

MORGAN'S SURPRISE

Morgan whistles an ancient tune while he happily taps and chips away at the large piece of stone in front of him. The sun is high in the sky, the birds are singing and he's carving out a surprise for Bess, his beloved wife. "Yaba-daba-doooo!" he cries as he finishes the song. Yes, life is good, here at New Pacifica.

He casts a glance at the machine in the corner and realizes it is exposed to anyone that happens to walk in. 'Can't have that,' he thinks. Devon would throw a fit if she knew I had it. It's best they've no idea where I get my stones.' He chuckles and grabs a blanket to throw it over the metal box before returning to his work.

A few months ago Morgan wasn't very happy with the way his life was turning out. He was stuck here on G889, at least until the Colony ship would land, and that reality was almost too much to take. To make things worse, his VR glasses were broken beyond repair when that stupid Grendler sat on them. He was beyond himself with fury at the darned beast and was sure he'd have killed it with his bare hands, if Danziger hadn't physically restrained him.

For a while there, Morgan had been *real* miserable. More miserable than at any time since the crash to G889. He grouched about the small house, moping, and complaining to himself, or anyone who would listen, that there was only so much reality a man could take - and that he, Morgan Martin, was definitely reaching the limits of his endurance.

Finally Bess threw him out of the house, saying he should make himself useful, or at least find another hobby, and stop bothering her. Dejectedly, he had cried that he wasn't much good at anything - to which she calmly replied that he was talking nonsense. He just needed to find out where his special skills lay.

Thus, he tried science for a while. But when he nearly blew up the small shed acting as hospital, during one of his experiments to create gold, Julia kicked him out, banning him from ever entering again - unless he was dead, or at least dying.

Next, Morgan took up painting and sketching. Yet that venture came to a premature end when Devon mistakenly complimented Uly on one of *his* paintings. Especially when he later heard her mutter to Yale that she expected the tutor to give the boy some lessons on drawing in perspective.

Miserable once again, Morgan was walking along the beach one day, when his eye caught something half hidden in the sand. Brushing away the dirt, he discovered a small rock, gleaming dully red. He turned it this way and that, and the beginning of an idea settled in his brain. This rock looked exactly like a miniature Grendler... didn't it? All

that was needed was a little chip here, a small nick there. Morgan set to work, borrowing cutting tools from Danziger, and a few hours later he proudly presented Bess with the first stone figurine to adorn New Pacifica. Morgan had found a new calling.

Nowadays, only a few weeks later, several creatures remain forever carved in stone. True has a real-sized cat decorating her room. And when Danziger and Devon finally tied the knot Morgan surprised them with a two meter tall Terrian figure.

Today he is working on an anniversary gift for Bess, when a sudden movement catches his eye. The blanket that he threw on the Geolock moves and stirs slightly. Cautiously he approaches it. A small creature scurries out from underneath the blanket, chirping merrily. Koba, Morgan thinks disgustedly. One of those critters that could put you in a two-day coma if they stung you. "Get away from there," Morgan cries. "That's a dangerous machine!" Grabbing a nearby stone fragment he pulls back his hand to chase the animal away with it.

oOo

The Dreamplane quivers for a moment. The Terrians perk up their ears and tilt their heads slowly, listening to a crunching sound that echoes across the plane briefly. Small tendrils of thought touch Alonzo's waking mind and he waits for more, but nothing comes. He shrugs it off and goes back to studying the maps for the next scout to grid seven. In the distance, a flock of birds shrieks angrily and takes to the sky. Yale has to call Uly to attention. Apparently he drifted off during his lesson about Earth's history. The boy shakes his head, to dispel the fog that momentarily clouded his mind.

oOo

"Julia, have you seen Morgan?" Bess runs up to the doctor when she exits the small hospital building.

"No," she answers. "Why?"

"Shank," Bess mutters. "Guess he forgot the time again. It was a lot easier when he was only playing in VR."

When Julia just gazes at her in confusion, Bess explains.

"He's late, he was supposed to take me on a picnic. He's off in the hills, as always, chipping away at his stones. At least, when he was in VR, Morgan was around. And I could just shut the program off when I needed him."

Julia nods, understanding now. "I was planning to go up in the hills myself to gather some more of those herbs, to synthesize sedatives. That's near Morgan's work place. I can detour a little to drop you off, if you like?" she offers.

Bess is smiling broadly. "Would you do that? He'll be so surprised if I show up there for our picnic. Just a minute, I'll go get the hamper." She chortles in anticipation as she hurries away.

oOo

Half an hour later the two women are in the DuneRail, driving through the hills, along the trail the vehicles had created by their regular crossing. Passing a copse of small trees they come to the clearing that is Morgan's hideout.

But they don't see any sign of Morgan. The ATV that brought him here, is parked near the shed though, so he can't be far off.

"I'll go take a look," Bess says, and jumps out of the Rail. Julia waits, closing her eyes and relishing the sunshine for a moment, when suddenly she hears Bess squeal in delight.

"Julia, come look. You got to see this," she calls to the other woman, waving frantically while she points at something half hidden in the shadows within the shed.

Julia peers into the gloomy interior -- She can't help it, she bursts out laughing. "Bess," she gasps between fits of giggles, "that's... that's... brilliant!"

"Isn't it?" Bess beams proudly. "I knew he was working on a surprise for me, but this..." In awe the women stare at Morgan's latest work in stone. Julia kneels near the statue. "Look at this," she says, "It's perfect! Even down to a tear in the pants."

"Yeah," Bess sighs, feeling incredibly proud of the man she married. "Now if only I could find that blasted husband of mine, to thank him properly..." and she looks around, searching for Morgan. Behind the women the statue, a life-sized sculpture of Morgan shooing at a small Koba, gleams a dull gray in the shadow of the shed....

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