

# THE MORGAN CHRONICLES: RETURN OF THE ISHTARI

## Chapter One: The Tournament

30 ABY

“Well, Cray, you’re forked. Do you want to go ahead and forfeit?” I grinned.

“Kriff it!” He hit the board in anger and his remaining two creatures flickered, their two holograms wavering simultaneously, their monstrous features momentarily. He stood and walked up to the bracket we had holographically projected and aggressively swiped my name upward into the finalist slot.

I cleared the board and stood up, and Tiran and Wietu slid into our seats. They selected their four characters, shook hands, and the game was off.

The tremors of the *Warrior*’s deck, caused by its flight through hyperspace, was punctuated by the heckling and banter, increasing as the game dragged on. Cries of “Bad move, Tiran!” and “Are you sure that’s really what you want to do, Wietu?” filled the rec room we had commandeered for the tournament. The crowd, a medley of *Warrior* pilots and Vice Admiral Marenta, reinforced that dejarik was a battle fought in the mind as much as on the board. Tiran sat hunched forward, intensely focused on the monsters and the board, while Wietu sat back in his seat confidently, legs crossed, assured in his marginal lead.

It struck me again, as it had occasionally on other days. This, *this* was the TIE Corps. This banter, this laughter, this wasting of time in transit from Tusorix to some unknown sector, this camaraderie, this brotherhood and sisterhood, the slapping of backs after a successful day in the sims, the small personable rivalries, the minor factionism only serving to tie tighter bonds: this is the TIE Corps, its heart and soul.

And then, suddenly, it was over; the shaking of hands, the swiping of Wietu’s name to meet mine. Tiran’s cry of “If this only were pazaak, I’d have all your asses and all your credits!” brought raucous laughter.

I swapped seats with Tiran and met Wietu’s red eyes, not shirking under his withering glare. Marenta’s shout of “First one to blink is a stinky Ewok!” was met with resounding laughter, snide comments about zucchini and its proper place, and disparaging remarks directed at the *Hammer*. Both our eyes watering, we blinked near-simultaneously, saving each other from humiliation.

I looked down at my small control panel and chuckled, part psychological manipulation and part genuine humor. I had tried to hone my skill in a decidedly non-standard lineup with the hope that I could whip it out in the final and my opponent would not be able to counter the unpredictable and unorthodox, and not being able to use my previous games in a strategy against me.

Our characters fizzled to facsimile life on the board, and whispers spread the room. Dav, breaking his analytical silence, quipped, “Morgan, you must have hit the wrong buttons, that’s a genius lineup only if your opponent is a brain-dead Gamorrean.” Even Wietu broke his intimidation routine and smirked, the room filling with chuckles.

“That’s strong talk for someone who didn’t make it out of the first round,” I replied, not lifting my eyes from the board. The room howled with laughter, but not even specifically at Dav. No feelings would be hurt, ribbings would be given and taken with no bruising.

Silence eventually pervaded. “Well, because of this,” Wietu said, gesturing to my half of the board, “this promises to be quite the finale. Best of luck, good sir, because you’ll most certainly be needing it.”

I winked and smiled broadly. “Then I’ll wish you none and keep it all for myself, because no Dejarik game is won without a little luck.” We shook hands, and Wietu clicked a key. One of his characters stepped forward and roared menacingly.

The room hushed, and the game began.

#

Quite unfortunately, it was over before I even knew it. His monsters swarmed mine, wading through my line, roaring and slicing and demolishing. Even with my four Kintan Striders healing themselves in concert, I couldn’t contend with Wietu’s ferocious monsters and his fierce logic, his impenetrable defense, and his own much more traditional menagerie on the board.

I stood and shook his hand, ignoring the jeering of my failed lineup, and swiped his name upward, above the rest of the bracket. “We’ve got ourselves a winner,” I said begrudgingly. “Congratulations, Lieutenant Colonel. Very proud.” I grinned. “Gonna have to pick your brain for some strategy tips.”

“The only strategy I’d recommend is not doing whatever you just did,” he managed between bouts of laughter, doubled over and clutching his chest. I punched him on the shoulder and walked past him, over to Marenta to collect my runners-up trophy. She handed me a datachip that would project an image when I hit a button on the side. Everyone gathered around, and I pressed the button. A large picture with text on it sprung from the display.

*“One free coupon for a week of bartender duty.”*

I groaned, and Marenta chuckled. “And you just redeemed it, Morgan. You can start tonight! Congratulations on being good, but not good enough.”

I sighed and picked up Wietu’s chip, throwing it to him, rolling my eyes at his still obnoxiously-wide smile. He pressed the button.

*“First Place, First Annual Warrior Dejarik Tournament.”*

I laughed. “Yours makes sense, mine’s just cruel!”

Wietu pointed at me, clutching his side with his other hand and still laughing. “Second place is just the first loser!”

Marenta shook our hands. “And now, it’s time for an early night. We break out of hyperspace tomorrow.”

Pilots began to file out of the room, retreating back to their quarters in preparation for what was undoubtedly going to be a busy day tomorrow. The squadron commanders turned with Marenta to her office for a meeting. She flagged me down before following the commanders.

“Can you find Cam and meet me in my office after the meeting? The two of you have some skills I anticipate needing.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me that, Morgan. You know it makes me feel old.”

I grinned. “Yes ma’am, Vice Admiral ma’am.”

She glared at me for a second, then sighed and left.

#

I found CAM-9 in the sim pods after looking for half an hour, wearing the likeness of a tall male officer. One hand lay on top of a data port on an instructor’s station.

“Hey, Cam. It’s been a minute.” I walked up and patted him on the back. He didn’t look away from the station and the rapidly-flashing data screen.

“It’s been one day, two hours, and thirty-seven minutes.”

“A touch specific, don’t you think?”

“And forty-two seconds.”

I laughed, and gestured towards the station in a questioning manner.

Cam looked at me and removed his hand from the port. “Sorry, I’m feeling a little analytical right now. I’m downloading all of your recent mission data and combat logs. Major Davalorn wants to know why you’ve been flying so poorly.”

I whipped my head around and stared at him. “Really?”

He chuckled deeply but exaggeratedly, his eyes nearly shut and smile wide. “No, Alex, your commander does not think you inadequate. But you should have seen your face,” he said, his grin widening even more in anticipation of his next gag.

My face fell into a tight-lipped grimace, and I rolled my eyes, an exaggerated gesture of exasperation. This was Cam’s new favorite thing to do: he called it “Replay Mode.”

He adopted my face and body, so intricate even to the small lock of hair escaping the front of my cap. In an exaggerated slow-motion reenactment, never taking his hand off of the port, he whipped his head around and widened his eyes. In my voice, he said, still in slow motion, “Really?”

I held up my hands. “Alright, alright, new comedian on the ship and all. Let’s work on diversifying your arsenal of jokes, you’ve done that one way too often already.”

He took his hand off of the port and reverted back to his original officer. “I know some more jokes, don’t worry. Why did the Ewok cross the road?”

I buried my suddenly-tired face in my hands. “Why, Cam, why?”

“To get to the zucchini on the other side and shove –”

I yelped, stopping him mid sentence. “Kripping shit, Cam, who taught you that one?”

He played innocent. “Why, it’s in my database. It seems to be popular over on the *Hammer*.”

“There’s a lot of weird things popular over on the *Hammer*,” I muttered under my breath.

“What’s that?” Cam cupped his ear in an effort to continue his ignorant charade.

“Nothing, laserbrain. Marenta wants us after the commander meeting.”

“Ah, the Vice Admiral. Well, the meeting ended thirty-one seconds ago, so shall we hurry over?”

I gave him a playful shove and began walking. “Damn you and your numbers.”

He smiled, my face lighting up on his.

#

Marenta’s office by the bridge was empty of straggling commanders by the time we got there. She was behind her desk, reading reports and sipping from a mug. She looked up and saw us enter.

“Welcome in, Morgan, Cam.” She gestured to seats arranged around her desk. She turned briefly to Cam. “Did you get the data?” She picked up a datachip from her desk.

He nodded and silently took it, holding it in between his hands as if he were in supplication.

I glared at Marenta. “So you could have told me the whole time where he was? I spent thirty minutes just trying to find him.”

She smiled and shrugged. “I would rather you wander the ship than wait outside my office in boredom, and I’m sure you’d agree.”

Cam unclasped his hands and placed the card back on her desk. “You should have seen his face when I told him it was data about how bad he flies.”

I wheeled on him as best as I could seated. “Don’t you do it, Cam. Once is enough!”

Marenta reigned in our attention, cutting off Cam’s gag. “Captain Morgan, I’ve heard you’ve been spending some time in our libraries, making our Training Office quite proud. How many Imperial

University courses? Thirteen?" I nodded in assent, and she continued. "I've heard that you fancy yourself and Cam quite the dynamic duo of knowledge."

"I know a little about a lot of things," I replied, "and to some that's better than the opposite. Cam, on the other hand, knows everything about everything, so he pulls more weight in the duo."

"I have a need for something of an outsider's perspective to the bridge environment. It seems slightly stilted right now, slightly off. I won't describe it too much to avoid influencing your analyses of how it feels. Do you feel capable of that?"

I nodded.

"Good. I'll have you on the bridge when we re-enter, both you and Cam, so I can get your opinions about what's going on and if I'm just crazy."

"Roger that," I replied. "Psycho-analyze people I've never met and provide a conclusion within half an hour. Can do." I winked. "Or at least Cam can."

Marenta shook her head. "There's some organic subtlety to emotion and perception that Cam might lack, and that's why you're there, Morgan."

I feigned offended. "I thought it was because of my dashing good looks! I thought the whole idea was that everyone would be too busy admiring my handsomeness that the awkwardness would dissipate."

Marenta rolled her eyes and stood up. "Thank you both, this means a lot. After that, I may ask for more."

"We're ready for any task you can throw our way, ma'am," I answered, emphasizing the last word.

She glared daggers, I smiled innocently, and Cam just chuckled.

"Dismissed, Morgan, get out of here. We'll break out in seven hours, be a touch early."

I saluted, and turned to the door. As it hissed closed behind me, Marenta's intentionally elevated voice carried: "Now, let's find out why he's such a shit pilot."

Laughing, I made my way to the bar to make good on my prize.

#

## Chapter Two: The Halls of Death

Seven Hours Later

The starlines collapsed to pinpricks through the bridge window, the system's stars closer than it had been previously. The flare of the binary pair slowly discarding matter bathed the bridge in soft orange light, silhouetting Vice Admiral Marenta, standing at the bridge's window.

A technician looked up from his station. "Microjump complete, Vice Admiral. The *Harpax II* pulled us out perfectly. The gravity wells are working at an estimated ninety-eight percent, and the crew is performing flawlessly."

"Relay my compliments to General Alpec. This is Third?" She gestured to the planet hanging in front of us.

General Frown stepped forward, passing in front of where CAM-9 and I stood observing. "Yes, it is. We came in from the edge of the system where we had emerged as close as we could."

"Run a scan, see if there is any active tech on the planet."

Another technician looked up. "Already begun, Admiral, five seconds remain."

Marenta nodded, half-turned and shot a look in my direction, and looked back at the window and the planet suspended in space. "Results?"

"No active technology emitting discoverable radar or sensors. If there are life-forms on Third, they do not know we or the *Harpax II* are here, as we could detect passive or active long-range sensors."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." She turned to General Frown. "Let's have a ground party go in and sweep for signs of the Ishtari, along with TIE patrols. Grid search the whole planet with the TIEs. Ground forces leave in oh-one hundred, and likewise with sky patrols."

Frown snapped a textbook salute and walked off the bridge to organize the efforts.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cam morph from his standard officer to something else. I didn't look, maintaining my statue-esque stillness in the corner of the bridge, standing out of sight and equally out of mind. Marenta bent down over a station, double-checking numbers herself, then turned to leave the bridge. Walking past Cam and me, she said, "Captain Morgan and, I suppose, other Captain Morgan, please join me in my office."

I shot a surprised look at Cam, who had adopted my tired visage. An imperceptible twitch of a smile teased across his face, almost invisible except to the person who does it, before turning to follow Marenta out.

#

Marenta looked across the table in her dim office. "Captain, what did you see?"

"Well, ma'am, your sensor technician is very proactive, and your second gunnery coordinator slouches."

She fixed me with an unamused glare, clearly communicating without words to cut the crap.

I sighed. "There is general confusion about what your new rank entails. They are unsure as to who the commander of the *Warrior* is, if you're now commanding the Battlegroup and Frown the Wing. They reassure themselves of your standing by their repetition of 'Vice Admiral this' and 'Vice Admiral that.' It doesn't matter now, as you're here, but when you're gone, I imagine there would seem to be a dead space in between Frown and yourself."

"Thank you. Quite illustrative. On a different point, I want you in the ground party. I have a suspicion you'll be needed."

I leaned back in my chair. "What part of me will be needed? More, what, perception things?"

“If I’m right? Architecture skills. I know your earlier education dabbled in analytical architecture and societal reasons for it.”

“I had quite the instructor.”

“Naboo architecture is very informative of the culture, it’s quite the breeding ground for architects, sociologists, and anthropologists.”

“And TIE pilots.”

“Only in exceptional cases.”

I chuckled. “So you admit I’m an exceptional pilot?”

Marenta stared again, her face disapproving.

I raised my eyebrows almost imperceptibly, and saw out of the corner of my eye Cam, now an ubiquitous officer again, shift on his feet. The sneaking suspicion that he could read me like an open book was slowly becoming much less of a suspicion and more a certainty. “May Cam accompany me? If we don’t get sufficient time there, he can retain schematics and preserve them to study later.

“Of course. And one more note – the team will be led by a Commander Mizre.” At this, Cam morphed into an average-height, brown haired, extremely rotund human male. “You technically outrank him, but not in this environment. Please preserve his authority in front of his troops.”

“Naturally.”

Marenta nodded in thanks and dismissal. “Enjoy your time down on Third.”

#

Major Davalorn caught me right before I boarded the troop transport. “She’s sending you?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Are you surprised?” I mocked his look of confusion.

“I suppose not, she uses her resources wisely.”

I laughed. “Let’s just hope I don’t get shot during my one mission on the ground. That would be quite unfortunate.”

“As soon as you step out of the cockpit, it gets more dangerous,” he said, chuckling.

“I’ll be guarded by a squad of Navy troops, specifically deployed for my personal protection, of course. I’ll be quite safe. Anyway, we’re not even sure if there is anything down there, it’s just a hunch from the Big Comm.”

“Don’t piss off Mizre, I heard he buries a fragile ego under his food.”

“Marenta insinuated the ego part, and Cam confirmed his appetite.” I pointed over at Cam, who still wore Mizre’s spherical body.

Dav smirked. “While you’re down there, we’ll be running patrols. I’m sure you’ll have more fun than us. Take holos for me!”

I walked backwards towards the transport I was assigned to, behind a now un-Mizred Cam. “You know I will. Nobody will miss out on the beauty of Third. Have fun flying over nothing!”

#

Third was a particularly on-the-nose name, as it was the third planet from the binary stars. The system and each planet was unnamed, nonexistent on official charts, so each planet got a number. The first two, predictably First and Second, were in a death spiral, mimicking the suns in a dance of doom: their orbits were synchronized together, each spiraling around each other, closer and closer, while spinning around the suns. The stars were still unnamed, but we weren’t planning on staying too long, so they probably would never get ones from us.

Third was evenly divided between temperate forests along its equator and massive ice caps, unable to be considered strictly polar as they descended deep into low latitudes. At the borders of these regions lay tundranic grasslands with, as we discovered, an abundant diversity of life. Animals not unlike shaak grazed on the sparse clumps of vegetation, ground-roosting birds frightfully fluttered close to the ground, avoiding the myriad of threats against them: bleak winds began forty meters off the ground, several of the ground animals seemed to fancy the taste of bird, and temperatures violently varied with little change in latitude.

The tremble of the troop carrier entering Third's turbulent atmosphere shook the deck and the overhead handle I grasped, the tremors traveling up my boots and through my flight suit's gloves, one clamped on the overhead handle and the other at the side of my flight helmet, adjusting the comms manually. I tuned it to the frequency Cam and I had reserved for our own use, far from the TIE Corps's and other standard ones, selecting the voice isolation so all the Navy troops would hear was perhaps a muffled buzz, imperceptible over the shudder of the ship.

"You there, Cam?"

A pause. "Roger." Cam's comms were similarly internal, so our conversation to the outside world did not exist.

"Pilot could perhaps fly smoother, eh?"

"Eh. Hard when it's basically a rectangle box with thrusters like this."

"At least I'm not on patrol duty."

"Way to look at the positive. At least I'm not stuck in Marenta's office, analyzing why you need to be demoted."

"For real, what was that about?"

"Routine data gathering of pilots in the sims from the last standard month."

"Oh."

Silence.

"So pretty boring," I said.

"From a certain point of view. To me, when quantified and charted, it can be more."

"Skill of pilots, health of the Corps?"

"Something like that."

I looked down the aisle of helmeted troopers at Cam just in time to see his shadowed face jerk to the side a fraction of a degree.

"What?"

"I've been monitoring the pilot's comms."

"And?"

"They found something."

#

The transport settled down on the icy ground, repulsor jets shooting plumes of rapidly-condensing exhaust around the lowering ramp. I stepped off the ramp first and onto the snow, my boots crunching and compacting the ground, suddenly thankful for my flight suit's insulating properties. Pulling off my helmet and squinting against the glare of the setting suns, I surveyed the horizon, only flat ice and snow as far as the eyes could see. I walked around the back of the transport, and there lay the bunker. The long, squat, structure stood out against the ice, its black color a harsh contrast to the white and gentle blue of ice flats.

A second transport gently touched down only five meters away from the one I came on. Its ramp lowered, revealing more troops. They exited in orderly fashion, their rifles held at attention and uniforms

crisp. The last of the troops exited, revealing the Commander. Mizre more or less waddled out after them, his hat gingerly placed atop his enormous head. My military self-regulation did not betray me, however, and I maintained a straight-faced salute as he walked towards me.

“Morgan, is it?” he gurgled. “I was told you would lend some... knowledge to our expedition?”

I nodded my assent, and gestured to Cam. “Yessir, CAM-9 and I plan on analyzing the structure to learn about the Ishtari.”

He harrumphed. “We’ll see about that. I don’t know what a building could teach you.” He gestured to two of his troopers, each carrying an end of a large rectangular black box. “This is our most high tech scanner, and it should provide whatever structural analysis you need. These two will carry it.”

Cam stepped forward and placed his hand over a dataport in the side of the box briefly, whatever physical droid beneath him connecting with the scanner. He stood back up and walked back over to me, nodding. “Data feed established.”

Mizre ignored Cam and his use of my rank, pointing to another pair carrying another box between them, this one open-topped and empty. “Although the mission objective isn’t plunder, I’m certain we can agree that some prizes would certainly aid our understanding of whoever was here.”

I nodded. “That would be most helpful.”

He harrumphed again and turned, walking towards the bunker. The Navy troopers fell in loose formation behind him, and Cam and I walked in the pocket they created. I fingered the blaster I took and slipped back on my helmet.

We approached the entry to the bunker, a low circular door, frozen open. The ice spilled into the hallway, providing a flat bottom to the circular hallway. Navy troops took point, creeping down the completely straight hallway, rifles raised and ready. The hushed atmosphere seemed creepy, eerie, too quiet and too still, and the tunnel darkened unnaturally quickly. The troopers flicked on flashlights attached to their rifles, but the beams didn’t penetrate far, the light seemingly swallowed.

Cam broke the silence, his voice awkwardly loud against the tense silence. “No lifeforms are present in a reasonable radius.”

The Navy troops visibly untensed, walking a bit faster down the hallway. I relaxed my hand off of my blaster’s grip. The hallway, the floor still bathed in ice, began to slowly widen, tapering out marginally, and then we entered the first room.

It was a giant hollow sphere, full of decidedly non-standard furniture in odd angles, clearly not designed for humanoids, sitting on the even floor of ice. I walked over to the walls, caked in electronic displays and panels, and pressed dark buttons at random, waiting for a reaction and getting none.

“Systems are dead,” I reported, satisfied with my quick and thorough analysis. Cam rolled his eyes and walked over to join me, briefly staring at one panel of dead displays and buttons before prying it straight off of the wall and tossed it into the plunder box. I blinked, and reached for another panel myself. I gave it a sharp tug, mimicking Cam’s motion. It didn’t budge. I used two hands, pulling with my weight. It didn’t move a millimeter.

Cam started laughing. “If you can’t release electromagnetic pulses with your hands, I don’t think you’ll be pulling that off the wall any time soon.”

I glowered, but couldn’t help the smile that quickly came to my face. “I guess I can’t, or at least not yet.”

Mizre harrumphed again, clearly a favorite expression of his. “The road forks here. I’ll take some troopers and the scanner to the left, because my orders prioritize schematics. But if you return with no artifacts to take to the *Warrior*, I’ll be most displeased.”



“As you wish,” I replied. “We shall not disappoint.”

Five troopers, including the two carrying the open box, stepped over to the right tunnel, and Mizre and his eight began down the right. Almost as an afterthought, Mizre shouted, without turning around, “Rendezvous back here in thirty standard minutes!”

I shot a sarcastically enthusiastic salute to his back, and turned to the right tunnel. Two troopers took point and one the rear, surrounding the box, Cam, and me.

#

It wasn't too long through an identical hallway before we hit another spherical room, still covered in the leveling ice. I laughed out loud upon seeing what it contained, certain Mizre would be quite upset that I had this direction and he the other. The walls of the wide room were entirely covered by physics-defying shelves holding rows upon rows of flimsiplast documents and small datachips of unfamiliar make. The troopers placed down the box, and joined Cam and me in grabbing all we could from the shelves and dumping it haphazardly into the box.

We stood in that room plundering and reading the alien script for what felt like hours. When we had taken what we wanted, almost filling the box entirely, I looked at my chrono.

“We've enough time to hope for one more room, yes?” I looked at Cam, who nodded, and then looked at the tunnels leading off from this room. There were four, three pointing relatively onwards and a fourth backwards and towards the left. “Which one, Cam?”

He closed his eyes, either calculating or analyzing whatever schematics the scanner had already uploaded. He emitted a high-pitched click once, and announced, “Far right will be the largest, backwards left points to the room where Mizre currently is, and the other two are unpredictable.”

“Far right it is, then,” I declared. One of the troopers who carried the box hit a small button on its side and it instantly rose and hovered at ankle height. The two of them got on one side and pushed on handles that had appeared, moving the now-heavy box with less effort than carrying. We assumed the same formation and continued onwards, slightly downwards on the ice.

#

The right-most room was indeed the largest. It was an oblate sphere of absolutely massive proportions, perhaps half a klick from one end to the other, with only one other tunnel leading off of it. The iced floor was now suddenly uneven, even jagged in some places, unnatural and often spiked. We stood in the middle of the entrance, frozen in awe. Carved out of the ground, this epic room was testament enough in itself of a complex civilization.

In the middle stood a grand statue of some buggish creature, hewn of the same stone as the walls, tens of meters in height. Its many legs stood posed on an open semicircle, clearly evocative of how the floors would have been had they not been covered in ice. It held a curved blade in one pincer and a circlet in the other, the first outstretched in a rally cry and the latter over its head. Cam blinked frequently while walking circles around it, recording the entirety of the statue and obviously intent to not leave out any detail. On the bottom, slightly beneath the ice and barely visible, incoherent symbols were inscribed.

Surrounding the statue, amidst the uneven ice were the tops of racks and racks of similar curved blades that the statue raised. I tossed some that escaped the ice into the box. “This must have been an armory,” I reasoned aloud.

“I agree, and I think I've cracked the code on the architecture,” Cam said. “I hesitate to say it so soon, though, so I'll save it for you and Marenta on the *Warrior*.”

“Fine, if you insist on being so stingy with intellectual property,” I joked. I looked around for any more loose items to top off the box.

And then, clearly and piercingly, a blood-curdling scream aired through the tunnels.

#

The seven of us did not hesitate a single second. Dawdling in unfamiliar territory surrounded by screams was definitely ill-advised, and no military training needed to reassert that. We instantly dropped what we were carrying and scrambled to the tunnel we came from. Two troopers got behind the box and began silently pushing it while running, desperately trying to keep up with us. I drew my blaster and sprinted alongside Cam.

More screams joined the cacophony, echoing and rebounding through the interconnected rooms and tunnels. We reentered the library room, and Cam pointed to the tunnel that he had said led to where Mizre had gone, one of the ways we had elected to not choose.

“That way,” he said, entirely calm and collected. My breath, on the other hand, had begun coming a little more shallowly, a little more raspily. The Navy troopers began to fall behind, the gap widening in between us.

We ran through yet another hallway, laboring against the almost-imperceptible uphill, and then we were upon the room. It was empty, utterly and completely, no furniture or shelves or electronics. The screams, still shockingly loud and constant, seemed to be emanating from the left of the two tunnels that led onward from the room.

The Navy troopers caught up with us, still protecting and pushing the box of plunder. They paused, panting, draping their over the box, entirely exhausted from the sprint.

Cam snorted. “They’ve dropped the scanner... and it’s offline. The scanner is not operational,” he said, speaking loudly over the constant droning screaming.

I turned to him, confused. “They dropped it so hard they broke it? I doubt that.”

He looked at me as if I were a particularly dim-witted child. “No, Morgan. Whatever they’re screaming about probably did that.”

“Well,” I said, feigning a lack of fear that Cam certainly saw right through, “let’s go and see what the problem is.” I turned to the left tunnel, gripping my blaster tightly and tensing to continue the sprint, but Cam stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

“There’s no need.”

The screams crescendoed, and I turned to Cam, confused.

He looked into the tunnel, his sensors seeing past the bend in the tunnel forty meters down.

“They’re here.”

#

Mizre and his cadre of soldiers, four fewer than there had been, rounded the corner at dead sprint shooting infrequent glances of pure terror behind them, accompanied by their crescendoing screams. I didn’t even find humor this time in the image of Mizre running towards us, because what I noticed chilled me to the core. None of their mouths were open.

None of them made it even halfway to us. One by one, they were struck down. Necks were snapped, massive gashes appeared, and the bodies dropped to the ice, lifeless. With each death, the screams grew louder, until it was a piercing shriek reverberating painfully. Mizre dropped last, his body bouncing before it laid still.

And then my brain finally registered what was behind them. The buggish creature was absolutely massive, its jet black body filling the tunnel with angled pairs of legs and massive pincers outstretched. Its open jaws sourced the unwavering scream. It killed each trooper and Mizre without touching them, only a flick of its pincers. It was the creature of the statue.

The five Navy troopers suddenly found their second wind, scrambling up towards the tunnel that Mizre would have taken from the initial room. They didn't waste their breath on screaming, abandoning the box of relics behind and sprinting. I shot at the beast with my own blaster, but it shrugged off the shots as if they were pesky flies.

"That's not going to work!" Cam shouted in an effort to be heard over the creature's screams, and he dashed to the abandoned box. He grabbed the handles and pushed it towards the tunnel where we had just come through, away from the Navy troopers and back towards the library room. "Morgan! Toss your blaster after the Navies!"

I complied unhesitantly, lobbing the blaster into the tunnel and turned, sprinting behind Cam to the other. My faith was rewarded, as the creature followed the blaster and the Navy troops.

"Run!" Cam shouted. "We have to beat it back!"

Adrenaline surged, my heart beating well past acceptable parameters and my breath coming raspily. My helmet was no help, but I wouldn't dare take it off. It was mine, and I would not let it go.

Cam pushed the box faster than the troopers had, his mechanical legs unable to fatigue. The officer he projected showed no sign of exhaustion, simply determination. I could barely even keep up with Cam, so I was very glad I was not pushing the box.

We entered the library room, my pace unwavering in pure fear. The screams continued, the constant pitch maddening. My lungs burned, my legs ached, my feet chafed in my boots, my head pounded, and my mouth was dry, but we were no longer running from the beast. We were racing it to the exit, and the stakes were our lives.

Cam's voice was barely audible over the screams, his voice so loud it almost slipped into something slightly mechanical. "Call the pilot!"

"What?"

He turned his head unnaturally backwards over his shoulder and yelled, his voice entirely mechanical and jarring. "CALL THE PILOT!"

I clicked my comm system. "Pilot, do you copy?"

"What the kriff is happening? I've heard nothing from the Commander, and I hear some high pitched noise. Why are you out of breath?"

Panting, I replied, "Just get the ship in the air and in front of the exit! Rapid evac."

The pilot paused, then said "Copy that, Captain. En route, ETA thirty seconds."

"Be ready!" I muted myself. "Cam, he'll be ready when we need!"

"I heard," he deadpanned.

I laughed, more of a rapid exhalation than a real laugh, but it still communicated humor. "You tap comms even in the middle of this?" I gasped for breath.

"No, I have comms built in that passively monitor our frequencies. And stop wasting your obviously scarce breath. We're almost to the first room."

Blasterfire briefly echoed through the tunnels, and then it ceased. The screams got louder, nearly crippling in volume, even with my helmet's auditory compensator.

"Almost there..."

And then we were in the main room. My heart dropped. In front of the exit, standing atop the mutilated bodies of the Navy troopers, was the beast. Cam acted immediately, leaping over the box with superhuman agility and shimmering, adopting a new holographic form. But to my surprise, he didn't stop changing. He morphed into a Wookiee, and then a Kaminoan, and then a miniature rancor, and then a Gungan, his transformations becoming more and more rapid, a slideshow of incoherence. I recognized a

Trandoshan, several Zabaraks, and a Munn before his mimicries became more abstract. He became binary suns, a rainstorm, and a seething black cloud, before finally settling on a mimicry in miniature of the beast itself.

Confused, the beast finally closed its mouth. The silence was stunning and welcome, but we were far from safe: the beast, still in front of the entry, was slowly beginning to advance towards Cam, its head tilted and pincers clicking in an off-kilter pattern.

And then the tunnel behind the beast was illuminated with sudden light, the transport's beams aimed down the entrance. I clicked my comm system and whispered, as to not distract the creature from Cam. "Fire your torpedoes straight down the tunnel right now, it's a straight shot."

"Straight shot to what? I can't see what's down there."

"If you don't right now, we're dead."

I could almost hear the sigh of the pilot. "Firing."

I dove behind the box and saw Cam do the same before I squeezed my eyes shut. There was a deafening explosion, and a blinding light, and then silence. After a few seconds, I tentatively poked my head above the box. The creature laid on the ground, a smoking hole in its chest.

Cam morphed back into his nondescript Imperial officer. "Well," he chuckled. "That's that." He got the box and pushed it over the pile of corpses, human and otherwise, and out to the ship. I followed numbly, trying not to stare at the mutilated corpses, shellshocked and exhausted. With the adrenaline gone, I felt my aching legs and my burning lungs, and my head's pounding got exponentially worse.

We pushed the box on the transport, and the pilot looked back at us. "What the kriff is happening in there?"

Cam answered him. "Call for medical and give them these coords. Take us back to the *Warrior* now."

The pilot widened his eyes, but turned to his controls, requested the medics, and lifted us off the ground into the now-night.

#

The ride back was silent, punctuated by frequent glances back at us, my flushed face, bloodied boots, and shaking hands, and Cam's calm and collected visage. I was rushed to the medical wing when we landed to make sure I wasn't carrying anything, and from there Cam accompanied me to Marenta's office.

She sat and just stared at me for a minute. I didn't bother with decorum and sat uninvited in the chair in front of her desk.

"So how did you manage to screw this one up so badly?" She grinned.

"Not my fault and you know it. Who could know there would be a man-hunting beast hiding in the depths?"

"Certainly not me. In fact, you performed very well. Your schematics and other physical evidence you brought back is quite illustrative of the Ishtari and their culture." At this, Cam held out an up-turned hand and projected the schematics of the interconnected rooms, including ones we had not entered. "This seems to confirm the idea of a hive culture."

"Vice Admiral?" I interjected. "Permission to speak freely?"

"Always, Morgan."

"I'm too tired right now to think, I can barely string together cogent thoughts right now, and I've just watched the particularly brutal murder of a couple people."

She laughed. "Very well. You're dismissed. I'll discuss things briefly with Cam right now, and fill you in later. Get the rest."

I saluted and exited, shaking my head. *It'll be hard to sleep for a while now, I thought, at least with that creature chasing me through my dreams.*

#

### Chapter Three: The Aftermath

A Shit Ton of Time Later, Relatively

It was not hard to fall asleep at all. I awoke confused, disoriented from my predictably chaotic and frightful dreams, already longing to lay back down and sleep more. I sat up in my bed and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, looking for a cup of water to soothe my ridiculously dry throat that I woke up with every morning.

“Good morning, Alex.”

I jumped in fright and clutched the bedsheets around me. “Holy mother of Vader, Cam! You know what you’re doing!”

“Well, I find it quite humorous.”

“I find it intrusive!” I felt my chest, catching my breath. “And my heart rate won’t go back down for another hour now.”

“You’ve been asleep for eighteen hours.”

“And I would have gone back to sleep if you hadn’t been standing there! What do you want?”

“I thought you would be excited to hear that Marenta and I have answered every question we could think of about what was down there.”

“Stop bothering me. Go back and think of more questions.”

“Also, all fighters are currently being scrambled. We’re under attack.”

My still-half-asleep brain didn’t immediately register what he said. I continued rubbing my eyes and blinking blearily, stretching my arms and waking my body up.

“Did you hear me?” Cam asked.

“Hear you what?”

“Hear me say that.”

“Say what?”

“What I said.”

“No, I guess not.”

My eyes were open and seeing now, so I could see how far back Cam rolled his own. “You’re a jackass, you know that?” He walked over to my small closet, grabbed my freshly laundered pilot suit, and threw it at me. I made no effort to catch it, and it smacked me in the face before falling to the floor.

“Morgan, klaxons are ringing on the ship bridge. That means hurry.”

I turned and stared at him. “I’m not in flying shape, Cam. That much is clear to me.”

“Fine. Then put this on and come to the bridge with me.”

“Only if they turn off the klaxons.”

He stared at me blankly, computational confusion written plainly on his face. He rolled his eyes again before acquiescing. “Fine. I bet they’ll be off by the time we get there. Now move it, you space slug.”

I slid out of bed and into the suit, grabbing my helmet from its shelf in my quarters. Cam and I trotted in a semblance of hurry down the hallways towards the bridge, he in a standard officer look and me in my suit with my helmet, with my callsign “ossus” on the forehead and gray widow’s tears streaking the cheeks, tucked under my arm.

“Did you get me something to eat?” I asked Cam.

He completely ignored me. “Hive mind, fear-reverential, and decidedly non-humanoid. Intelligent, yet simple. An odd contradiction.”

“Excuse me?”

“The Ishtari.”

“The creature?”

“No, that’s just why the Ishtari left that bunker. They must have uncovered that thing in the depths.”

“How did you figure these things out?” I asked.

“Architecture. And technology, and other things we brought back. I’ve been examining them while you lazily slumbered.”

“All I have to do is find your off switch and then you’ll lazily slumber forever,” I shot back.

“Good luck finding it,” he chuckled.

#

By the time we reached the bridge, the klaxons had indeed been silenced. Crew ran from station to station, and Marenta barked out orders. I looked out the viewport and saw the far-off enemy, the Ishtari, according to Cam. Their craft, projected on the bridge’s tactical board, were ugly and bulbous, arranged in a line but slowly concentrating into a more cohesive unit.

“Stations, and stay by them! Man the guns, and get me Alpec!” she shouted. “Actually, get me everyone. Conference call this motherfucker!” She caught a glimpse of me, and held up a hand to her aide to indicate a mute on whatever call was already ongoing. “Morgan, why are you not in a TIE?”

I played slightly ignorant, and slightly helpless. “I just slept for eighteen hours straight, ma’am, and I’m not quite fit. I thought I could lend a hand up here.”

She eyed me with the withering glare only a mother is capable of. “If you want to be useful up here, you could get started on my MoC recommendations that I would be doing if not for this.”

My eyes widened. I executed the quickest about-face of my life to prevent her from recalling me, and quick-stepped off the bridge, Cam following me.

“Well,” he laughed, “that didn’t last long.”

“Whatever, jackass. You don’t have to actually fly, if you did you’d be just as keen as me to get out of it. This time, at least.” I chuckled. “And anyway, no chance in the void you’d catch me doing admin work.”

Cam shot me a quick side-eye, but moved on. “Anyway, I got you something.”

“A gift?” My eyebrows excitedly shot up.

“Not exactly. Kind of.” He reached into his “pocket” and pulled out a datachip, a feat I never really understood how it was possible, given his holographic-yet-tangible nature. He held it out. “Music. Of a kind. For the flight.”

I took it and scrutinized it, as if I could read it like flimsi. “What type? You know I’m particular.”

“It’s a surprise. All I’ll say is that it’s Corellian.”

“Well, then, it must be great!”

Cam said nothing, raising only slight suspicions.

We had made it to the hangar, now completely vacant save for the *Naas*. I trotted over, ignoring the blatant and confused stares from Mix across the hangar. I turned, and with a salute to Cam, climbed the ladder into my Avenger’s cockpit. With flicks of switches, presses of buttons, and the drop of a lever, the *Skira Naasad* rippled to shuddering life, the coursing of potential energy tangible. With a facetious kiss blown to Cam, I pinwheeled the craft out of the hangar and into the ever-cold black.

#

I caught up with Rho within seconds of leaving the bay. The *Warrior*'s fighter contingent hung back as a screen, waiting for instruction, and I slipped into the formation, keying my comms to Rho's frequency.

"How kind of you to join us," Lieutenant Colonel Wietu quipped.

"Just taking my time with my pre-flight checks, Fro. Better safe than sorry," I replied.

"Cut the chatter," Dav's voice pierced through Wietu's reply. "Here they come. Standing orders: open comms, engage at will."

I immediately muted myself and rocketed forwards with the rest. It truly must have been a terrifying sight for the enemy, a swarm of screaming TIEs, flown by the finest pilots in the galaxy, barreling towards you. I grabbed the chip and slid it into my jury-rigged audio system and pressed play.

But no soothing vocals or vivacious percussion passed to my ears. Instead, the raucous, piercing screams and screeches of some surely-dying animal shattered my eardrums. In total shock, I looked at the display read-out on the system. It read in bright blue font: *Corellian Banshee Bird Mating Call Compilation: Three Hour Version.*

*When I get back to the Warrior, I swore to myself, Cam is going to meet angry Morgan.*

#



CMDR-ROA/Alexandre Morgan/Rho/Wing II/ISDII Warrior/Battlegroup II