

## Meltdown

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Warning klaxons continued to blare as another tremendous shutter ripped along and through the hull of the PVC Aten class cruiser. Morgan stumbled to one knee and reflexively caught himself against the inner wall with an outstretched arm. Sweat rolled into his eyes and he vigorously wiped his brow clean with the sleeve of his GTA standard issue flightsuit.

Another volley of explosions rippled through the hull of the ship sending jarring tremors through the metal flooring and along the walls. Several conduits erupted in a shower of sparks as an electrical panel disintegrated on the wall opposite Morgan. That got him moving again. He jumped up and moved toward the aft section of the cruiser as black smoke began to fill the causeway with the acrid smell of smoldering electrical wiring and melted silicon.

Morgan reached an intersection and was greeted with a sharp jab to his midsection as a kick connected with him from out of nowhere. He stumbled back but didn't fall, instantly moving into a counterstrike stance. He did his best to breathe normally though it was obvious he had most of his wind knocked out of him. Looking up, his gaze met the yellowish glare of a two and half meter tall Vasudan soldier. Though similar in body type to humans, the leathery skin paired with bony and sinewy extremities cast a certain level of disgust in Morgan's stomach. These were the beings he had been trained to kill, and he had taken to his training with a voracious appetite. But that had been nearly a lifetime ago, before the Shivans turned the Terran 10 year war with the Vasudans into a forced alliance. It hadn't taken an astrophysicist to calculate the odds of either race's survival had the Terran-Vasudan war continued in the face of a new and nearly unstoppable enemy.

Morgan's thoughts shifted purposefully back to his attacker. The Vasudan came in with fury in his eyes. An instant before his punch would have landed Morgan counter-stepped and threw a vicious jab into the tiny cylindrical waist of the soldier, sending the guard sprawling.

Setting his stance again, Morgan moved in on the downed Vasudan. He knew he had precious little time to deal with his attacker. He needed to disable his enemy and continue aft. Assuming that there is a ship left for you to escape on, the irritating voice in his head chimed in sarcastically.

Morgan followed through with a rapid upward kick that sent the Vasudan soldier reeling onto his back. A quick elbow to the bony throat and Morgan was back on his feet running. A sudden shriek of metal twisting rippled above his head, a tell-tale sign that a passing fighter was strafing a blast of laser fire from its dual Banshees, tearing past any remaining shield strength and connecting with the hull. There wasn't much time left.

As Morgan set off down the adjoining hall, the lights began to flicker. Morgan started to feel sudden nausea creeping into his midsection. The gravity generators were beginning to fluctuate, making the inside of the ship move alternately from two or three G's to less than a third. It wouldn't be long now before the giant ship would list out of control and begin to fold in on itself.

Morgan pressed on, gritting his teeth as another shower of sparks danced golden orange embers along his face and shoulders. Nearing the fighter bay, shouts could be heard over the din of the ship's subsystems slowly dying out in arcs of electricity and billows of dark smoke. The crew was in a panic trying to abandon what was surely going to be a tremendous fireball in space at any moment. Up ahead, Morgan spotted a light Vasudan class fighter - an Anubis. It appeared minimally armed, a pair of ML-16 laser cannons and one hard point of MX-50 missiles, nestled below the tri-wing configuration of the ship. It wasn't much but it was closest and still intact. It would have to do.

The magnetic field protecting the bay from the hard vac of space gave way to an almost surrealistically charged display of light and movement as blasts of laser fire danced across the hull of the ship. Small glints of light here and there against the background of the Antares Maelstrom were sure signs of smaller ship-to-ship battles taking place a scant few clicks away. One thing was certain. Morgan's troubles weren't going to end just by escaping the doomed cruiser.

Leaping from the overhead gangway, Morgan raced toward the fighter, arms and legs pumping rapidly. There were three other ships at the far end of the bay, but he put them out of his mind as two of them launched from the flightdeck. . He didn't have the luxury of choice. Besides, the hatch of the fighter in front of him was wide open, a sure invitation to anyone who wasn't ready to give up and die just yet. Tumbling into the fighter, Morgan scrambled toward the cockpit and leaped into the pilot's chair, picking up the helmet that lay in the seat. Though it was a little large, being designed more for the head of a Vasudan than that of a Terran, Morgan strapped it on and began to scan the console. He had flown this ship before - albeit against his will. But that was nearly a decade ago, a scant two years before the final battle with the Shivan battleship, Lucifer. Amazing how it all comes back to you, he thought while priming the engines to life.

There was a sudden thud behind him. Wreckage began to spill from the overhead scaffolding of the fighter bay in twisted piles of metal and wiring. Closing the outer hatch, Morgan fired the engines up to maximum thrust. He was held tightly against the chair by the force of the acceleration. The fighter cleared the magnetic field and slipped into space with ease.

Two Terran fighters whizzed overhead in a tight formation, unleashing a volley of Hornets at the doomed cruiser. The wisps of smoke streamed haphazardly in space before impacting on the hull with horrific intensity. Morgan only needed to glance once at the aft display to see that the killing blow had been dealt. A chain reaction of explosions and fire seemed to erupt from several places all at once across the surface of the cruiser. A giant fissure formed along the center portion of the hull sending debris out in a shower of twisted metal.

"Come on, come on," Morgan muttered to himself. With a massive flash of hot white light, the cruiser's reactor reached critical mass, imploding with ferocious steams of fire and rubble. Another flash was followed by a giant arc of sheer energy that raced out from the core of the ship in an ever-widening sphere that rapidly began to engulf anything within its path.

A tiny bead of sweat ran down Morgan's brow and across his cheek as he clutched the throttle in one hand and the flight stick in the other. The fighter began to shudder, then vibrate. Instantly the tremors were buffeting the small ship about as lazily as a leaf in a windstorm.

"Come on!" The leading edge of the blast hit the tiny ship. Subsystems, overloaded by the electromagnetic pulse of the wave, erupted in torrents of sparks. The fighter was sent into a wild tailspin, hurtling nearly sideways through space. Fighting the controls with every ounce of strength, Morgan cursed under his breath and tried to take stock of his situation.

His HUD filled with subsystem failure messages in bright green iridescent letters that glowed eerily against the background of space. Life-support down to 20%. Shields completely out. Guidance controls partially active. Weapons sporadic at best. Engines operating at 53% of optimum. Things had looked better. Of course, they could have been worse. The hull seemed intact and the shield generators were starting to come back online as automated repair functions began to come to life. Then things did get worse. The 'radar-lock' warning screamed to life. A Terran fighter had targeted the Anubis. A quick look at the HUD revealed four incoming missiles, all locked on his position.

Morgan's eyes darted from left to right across the console. Without thinking, he launched four packets of countermeasures and engaged the turbos. The damaged engines strained against the force of the sudden acceleration. Warning chimes continued growing louder in Morgan's headset. The inbound Hornets weren't even close to running out of fuel.

All at once, Morgan jammed the flight stick to the left and then back forcing the missiles to try to make a 90-degree correction. They flew by the cockpit in streams, arcing as they attempted to adjust to their target's sudden change in position.

Firing off another two bursts of countermeasures, Morgan hit the turbos again and pushed the fighter into a spiraling dive only to pull up once again only moments later. As quickly as the 'radar-lock' warning had blared to life, it abruptly ceased.

"Okay, now who fired at me?" Morgan's eyes raced over the console to find the targeting controls. His finger clicked through a series of keystrokes and the outline of a Terran Valkyrie came up in his viewer. It was just over 600 meters away and was coming around behind him, rapidly gaining.

"Great, they think I am one of them. Break, break," he shouted into the microphone jutting out from the corner of his helmet. "Valkyrie, break off your attack. I am a GTA pilot." Morgan's plea was met with static. Before he had time to speak again, another warning sounded. This time the readout indicated he was being fired upon. Instantly, screams of laser on hull ripped through the hindquarter of the fighter.

"Damnit! I'm one of you. Don't you get it?!?" Morgan punched the engines up to full and pulled hard left on the flight stick. He had to try to get around and behind his attacker. But he couldn't take out one of his own kind. Frustration began to well up inside him, causing him to yell out uncontrollably. Then it occurred to him - target just the weapon's subsystem of his attacker. At least that was better than being ripped to shreds in an already battered ship.

A quick look back up at the HUD and Morgan realized his engines were now back to almost 70% and his shield batteries were starting to charge back up, albeit slower than he would have liked. Toggling through the list of possible subsystems, Morgan focused the Anubis' ML-16's on the weapons system of the attacking Valkyrie. The pilot of the Valkyrie had different intentions in mind. He quickly veered left then right in a criss-cross pattern trying to force Morgan to over commit to one direction over another.

This guy is good, Morgan thought to himself. Abruptly, Morgan had an idea. He began to ease off of the throttle and straighten out his flight path. The Valkyrie suddenly fired up its turbos and moved in for the kill.

"Just a little more," Morgan whispered to himself. Instantly every warning siren onboard the Vasudan fighter went off as both missile lock and incoming laser fire were registered on the HUD.

Instantaneously, Morgan set off a barrage of all remaining countermeasures and killed the engines. The Valkyrie flew past the suddenly still fighter, overshooting its mark by almost 30 meters.

Veering sideways, the Terran pilot tried to force his ship around but the mistake had been made. Once the Valkyrie was in front of Morgan, the targeting computer registered a weapons lock. Morgan let loose with a barrage of laser fire that tore through the Valkyrie's shield quadrant, reducing it to nothing within a matter a dozen rounds. Keeping a watchful eye on the damage

screen, Morgan unconsciously bit his lower lip as the streams of laser fire bit into the Valkyrie's armor. The attacking pilot, recovering from his critical error, began to turn his ship away, firing up his turbos in an attempt to turn away from the incoming fire. Morgan countered, continuing to hammer at the weapons system.

"Gotcha!" Morgan shouted as his readouts suddenly indicated that the Valkyrie's weapons system was now useless. Now his only problem was how to avoid drawing any further fire from others and letting them know he wasn't the enemy. Two blips on his proximity scanner told him he was too late. The Valkyrie's pilot had obviously radioed for backup and it looked as if it was coming. Morgan had to think fast. The two incoming blips were 8600 clicks away and closing fast.

Looking across the HUD, he knew what he had to do. Switching back to his targeting console, he acquired a different subsystem on the Valkyrie - her engines. It was a dangerous stunt to pull. Fighter ships weren't that robust and the chances of breaching the core were a lot higher without the luxury of having disruptor cannons onboard. But he had little choice. To make his plan work, he had to disable the Valkyrie before the reinforcements arrived and introduced him personally to the hard vac of space.

Again, the Valkyrie began to dodge to and fro in an attempt to evade the attacking Vasudan fighter. Morgan pushed his throttle up and chased after the defenseless fighter. However, the giant engines on the Valkyrie were beginning to outdistance him. A burst of laser fire smashed onto the rear deflectors, glowing a bright blue as the shields absorbed the damage. Then the Terran ship veered again.

"Shit!" Morgan instantly compensated and let off another volley of laser fire that harmlessly undershot the zigzagging fighter. Morgan checked his HUD and saw the two incoming ships were just under 6000 kilometers away.

Rolling his fighter over, Morgan pulled back on the flight stick and engaged the freshly charged turbos. The nimble fighter rapidly closed on the Valkyrie. Morgan lined up the engines of the evading Terran ship and squeezed down hard on the firing trigger. Bolts of light raced toward the hindquarter of the Valkyrie, dancing off the shield once again.

Morgan glanced momentarily down at his ship's scanner to see if he could get a read on the fleeing ship's remaining shield strength. There wasn't much left, but another glance at the HUD indicated the two back-up ships were now just over 3000 kilometers away. They'll be within missile-lock range pretty soon, he thought to himself.

Straightening out his ship. Another blast from his dual ML-16's did the trick. The Terran shield flickered out as the bolts of energy from the Anubis' guns finally connected with the hull. Without hesitation, Morgan launched one of the MX-50 heat-seeking missiles at the now exposed and unprotected hindquarter.

The Valkyrie desperately tried to evade, but it was to no avail. The missile slammed into the left engine, splintering it in glowing shards.

The crippled Valkyrie's second engine sputtered, flared once, and then went dark as the reactor shut down. The momentum of the blast had turned the Terran fighter slightly around, the nose pointing up.

Without a moment to lose, Morgan rotated his ship so that it was perpendicular to the Valkyrie. Then he rolled it so the two cockpits were nearly touching. The HUD screamed to life as two

missile locks were suddenly achieved.

Morgan began to wave his arms wildly. He could make out the faint outline of the Terran fighter pilot sitting in the now lifeless Valkyrie. The pilot seemed to rotate his head as though making eye contact, but it was difficult to tell with his helmet still in place.

THE HELMET! With the warning sirens growing steadily louder from the incoming missiles, Morgan yanked his helmet off his head. He could hear his breath loudly in his ears, panting like a dog. He waited for what seemed like an eternity but was probably only three seconds before he knew he had to move. Pushing down on his flight stick, Morgan brought the engines up to full and nailed the turbos.

The first missile connected, jarring the ship hard underneath him. His HUD flashed red and the rear shield fell to nothing. Instinctively, Morgan rolled the ship 90 degrees and exposed the belly of the light fighter to the next incoming missile. It slammed into the underside of the Anubis. Warning lights went off inside the cockpit, telling Morgan his ship couldn't stand much more damage. Two of his four shield quadrants were gone and his hull was beginning to sheer under the force of the explosions. He quickly redirected his shield strength to help fill the now depleted banks.

Come on, you had to have seen me, Morgan thought incredulously. "I'm one of you!" He tried to regain control of his wildly spinning ship. Another warning went off and both of the attacking fighters began to send a volley of laser fire toward him. "DAMNIT!"

He veered to the left then back to the right, rolling back and forth in space. He evaded most of the incoming fire, but a few shots managed to make it through. His automatic repair subsystem was completely gone and his firing controls looked to be operating sporadically at best.

He began a rapid barrel roll to the right before diving straight down. The two terran fighters answered in kind with another volley of laser fire. Smoke began to stream into the cockpit as several bolts of laser fire ripped across the hull of the Anubis. Morgan hit the circulation cleansers up to full and tried to hold his breath. Hull integrity was down to 40%.

Flying blindly now, the front window blocked in a haze of smoke, Morgan, for the first time in recent memory, began to panic. After all the dogfights with hostiles, Vasudan and Shivan alike, he was going to buy it from one of his own race. Ain't life grand, his mind quipped.

The barely functional cleansers finally began to clear out some of the acrid smoke, thinning it out just enough for Morgan to do two things. The first was, take a badly needed breath. The second was to see another stream of incoming laser fire rip across the nose of his ship.

The HUD wavered, then went out. Communications were gone. His hull was just barely hanging together. Sparks began to erupt from his main console as traces of blue electricity danced around the onboard flight computer.

Suddenly all sound stopped. Morgan froze in place, eyes darting back and forth. Then it hit him. His engines had gone offline. All that was left was a faint glow from an overhead light. Not fully versed in the Vasudan language, Morgan could only guess at what it was telling him.

"What the hell," he said, placing his helmet back on his head. "No one gets to live forever." Reaching up, he hit the button.

The Anubis instantly vaporized.

The dull gray light started to grow brighter. Off in the distance, murmurs of voices were speaking unintelligibly. Morgan opened his eyes slowly. He rolled his head slowly to the left and then back to the right, trying to get a fix on where he was. It appeared as though he was in some type of medical ward, a sheet drawn around him on all sides. He was dressed only in a standard hospital gown. Reaching over for the handheld control to the bed, he hit the button, raising himself to an upright position.

The voices halted their conversation in midstream. Suddenly, the curtain parted and a human physician approached. He pulled his surgical mask down and leaned in. His blue eyes seemed dull and his face expressionless.

"Awake, are we? Feeling better?" There was as much warmth in the voice of the doctor as there was in the hard vac of space. Maybe less, Morgan thought to himself.

"Where am I?" Morgan asked, eyeing the doctor carefully.

Without answering, the physician turned and leaned back outside the parted curtain. "Come in here, please," the doctor spoke.

"Someone tell me what the hell is going on here," Morgan demanded.

The curtains were yanked back as a group of GTA agents swarmed around the bed. One of them stepped forward, his jet-black hair slicked back over a thick brow. He was certainly the largest of any, having spent more time at the dinner table than out in the field.

"Lt. Durning. We wish to congratulate you on your mission. It appears as though it was a success."

"Excuse me?"

"I can't go into much detail at this point. The areas of your memory that had been previously removed will be returned as soon as possible. In the mean time . . ."

"Listen, you, whoever you are. I don't have a clue what you are talking about."

The large agent exchanged glances with the pale faced doctor. The doctor only shrugged and pursed his lips. The agent looked back at Morgan. He stood there, motionless, as if he had the room entirely to himself.

Abruptly, he ordered everyone to clear the room. The doctor appeared to protest, but a stern look from the GTA agent sent him quietly out with the others. When they had all cleared, the agent once again turned to Morgan.

"Lieutenant. Do you remember the mission at all?"

"What mission? What are you talking about?"

"You were selected to be our primary operative in a mission code named 'Meltdown.' The objective of your mission was to infiltrate a Vasudan cruiser and place a nav scrambler in the engine compartment. This scrambler would cause the Vasudan cruiser to veer ever so slightly from its course, drifting it into GTA space. Do you remember any of that?"

Morgan looked up incredulously. He had no recollection of any of the parts of the story the GTA agent was purporting to be true.

"I remember leaving the GTC Tannenbaum for a routine patrol of the Antares system. Next thing I knew, I was being fired upon by Vasudan fighters and brought aboard one of their cruisers. I was left in an interrogation room for what seemed like 5 or 6 hours when suddenly all hell broke loose. When a Vasudan guard came to remove me from the room, I managed to get the better of him and from that point my only thought was to escape."

"So you remember the attack?"

"Remember it?!? I almost bought it on that ship. And then our own guys nearly blew me away. If it weren't for the escape pod on the Anubis, I wouldn't even be here right now. Wherever the hell 'here' is!"

"You weren't on a ship. You were never attached to the Tannenbaum. A Vasudan rebel snuck you onboard via a standard supply drop. The scrambler you placed forced the cruiser into our airspace, thereby violating the peace treaty."

"What?"

"Thanks to you, we can get back to the business of eliminating the Vasudans from our galaxy." The agent formed what seemed to be a smile and crossed his arms. If Morgan didn't know better, it looked as though the agent was actually quite pleased with himself.

"So the governing council wanted to start a war with the Vasudans? Is that what this was all about?"

"You know bureaucrats. What they want and what they say are very often two different things. My agency just helped to prod them in the right direction."

"Your agency?" Morgan asked, quizzically.

"I run a rather small black ops detachment of the GTA intelligence community. We tend to specialize in assassinations and stock market crashes. I must admit, we nearly overextended our capabilities. But, thanks to you, it appears we have accomplished the objective."

"So this was all your doing? The president wasn't involved. The council?"

"What difference does it make? It's what everyone wanted. Hell, even your psyche profile indicates your hatred for the Vasudans. In part, it's what gave you an edge over our other candidates."

"I don't believe this!"

"Believe it, my friend. All of this will become clear when we restore your mind to what it once was. As for why you don't remember engaging the ship, that must be the result of trying to segment only parts of your memory, sort of a delayed amnesia. In any event, you did an immense job. Now rest easy. I'll see if I can get the doctor to schedule your memory reinstall this afternoon. Who knows, in a week, you might be back in a fighter squadron," the GTA agent winked, slapping Morgan on the shoulder. With that he turned and left.

Morgan was left alone.

It was all going to be his fault. The second war. The lives of thousands of soldiers and fighter pilots. People with families. The sudden horror of it all hit him so hard he could hardly breathe. His head was spinning. All he could do was cradle his head in his hands, rocking back and forth on the bed like an infant. And for the first time since childhood, tears began to run down his cheeks.