



THE COVERT

ANDREW R. CAMERON

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The Covert

When we got to school on Centaxday morning, everyone was giddy with excitement because Toono was saying he'd seen a Mandalorian warrior in the mountains above the town while he was out hunting with his father. It was the biggest news to ever hit our little school and it fired our imaginations something wild. What was a Mandalorian doing out here? Were they chasing a bounty? Were they scouting for a new base? Of course, I didn't believe it at all. Toono had a complicated relationship with the truth, as my gran would say. When he first came to our school, last year, he told everyone that he used to live in a high-rise apartment on Coruscant, but then we found out that his family had shuffled around the Outer Rim on a refugee ship. And then last month he said that his

dad owned a Skyblade-330 swoop bike, which would have been absolutely wizard, but then it turned out his dad actually owned a broken-down, piece of shit V-35 Courier. I don't know why Toono lied so much, but it bothered me that everyone got so excited and part of me just really wanted to prove him wrong.

We had to wait until recess to hear the full story. This is what he said:

Toono was hunting with his father in the mountains to the west. They were hunting bran beasts, as usual, because Toono's family sold their pelts in the markets. They were up on a cliff overlooking a valley when Toono spotted movement far below. He looked through his macrobinoculars and saw a lone Mandalorian warrior kneeling by a stream, filling a canteen. The Mandalorian had a jetpack on his back and a rifle slung over his shoulder and his armour was a combination of green and brown.

No, the Mandalorian didn't see Toono or his father.

No, the Mandalorian didn't appear to have a ship nearby.

Toono and his dad watched the Mandalorian for a while and then went in the opposite direction because they didn't want to cause any trouble.

"That is such a load of poodoo," Sheree announced, when Toono had finished telling his story. We were huddled around a table in the courtyard, squished next to each other on the benches so that we could all hear Toono talk. He was wide-eyed and breathless, his long green fingers flapping as he told the story.

We turned our attention to Sheree. She was a year older than the rest of us. She had been held back a year because she said she had better things to do with her time than learn Basic and mathematics and history. “There is no way you saw a Mandalorian in the mountains, Toono. It doesn’t even make sense. This is just like your swoop bike story.”

“It’s true, I swear,” he squeaked, searching our faces to see how many of us believed him.

Sheree spoke with the utter certainty you get when you turn eleven. “Mandalorians don’t come to Possti—there’s nothing out here for them.”

“They’re too busy fighting the Empire,” I added, receiving a firm nod from Sheree.

We all knew what Mandalorians were about, of course. We all knew that their homeworld had been destroyed when they disobeyed the Empire and now their remaining tribes were scattered throughout the galaxy, hiding from the Empire and taking on work as bounty hunters or mercenaries. They were proud and deadly warriors. The idea of one of them being here on Possti was ridiculous. We were a colony world on the edge of the Outer Rim; our tiny community of farmers and refugees was the only settlement on the planet. Even the Empire didn’t bother with Possti.

“Maybe the Mandalorian was resting between missions,” Toono said. “Or maybe they were lost.” But he knew that none of us really believed him anymore, especially now that Sheree had called him a liar. She wasn’t good at schoolwork, but she was wise in the way of the galaxy and she knew about such things.

A couple of the kids slipped away from the group to go play. But Toono wasn't ready to give up yet. "You can ask my dad," he insisted.

None of us was going to ask his dad, and he knew it.

A strange look had come over Sheree's face. "There's one way to find out if you're telling the truth," she said, and everyone held their breath as she made a show of checking for the teachers, stretching out the moment of suspense. "We take a landspeeder," she whispered, "and head out into the mountains. Find this Mandalorian ourselves."

"How do we get a landspeeder?" Hari scoffed.

"We'll take my family's landspeeder, of course."

"Won't your dad be angry?"

"Why would he? He lets me take the landspeeder whenever I want," Sheree said, and her haughty tone made the rest of us feel like little kids. She looked to Toono. "If we drive out to the valley, do you think you can find the spot where you saw the Mandalorian?"

"I think so, yeah. But... I don't know. It's pretty far away. A few hours, at least. We were *deep* in the mountains, where the bran beasts live."

Sheree shrugged. "That's no problem."

I could sense the hesitation coming off our group like a palpable wave. Talking about a Mandalorian was one thing, but actually going looking for one was a whole different level. It wasn't just the Mandalorian, either; the mountains were dangerous. Most of us weren't allowed to play outside the bounds of the settlement. Gran would *kill* me—and I mean that in the most literal way possible—absolutely *kill* me

if she found out I was heading into the mountains with my friends in Sheree's dad's landspeeder.

Hari wasn't making eye contact with Sheree anymore. "I don't think my parents..."

"Then don't *tell* your parents!" she snapped. "Are you going to just spend your life doing what your parents tell you? Or do you want to have an adventure?" She jabbed a finger at Toono. "Do you want to see his Mandalorian?"

And so it was decided—or rather Sheree decided for us—that we would head out into the mountains to see if Toono was telling the truth.

It's not like Sheree's father actually gave her permission to take the landspeeder—it was more like he just didn't care that she did.

Toono and I met at Sheree's garage early on Primeday. We had been planning the expedition all week. A couple of kids had dropped out when it became clear that this was actually going to happen and Sheree wasn't just blustering. So now it was just four of us—me, Hari, Toono, and Sheree. We each had a vital role to play. I was responsible for the food because everyone knew my gran made the best cookies, Hari was in charge of equipment and weapons, Toono was our navigator, and Sheree was our driver. We had planned our expedition right down to the tiniest details—our schedule, the clothes we were wearing (green, to assist with camouflage), even how often we would stop for bathroom breaks. Toono, Hari, and I had coordinated our alibis: We were going on a picnic in the forest. Gran had been extra generous with the cookies.

Sheree's father was a mechanic. His garage was full of spare parts and disassembled speeders and rusting devices which he occasionally tried to sell to townsfolk. Sheree's mother had left the planet years ago.

I liked hanging out with Sheree—she was my oldest friend and I liked playing with the junk in the garage. One time we put together an old GNK droid and took turns sitting on it while it roamed the yard. But she had a very different life from me. She often had to cook dinner for herself while her father was at the tavern or repair her clothes by hand. At school she sometimes bragged that she hadn't showered for a whole week, and although I was impressed—a week was a long time!—part of me understood it wasn't something anyone should aim to do. The garage was not a good environment for a child, my gran said.

Her father's X-34 landspeeder had seen better days, but it was fast and wizard. Admittedly, Gran and I didn't have a vehicle of any kind, so I thought any kind of speeder was pretty wizard. We loaded our bags into cargo compartment, me being careful to make sure gran's cookies weren't crushed under the other bags.

"Dad, I'm taking the landspeeder," Sheree yelled into the workshop.

There was a rattle of machinery and a couple of swear words. "Don't overheat the engine," he yelled back. "If you come back with a cooked engine, don't bother coming back at all."

And although I sometimes hated how strict my gran was, I was suddenly grateful that she cared about me enough to ask where I was going and if I had food.

We headed out of town on the westward road, driving through the outlying fields and farms. Hari's farm was the last one before the road swept up into the forest and the foothills. We pulled up in front of the gate and watched Hari come lumbering up the driveway towards us, a rucksack bouncing over his shoulder. This was a critical moment for the success of the expedition. Hari had—reluctantly—agreed to bring his mother's blaster pistol along with him, and we all knew if he was caught taking it, our expedition would be over and we would be in *a lot* of trouble.

“Did you get it?” Sheree hissed, as Hari closed the gate behind him.

“Yep, I got it,” he panted. And he threw himself into the back seat as if he was being chased by a dozen charhounds. Sheree hit the accelerator and gave a whoop of triumph as we roared away.

I wasn't sure why Hari had agreed to come along. As he settled into the seat next to me, he tucked in his shirt where it had come loose and ran trembling hands over his collar to ensure it was sitting flat.

The road wound up through the foothills. The mountains loomed high above us, their rocky slopes thick with snow. The view from the foothills back along the valley was beautiful—there was our little town, surrounded by the golden and mauve sweep of fields, bisected by the river. We could see the docking field—two clunky freighters were offloading cargo—and the beige school buildings. Everything looked so small from up here, and I wondered how much of my life I was going to spend in this little settlement.

Sheree was a good driver, but she was a bit sharp with the accelerating and braking, so that we all got jerked around in our seats.

Toono said her driving was going to make him vomit and we all laughed at that and made vomiting noises each time she braked too hard.

A few hours after we left town, we stopped for a rest and a swim at Emerald Lake. It was too cold for us to really enjoy it, but you *never* passed up a chance to swim at Emerald Lake. Everyone knew that. The water was as still and clear as glass, and you could drink it without making yourself sick. It was the clearest lake on all of Possti, according to Toono, who had seen more of the wilderness than the rest of us.

After we grew tired of swimming, we spent twenty minutes skipping stones. The stones at Emerald Lake were flat and round and smooth—perfect for skipping. I got twelve skips from one stone, but Hari got fifteen. Toono only got eight. He reckons he got over twenty when he did it with his dad once, but I'm pretty sure that was another lie.

When we were properly dry, I gathered the food and set it out for my friends on a picnic rug. There were no adults around, so we ate the cookies *before* we ate the bantha steak sandwiches. It was the first time that Toono had eaten my gran's cookies, and he agreed that they were the best ever. Hari said his mum made the best ronto wraps (although I am dubious because gran says we just don't have the proper spices out here on Possti to make real ronto wraps like they have on Batuu) and then Toono told us how his mum occasionally turned bran beast meat into a delicious stew. We pondered if we had different tastes because Hari is a Duros and Toono is Rodian and I am human. But obviously my gran's cookies taste amazing for all species.

Sheree stayed silent during this whole conversation. I wondered if her dad ever cooked something or if he just heated up stuff he bought at the markets. My gran sometimes made an extra lunch for Sheree, and whenever I asked if Sheree could come to ours for dinner, Gran cooked up a huge feast. “Gotta feed a growing stomach,” she would say.

As we finished off the last of our lunch, Sheree walked back to the landspeeder and picked up Hari’s rucksack. “What blaster did you bring?”

“Wait!” Hari yelled, clambering to his feet.

But it was too late. Sheree was rummaging through the bag, her expression incredulous. “Where is the blaster?” She pulled out a pair of macrobinoculars and waved them in Hari’s face. “This is all you brought? You said you were bringing a blaster.”

Hari snatched his bag away from her. “I couldn’t get it. My parents have it locked away.”

“I thought you said you could pick the lock?”

“I... I couldn’t.” His expression was pleading. “It was too risky. If my parents found out I’d taken the blaster, I’d be grounded for months.”

“Dank ferrik, Hari, you damned coward. So we’re out here with no blaster and a Mandalorian warrior running around. Not good.”

I wanted to say that a blaster wouldn’t be much help against a Mandalorian, but I stayed silent. We were all a bit afraid of Sheree when she was like this.

“Do you want to go back?” Hari asked.

“We’re not going back,” Sheree snapped. “We’re going to go find this Mandalorian and put an end to this.”

Hari sniffed loudly and Toono and I did that awkward shuffling thing you do when your friend is crying but you don’t want them to know that you know they’re crying. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“It’s not your fault,” Toono said, earning a glare from Sheree.

We continued into the mountains. The road became narrower and steeper, the sort of track used only by hunters and beasts. Branches and bushes scraped against the side of the landspeeder. It was lucky the vehicle was already banged up and scratched to shit, otherwise Sheree’s father would have a meltdown when we returned it to him. The forest was darker and thicker, the trees rising high over our heads, blocking out the sky. Hari shuffled closer to me. Our jokes became louder, our laughter exaggerated. Things that normally wouldn’t have been funny became *hilarious* and I wondered if Hari and I were going a little crazy.

Yet Toono continued to give his directions in a calm, unruffled voice. Being out this far from town didn’t bother him in the slightest. He draped a long arm over the side of the vehicle and sat with his feet resting on the dash. He talked about places where his father had taken him hunting and the special spiked shoes they needed for the high passes in the snow.

At one point, as we crossed a meadow, he told Sheree to slow down and stretched a finger towards two bran beasts prowling along the edge of the forest.

“Are we in danger?” Hari asked. The beasts were staring back at us, ears pricked. Even at this distance, I could see the muscles rippling under their furry pelts.

“They won’t attack us,” Toono said. He was standing on his seat, leaning on the windscreen to watch the distant beasts. “They’re afraid of loud noises, like speeder engines. You have to be silent when you hunt them.”

I felt reassured by his composure. This was the most time I’d spent with Toono outside class. At school he seemed skittish, constantly on edge. But out here he was still and calm and confident. His family still seemed a bit strange to me—they were the only Rodians in the settlement. And his constant lies meant I didn’t know anything about his past.

“Where did your dad learn to hunt?” Hari asked.

Toono took a long time to answer. “Eriadu. We lived in a small town in the highlands. Dad hunted Eriaduan rats, but we had to watch out for veermoks too. They are nasty things—real fast, with huge teeth.”

“Why did you leave Eriadu?”

He shrugged. “The Empire.” And then, because that answer seemed too short, he added, “We spent a long time moving around the Outer Rim. I got tired of being on starships. So cramped.” He sucked in a chestful of fresh air, lifting his gaze to the mountain peaks.

“That’s why I’m here too,” I said. “The Empire arrested my parents back on Lothal, so my gran brought me here.”

“Possti is a paradise,” Toono said.

“My dad says Possti is worthless,” Sheree said. “It doesn’t have any minerals or ore, so no one cares about it.”

“That’s why it’s safe,” said Toono. “If there were minerals here, you can bet the Empire would build a big mine, just like they did on Eriadu. Safety is all that really matters. You can live here without being frightened.” He took one last look at the bran beasts and lowered himself back into his seat.

“It’s too boring here,” Sheree said. “As soon as I’m old enough, I’m out of here. I’ll go to Corellia or Daiyu or someplace with a bit of action.”

Toono sighed. “Boring is good, sometimes.”

Sheree occasionally grumbled about the blaster under her breath, but the rest of us had forgotten about it. To be honest—and I’d never tell Sheree this—I was kinda grateful that Hari had left the blaster behind. If anything went wrong and we got into trouble with our parents, having the blaster with us would mean even more trouble. More than it was worth.

Despite our detailed planning, none of us knew what we would do if we actually found a Mandalorian. It didn’t seem like a real possibility, despite how adamant Toono was. I got so caught up in the excitement of taking the landspeeder and planning the expedition that I kept forgetting the Mandalorian was the reason we were doing this.

And now, as we laughed and teased each other in the landspeeder, I had the sudden realisation that it didn’t really matter if there was a Mandalorian or not—it was just an excuse for an adventure. We were

getting to that age where we wanted to roam a little further from home. Toono's Mandalorian was just the spark which had started it all.

As I was silently marvelling at how wise I was becoming, Toono suddenly gripped Sheree's arm. "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"Cut the engine!"

Sheree fumbled with controls for a few seconds and then whine of the engine faded away, the landspeeder coasting to a stop. Toono was looking upwards, a finger raised to his lips. We all heard it then—a distant, piercing howl, growing louder.

"A ship?" Hari whispered.

Toono nodded, just as the howl passed directly overhead. There was a flicker of shadow and a brief glimpse of movement through the forest canopy, and then the howl was fading away again.

We all looked at each other, wide-eyed.

"What sort of ship was that?" Hari asked.

"Who would be out this far?" I asked.

"It's the Mandalorian," Toono said, with a certainty in his voice. "It has to be. No one else would be flying around out here."

For the first time, the possibility that we would find an actual Mandalorian out here solidified in my head. And—honest—it scared the shit out of me.

"Do you think they saw us?" I asked.

Toono was still looking up at the forest canopy. "I don't think so."

Hari spoke quietly. "Should we...?"

"We keep going," Sheree said quickly.

Eventually we got near to the place where Toono saw the Mandalorian. It was early afternoon now, the sun on a slow downwards ebb towards the horizon. We left the landspeeder on the edge of a meadow and proceeded on foot, Toono leading the way up a gentle rise. It was cold, this high in the mountains. We were still below the snow line, but there were patches of dirty ice in the hollows between trees which hadn't fully melted from last winter. The air felt different up here. It tasted different on my tongue. It was fresh and sharp and somehow brittle. Clouds had drifted in from the north and I shivered uncontrollably every time one of them moved across the sun.

Toono turned to glare at us. "You're too loud!"

Sheree gave him an annoyed look. "What do you expect us to do?"

"You gotta walk quietly," Toono said, "like this." And he crouched low, scanning the ground ahead of him, placing each foot carefully to avoid leaf litter and twigs. It worked—I couldn't hear him. Sheree rolled her eyes, but we all copied his movements and soon we were creeping through the forest like nexu stalking their prey.

Watching Toono move like that, all silent and stealthy, made me realise he wasn't lying about hunting on Eriadu. He was a good hunter.

The trees thinned out as we reached the top of the rise. Toono raised a long finger to his lips and we nodded in understanding. This was serious now—no more time for games. My heart was starting to thump in my chest.

We emerged from the trees near the edge of a cliff. Toono waved at us to get down. We lay on our bellies and wriggled to the edge. Spread

out below us was a long, green valley, like a scar running through the mountains. Mountains rose precipitously on both sides; waterfalls plunged from the snowfields up top into the forest below. It was so incredibly silent. I had never seen anything so beautiful and I was suddenly jealous that Toono got to come out to places like this every week with his father.

I poked a small pebble and watched it tumble into the abyss. It was exhilarating being so close to the edge. Gran would *kill* me if she knew what I was up to.

“Down there,” Toono said, indicating a shallow stream flanked by meadows of long grass.

We took turns with the macrobinoculars, scanning the valley below, focusing our attention on the stream that Toono had indicated. It sure looked peaceful—crisp mountain water flowing over rocks. But no sign of any Mandalorian.

A weight had settled over us—we were silent for a long time. If it’s possible for people to think two things at once, I sure felt that way up on the cliff. Part of me was relieved there was no Mandalorian—I didn’t want to get in trouble with one—but another part of me was deflated to come all this way and have nothing to see. Not even a Mandalorian-shaped rock which we could tease Toono about for the rest of the school year. It seemed like a disappointing way to end our adventure.

Sheree got to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Toono asked.

“I’m going down there,” she said.

“What?!”

“Let’s go down there! We didn’t come all this way to not have a proper look. There might be clues down by the stream.”

“But...” Toono glanced up at the sun, then checked his wrist chrono. “It’s getting late. If we head down there, we won’t be back in town before sunset.”

This sparked a look of panic in Hari’s eyes. “We gotta be back before sunset. I promised my mums.”

“Me too,” I added.

“We’ll make it back before sunset, don’t worry,” Sheree said. “I’ll drive a bit faster and we won’t make any stops.”

“I dunno, Sheree,” Toono said. “It’s going to take us a while to get down there...”

“Then we better get moving!”

I’d like to think it was my newfound wisdom which made me get up and follow her. Years of experience had taught me that when Sheree was determined, it was pointless to argue with her.

It definitely wasn’t because I was afraid of her.

It took us a long time to descend into the valley. We found a narrow trail to the side of the cliff, scrambling and stumbling over rocks. A few hours ago I think we would’ve laughed at each other every time we slipped and fell, but now we moved with a grim urgency, helping each other down the steepest sections, picking each other up when we fell. We were all muddy and sore by the time we reached the bottom. Hari had ripped a hole in his pants and he kept fretting that his mothers

would tell him off when he got home; I had grazed my elbow on a rock and was trying to pretend it didn't sting.

It was tranquil down here. We headed towards the stream, wading through the long, golden grass that rolled in the breeze like an ocean swell. It made me think of the grasslands of Lothal, which made me think of my parents in prison there, which made me think of what Toono said about safety being the most important thing. He was right—Possti was a paradise. And I was glad that Toono was here, even if he did tell lies about things, because he was fun and adventurous and being out here sure beat playing with the junk in Sheree's father's workshop. It's hard to make friends when you come from another planet and don't know anyone.

The stream bubbled over shallow rocks. If Sheree was hoping to find bootprints in the sand or something, she was going to be disappointed—the banks were made of tiny pebbles. The whole place looked untouched, like we were the first people who had ever come here.

"I don't think there's anyone around," Hari said, giving voice to what we were all thinking.

"Sorry, Toono," I added.

"Do you still believe me?" he asked.

Sheree gave a loud laugh. "We never believed you!"

Toono looked towards Hari and I. "What about you?"

"I think... Well, I think you must've seen *something* down here... right? Maybe like a bran beast which you thought looked like a Mandalorian?"

“I know what a bran beast looks like,” Toono said, his voice flat.

“Does it really matter?” I asked. “We’re here now. Let’s enjoy it while we can, then head home.”

Sheree took a few steps into the water and bent over to scoop some into her mouth. “Better than Emerald Lake!” she said with a grin, and I could tell that made Toono feel better because he laughed and kicked some water at her. Sheree splashed back at him and Hari moved to join them and it looked like there was going to be a wizard water fight.

There was a rustle in the grass behind me. Movement in the corner of my eye.

A Mandalorian rose out of the grass. Green and brown armour. A rifle gripped in their right hand. Sunlight glinting off their shiny helmet.

And behind them, another Mandalorian, this one in gold and red armour. And another, and another, until there were a dozen Mandalorian warriors surrounding us, rifles held across their chests.

My brain was frozen, uncomprehending. I heard a scream from behind me—a strange, high-pitched tone which seemed to come from Sheree’s mouth but sounded more like a distressed bird.

And then Hari launched himself in front of me, arms out wide, roaring at the top of his voice, “Don’t you *dare* hurt my friends!”

The Mandalorians tilted their helmets towards him. There was a long moment of silence as they looked at us and we looked at them. It was impossible to tell what they were thinking under those helmets of theirs. My brain was starting to work again now, trying to work out our chances of escape. But now it was my body which seemed frozen and

uncooperating. My legs felt wobbly, as if they could no longer carry my weight. I resisted the urge to sink into the grass and cry.

“We do not intend to hurt you or your friends, child,” one of them said—the first one who had emerged from the grass. “What brings you so far from your homes?”

We all looked to Sheree, but she was white in the face and looking as if the next thing that came out of her mouth would be a torrent of vomit.

“I... I saw you last week,” Toono stammered, “when I was hunting with my father.” He pointed to the top of the cliff. “Up there.”

The Mandalorians looked to where he was pointing. “You and your father must be skilled hunters to escape our notice,” the Mandalorian said. “Why did you come back?”

“My friends didn’t believe me that you were here.”

“This is our covert, our hiding place. Now that it has been compromised, we can no longer remain hidden here.”

“We won’t tell anyone,” Toono said. Which, in hindsight, was an outright lie, because he had already told *everyone* last week and intended to tell everyone again... But it seemed like the right thing to say at the time.

“It does not matter. We must leave your planet and find refuge elsewhere.”

We didn’t know how to respond to that. Part of me simply expected them to level their blasters at us and start firing. Another part of me felt sad, like we had stumbled onto something sacred and ruined it.

The Mandalorian lowered his rifle. “You should go home now.” And then they turned their backs on us and walked away, moving silently, melting into the trees like ghosts. Within a minute, we were alone again.

We stood there in silence for a long time.

And then Toono punched Sheree on the shoulder. “See, I *told you* I saw a Mandalorian!”

When we got to school on Centaxday morning, everyone was giddy with excitement to hear if we’d found Toono’s Mandalorian.

But we shook our heads in defeat. There had been no Mandalorians, but we still had a wizard adventure.

We huddled around the table in the courtyard again, Sheree and Hari and Toono and me sitting in the middle, all our friends dying to hear what had happened. Sheree sat with her arm draped over Toono’s shoulders and told the story of how he led us far to a distant valley, where a pack of wild bran beasts came upon us while we played in a stream.

“Their fangs were longer than my arm,” Sheree said. “And when they emerged from the grass, I was certain we were going to die.”

Any talk of Mandalorians was quickly forgotten.

When we got up to the part where Hari leapt between us and the bran beasts, saving our lives with his loud roar, Sheree launched off the bench and spread her arms wide in a brave warrior pose. “Don’t you dare hurt my friends!” Our classmates yelled in triumph and patted Hari on the back. He looked abashed and proud all at once.

Of course, we skipped the part when we got home after sunset and all got told off by our parents. Except Sheree, whose father's only comment was a pleased grunt that the landspeeder's engine hadn't overheated.

And when they asked us to repeat the story, I added in the part about Emerald Lake and how Toono skipped a stone twenty times.

"Twenty?" Sheree roared. "It was *at least* thirty!"