn't even spiked. Emere reclined to his side, dark hair fanned out beneath her, idly scratching along Bugs' crest of spines, her eyes half-lidded. The hounds had woken them before Morra had...though Morgan was pretty damn sure that his daughter had put them up to it, as they'd found her ready and waiting on the couch. The expression on her face, a mixture of clinical curiosity and expectant, *childlike* enthusiasm had warmed his heart to the whole idea more than anything else, even Emere's encouragement. Getting to see his daughter happy, *truly happy*, was enough. More than enough.

Really, the whole thing was for her. The decorations, the hot chocolate, the gifts, and the damned, bulky, baffling, garishly colorful "*Tree of Life*" that they'd tucked them all under. The ideas certainly weren't his, and he knew for frakking certain that they weren't Emere's. No, each and every one had come from Morra. Bit by bit, hint by hint, she had unfolded the whole damned plot before either of them knew what was happening. Morgan was proud; he couldn't have organized a more effective scam himself. Both he and her mother were in the dark, manipulated into covering separate pieces of the gifts and the decor and the horribly cheesy music, until Morra finally brought them together and informed them that *she wanted a Life Day*.

And so they did. No more questions asked.

And it had been amazing. Spellbinding. Everything that she wanted, and everything that he'd never had before. Gifts, and food, and... a family to share it with. Watching her open her gifts, jumping immediately at the damned *Sith Alchemy* guides that he'd purchased for her instead of the sword, or the practice blaster, or anything else. Just as he'd expected really. Circling the necklace around Emere's neck, brushing her hair out of the way of the thin, silver chain, wrapped around a tiny fragment of a Kyber crystal. Laughing at their jokes, grinning at their smiles.

For a few hours, Morgan believed in the lie. A beautiful, beautiful lie.

The beautiful idyll that had fallen into his lap after a lifetime of sin, and waste, and pain. Sickly sweet, lightyears better than *anything* that he had ever lived. Anything that he had ever earned, and could ever deserve.

For just a little bit, Morgan had believed that he wasn't worthless.

*Worthless*, a grief-stricken voice sobbed in the back of his memories.

*Worthless*, Grimaldi chortled, as if they were right in his ear.

*Worthless*, Morgan's own voice chided, reminding him of the truth.

When he looked back up, breaking from his thoughts, he found Emere's eyes on him, dark and questioning. Morgan had known Em for most of his adult life, and he knew that look. Those eyes of hers could burn a hole through duracrete, and thusly had no problem burrowing right through his chest. Right now, clearer than any words, they were questioning him.

Morgan's brow furrowed, and he gave Emere a slight shrug, still reclined on the couch.

"Just...thinking."

Before the words had even left his mouth, he knew that was *not* the right thing to say.

"You *know* that does not even *begin* to cover it, Desatado," she whispered harshly, rising up to a sitting position, her eyes seeming to *flare* with an invisible heat. "I know that you're thinking, even if you don't have the damned *brains* for it. What I want to know...is what exactly is in. Your. Head."

Morgan sat up as well, glancing towards the other room, where Morra was, and pulling back slightly at her words. Rattled, his mind defaulted to what he normally did when pressed into a corner, and came up with the quickest lie that it could. "Just...thinkin' of costs. If Morra keeps pushin' through her damned classes at this rate, we'll need more creds comin' in, and karkin' fast at that. Might see abou-..."

*"Kriffschitt."*

"I'm havin' an affair?" he shot back, this time reverting to humor. Her expression only darkened.

"No. None of that kark," Emere stated flatly, moving across the couch towards him. For a moment, Morgan actually flinched backwards, but the Illohan caught him by the bicep, holding him where he was with one arm. "You. I need *the truth* from you. Everytime I think we've found a balance, everytime I think we've got it *right*, you get this look in your eyes. Like the man that I know is gone..."

She poked him in the forehead. Hard.

"...Somewhere in here, and something else is sitting where he was. Something savage, and afraid. I need to know what that is, Desatado...what you are. What you want. And I need the truth of it."

Visceral terror and panic bloomed in Morgan's chest, every instinct pushing him to get up and *get out*, to run the hell away before they went any farther. Down this path was pain. Down this path were things that he didn't want to think about, didn't want to examine. Shards of a mirror that he'd long since shattered.

But Morra was in the other room. And he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Still, Morgan looked up at Emere, finally meeting her eyes. Any hint of his normal grin had long since evaporated. Now...he only looked afraid. "Em...I dunno if you know what you're askin'. I dunno if there's a karkin' thing to frackin' *fix*, here. I don't know where to **start**."

"Try...at the beginning," she pushed, her expression finally softening. Emere glanced to the other room -towards their daughter- and he knew they shared the same thought. For her. "Just *try*, Morg."

The beginning. The beginning.

"...I found the damned blaster in the gutter. Was half-sure the karkin' thing wouldn't work. First time I tried, it didn't..."

--

Hunger, gnawing in the pit of his gut.

Pain, burning across his body, centered in a white-hot needle at the back of skull, where an ugly bruise throbbed.

Bright, colorful light down the street, the neon sign flickering.

The blaster in his hand. A heavy, cracked, useless piece of karking plastic and rusted durasteel. Morgan had picked the damn thing out of the gutter, scavenged parts for weeks, fought and scrounged and begged for the creds that he'd thought would fix the thing up. He thought he'd found salvation. A *blaster*. Something to keep him safe, after so long with *nothing*. A gangly, starving kid didn't stand much chance this far below the surface, especially alone. But, with a blaster? A blaster was a lifeline. A ward against the beaters that went from alley to alley, smashing in the faces of the homeless and sick for whatever crap they could pick from their pockets. A blaster was credits in his pocket, food in his mouth, *clean water*, if he could find who to talk to and where to point the damned thing. That part was the easy part, he'd always told himself. All he needed was a blaster.

The first time he pulled the trigger, when a trio of beaters sauntered into his alley, nothing happened. He'd heard them coming, heard them working up and down the streets, pulling the helpless from their nooks and filthy crannies. When the lead kid poked his head in, dark eyes leering, Morgan already had his little heater up and ready, pointed right in the guy's face. The momentary flash of fear was glorious, beautiful retribution.

And the damned thing didn't even work.

When the three were done with him, they didn't leave a damned thing behind but the clothes on Morgan's back and the *karking* stupid blaster, laughing at the joke of it. The beaters never killed him, or the others, of course. Killings drew attention, and that wasn't something that they or their larger crews wanted.

Morgan, somehow, still felt grateful for that fact. He wasn't dead. He was alive. That was worth something.

It had been two years since Morgan had left his mother. Two years living hand to mouth, stealing and selling what he could just to live hand to mouth, scrabbling desperately to find a room, a bed, or a hole that was out of the way enough to sleep in. In two years he'd learned to pick pockets, to carry secrets, to identify who could be stolen from and who to steer away from. In two years, he'd lost every scrap of his childhood, just to live. He'd never even broken out above level 1010, the closest to the surface that he'd made it since his mother had gotten sick.

The blaster was supposed to be his way out. The gangs wouldn't take a kid like him, not quite eleven years old and hardly a hundred pounds soaking wet. But, a kid that could buy his way in, with creds and a working piece was another deal. A gang would mean protection. A gang would mean security. A gang would mean a bed, and food. No more beaters on the streets, or scarred old mercs that caught his hand in their pockets, leering down with broken teeth.

Morgan cradled the broken blaster in his hand, and looked down the street. He could hardly even stand straight on his feet, they'd beaten him so badly the day before. Not the worst he'd

ever had -no, this one left him with all his fingers- but certainly on the upper end. He was spotted black and blue with bruises, and one bloody welt swelled at the base of his skull. Still, he had to stand. He'd pulled himself out of his alley, and stumbled along, blaster in tow.

He'd live. He'd fight. He'd keep running, for as long as he could. He'd make his life worth something.

*But he needed credits.* Food. Something. They'd taken everything that he'd scrounged in the last few days. That meant that he had to pull something desperate...and the clean little store in the block's corner was probably his best bet. It glowed with a pristine white light, digital letters advertising groceries, medicine, tech repair. There were billions of little places like it, all over Coruscant. Morgan had been to this one before. He knew they didn't carry any merc protection; this neighborhood was supposed to have more CorSec patrols, anyway.

Morgan didn't care about them. He needed the credits.

A small, electronic tone buzzed as he limped through the door, his heart hammering in his chest. There was a bored looking kid behind the counter, maybe one or two years Morgan's senior. He didn't move for the counter right away. Instead, he slowly meandered through the little store, looking over the immaculate rows of goods, bathed in harsh white light. Most everything that was worth anything was kept locked behind the counter, the cases only able to be opened by someone deeper within the store. He knew that well enough; he'd jacked places like this before, normally when he was down and out for food or water.

This time would be different. He needed the credits.

Morgan grabbed an armful of cheap, high-caloric protein cakes from one of the aisles, and limped back to the counter blinking at the cashier through one swollen eye. The other boy looked back at him, studying. Then, he nodded to the snack bags, and Morgan plopped them down on the counter, barely managing not to turn and run.

An easy scam. He'd run them dozens of times before. Just...not like this.

The other kid had barely begun to scan Morgan's "purchase" before he pulled the blaster from his pocket, pointing it over the counter with a shaky, aching hand. The blaster was broken, but the boy didn't know that...and he wouldn't take the risk, anyway. Morgan knew that. *Still*, he didn't look even the slightest bit surprised, or even a little bit afraid. As if he'd known what would happen the moment Morgan walked through the door.

Like clockwork, the boy pressed a button on the register, and popped out a little counter, raising one hand up so that Morgan could see it. He withdrew a small stack of shining NR Credits, bound together in a roll of flimsiplast, rolling it across the counter towards Morgan, who only barely caught it.

“That’s all I can give you; register won’t give anymore. Countermeasures. Y’know, for robberies,” the boy remarked, regarding Morgan with an even gaze. Morgan looked down at the pack; fifty creds, at most. A small fortune compared to all that he’d had in the last few years, a bounty that could keep him alive for weeks. Still...it wouldn’t have paid for even half of one of the pills that might have kept his mother alive.

Morgan looked back up at the cashier, and caught sight of something over his shoulder. A holopicture...of the cashier with an older man and a woman, their hands on his shoulders. Smiling bright. The boy himself had crossed from behind the counter as Morgan backed up...with the snack packs that Morgan had grabbed.

With one hand, he offered them over, earning only a shocked look from the boy with the gun.

“Take it. They’re five creds each, anyway; we’ll just say that the fifty is your change,” the boy offered, one eyebrow arching as he handed the snacks over. His eyes flitted to Morgan’s blaster, examining it for just a moment. Then, he gave a chuckle. “Your safety’s on, by the way. Might want to work on that.”

Morgan’s eyes followed the boy’s gaze to a small switch near the trigger. One that he hadn’t even seen before, its paint chipped away. Then, he looked back up. He could see his reflection in the plexiglass that lined the countertop. Morgan and the cashier might as well have been brothers...or different species. Nearly the same height, the same skin tone, the same eyes. But, one was a hollow cheeked, wild eyed, bruised and blood spattered animal, dangerous and feral and afraid. The other was soft cheeked, clean, rested...smiling.

One had been abandoned. The other had been raised. One had been fed. The other had starved. One couldn’t fathom kindness that he hardly remembered ever having. One could afford to be kind without a thought. One was staring down a rapidly approaching dead end to his life, a gap that he could never cross. The other might have had a future. Maybe. Just maybe.

In that split second, Morgan felt something inside him *break*.

His thumb brushed the safety switch to the off position, and he felt his finger squeeze down on the trigger. As if he was watching it, rather than doing it.

Morgan pulled the trigger, for the very first time. And he would regret it for the rest of his life.

The scrappy, broken down blaster kicked hard in his hand, nearly ripping the blaster right out of his grip. Instead of hitting the boy in the chest, where Morgan had been aiming, the bolt flitted up right through his neck. Burning red plasma carried most of the throat along with it as it seared through flesh and bone, vaporizing gouts of blood in its wake. In the confines of the store, the report was deafening, and the crimson-white flash blinding, shocking.

Morgan staggered back...and the boy fell to his knees, fingers rising uselessly to the fist sized hole in his throat. Morgan watched the light fade dully from his blue eyes moments later, as the pool of blood spread across the once-clean tile beneath him, spattered with gobs of smoking flesh.

Morgan knew that it was a mistake the moment that he'd pulled the trigger. But, he didn't realize quite how bad it was until he heard the cry of alarm upstairs; a shriek of sudden fear and worry. It broke him out of his reverie...and sent him running, running back into the streets, the credits and his blaster clutched in his grip.

Fifty credits. He'd killed for fifty credits.

He'd killed someone that had a life, where he had none.

It was then, blood on his hands for the first time, that Morgan finally realized that he was worthless.

--

"The slavers reminded me, of course," Morgan continued to explain, his head in his hands. "They told me. Over and over again, once they brought me to Grimaldi. That I was nothing. That I was *worthless*."

He looked up, and met Emere's gaze, managing a small, meaningless smile. "A part of me believed them. Still believes them. I think...I think it always thought that, really. It's been there since I killed that kid. I can ignore it...but it always comes back. It always reminds me."

Morgan looked to the other room, where Morra was now dozing, her head nestled in the crook of her arm. A beautiful, brilliant, perfect girl. The daughter that he didn't deserve...and who didn't deserve to have a father as fracked as him.

"A part of me thinks...this is all just a lie. That, no matter how hard I try, I'm just...just another scam, pretending to be here for you two. Putting you in danger. There's a part of me that's *broken*, Em. Shattered and dead, just acting like it's alive. And...I don't..."

"You don't know which one is real," Emere finished finally, her dark brow furrowed. Slowly, she moved closer to him, one hand rising to his shoulder. Morgan didn't feel like he had the energy to shake it off. He felt like he'd just worked another year in the mines...or another week in Grimadli's household.

Still, he managed a nod.

"I don't know. I'm...*scared*, Em. Terrified...that whatever I've got coming will catch up, and take all of this away. Leave you two dead...or worse."

Looking up through his hanging hair, Morgan's eyes met Emere's for just a moment. This time, the heat in her gaze didn't scare him. Instead...he felt it burning in his chest, a warmth that he couldn't ignore.

Emere pursed her lips, for just a moment, the gears working visibly in her mind. Then, once again, she spoke.

"I don't know either. Sorenn told me almost exactly the same...but Sorenn's Sorenn, and you're *you*. I can't fix this for you. But...*but*...I do know what she wants," the Illohan stated calmly, nodding towards the other room. Towards Morra.

"Y'know why she did all this? Put all this schitt together? *Tricked* us into doing it, so it would be a surprise? She didn't just want a Life Day; she wants us to be a damned *family*, Morgan. All three of us. And for that...she needs you."

Emere drove a finger into his chest at that word. "*You*. I know you're afraid. But you're *still* *fracking* alive. Even if you don't know what you want, even if you might want to be *dead*...you aren't. Not yet. That means that you're worth *something*...and if you love your daughter, you'll spend that something on *her*. Not on giving up. *Never* on that."

Morgan blinked as the words hit him, each individual syllable slamming him like a series of punches. Unconsciously, he glanced towards the other room...and he felt his gaze soften, his heart burning in his chest.

"A family," he stated. The word was practically as much of a joke as Life Day.

"Fracking stupid," Emere replied, shaking her head. "You and me...I don't know, Morgan. But it's what she wants."

Morgan nodded, silent. Then, he turned back towards Emere, and met her eyes once again.

"Y'know, I wouldn't mind if you invited Sorenn to a threesome," he suggested finally, a genuine grin crossing his lips. He watched Emere's face turn *several* different colors at that, one hand rising. He caught it before she could do anything, shaking his head with a laugh.

"I'll leave *you* to think on that one. For now...well. We've got those classes to think about for her. Credits. Alchemy isn't cheap, Em."

"If you suggest I heist, I'll kick your *fracking* ass."

"Not even a small one? Life Day gift for me?"

"*No.*"



Morgan just smiled...and after a moment, Emere smiled back.

And the little voice, whispering *Worthless* at the back of his mind grew the slightest bit smaller.