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Schlock!

WEBZINE

VOL. 15, ISSUE 12
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THE FESTIVAL OF THE NEW MOON

BY TOMAS
MARCANTONIO
—A CAT FROM
ANOTHER
TIME...

FLIGHT OF THE ARCHANGELS

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WALKER—
A SWIFT AND
BRUTAL REBELLION
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THE PIMENTA PUM-PUM FRANCIS-MARIE DE CHATILLON

THE WHEEL'S SPINNING BUT THE HAMSTER'S DEAD CARLTON HERZOG

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Gavin Chappell

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Stilson*

SCHLOCK! WEBZINE

Welcome to Schlock! the webzine for science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

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Schlock! is a weekly webzine dedicated to short stories, flash fiction, serialised novels, and novellas, within the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. We publish new and old works of pulp sword and sorcery, urban fantasy, dark fantasy, and gothic horror. If you want to read quality works of new pulp fantasy, science fiction or horror, Schlock! is the webzine for you!

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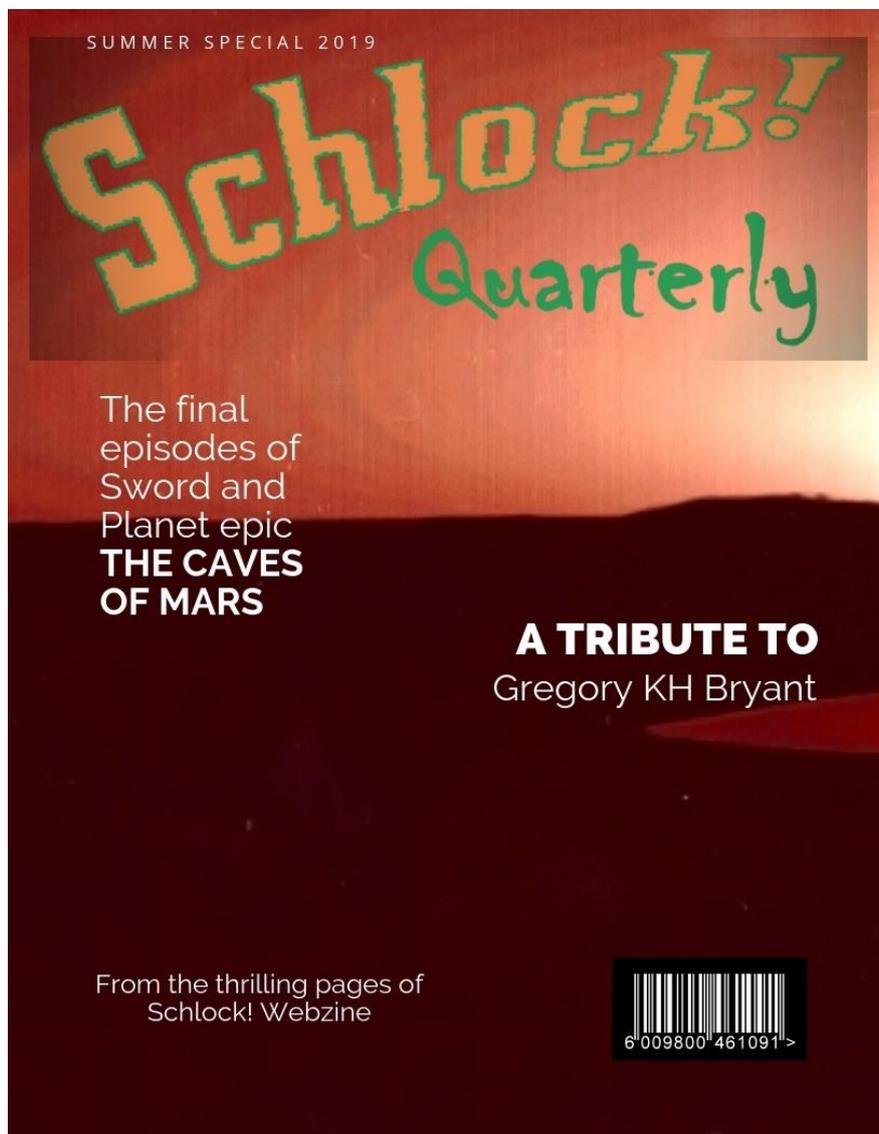
EDITORIAL

This week, three girls come face to face with a god of the forest. At the very climax of the ritual, Kasimir Kohl hears bad news. Lieutenant Firestar of the Consortium leads the attack on the Federation cruisers. Winston visits a witch in the forest to help tackle his marital inadequacies. God is found in an eternally spinning hamster wheel.

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—Gavin Chappell

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IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

IT CAME FROM INSIDE THE INKWELL!

By Vincent Davis



"EXCUSE ME, I'VE GOT TO TAKE THIS."

Vincent is an artist who has consistently been on assignment in the art world for over twenty years. Throughout his career he has acquired a toolbox of diverse skills (from freehand drawing to digital design, t shirt designer to muralist). His styles range from the wildly abstract to pulp style comics.

In 2013, his work in END TIMES won an award in the Best Horror Anthology category for that year. When Vincent is not at his drawing board he can be found in the classroom teaching cartooning and illustration to his students at Westchester Community College in Valhalla NY.

He lives in Mamaroneck NY with his wife Jennie and dog Skip.

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THE FESTIVAL OF THE NEW MOON by Tomas Marcantonio

Quisarmo the mayor ran his droopy eyes up and down the bodies of the three girls, the hairs in his nostrils quivering. It was customary for him to say a brief word to the watching crowd before the test began, but today he merely hiccupped and smeared a forefinger across his shining black moustache, and wiped what he collected there on the leather at his hip. The crowd began the countdown on their own, watching the sun's steady progress towards the top of the west bank. It was said that once the spire of the church pierced the sun at the end of each day, its yolk would spill across the horizon, and the thousand gods which had been trapped within would sail across the sky to deal out judgement to the peoples across the world. When the lower haze of the sun kissed the crooked spire neither yolk nor gods escaped, but a great guttural roar went up from the crowds gathered in the favela square, and the three girls went charging through the cobble-stoned alleys that sloped downwards towards the great lake at the city centre. The crowds, carrying pigskin bags of Rhu wine and home-brewed beer, split into three factions and pursued the girls like hordes of delirious insects.

The first girl, Margaredo, went straight for the lake. She was a smuggler of Rhu wine, tall and pale, with contemptuous eyes and a spear that she was seldom seen without. She was never more at peace than when she made her secret dusk visits to the forest village of Laroto in her self-made canoe, trailing one hand through the water as the riverbank children in their sparse leathers whistled to their elders to announce the arrival of a visitor. The night before she had shaved off two-thirds of her hair, and now she let the rest fall in a copper curtain over the same eye that had been poisoned by a lightning frog three years earlier and now drooped slightly in the outer corner.

A crowd stood on the shore of the mirrored lake and watched as Margaredo tossed her spear into her canoe and climbed aboard. Unmoved by any of the onlookers' volleys of support, insults, or lewd catcalls, she paddled with cool precision to a point not twenty metres from shore, where the fish were more plentiful, but she was still within sight of her judges in the quickly fading light. She dropped the paddle into the canoe, took up her spear and stood up. Raising the spear above her head in both hands, she waited, watching the surface of the water, scarcely blinking, her face empty of emotion.

The second girl, Uxia, led a following towards the Square of the Gods. Uxia was the daughter of one of the city's most prominent governors. Unbeknown to him, she was addicted to the saliva of the whitewood gecko, removing it from the creatures' tongues and inserting into her bloodstream by piercing her neck with acacia thorns. She did this every morning, every night, and at other times when she was not required at the home of her tutor or at official functions for her father. Short but sinewy, she wore three red feathers in her brown braided hair, the same way that her mother had done before she was taken by a fever four years before. In the Square of the Gods, not a stone's throw from the eastern shore of the lake, Uxia's father was waiting with a small group of other officials and friends around a bamboo pole that had been thrust into the dry earth. Tied to the bamboo was a live silk anaconda, all of seven metres long.

Uxia stopped before the great snake and allowed her tailing crowd to assemble in a circle around them, slapping each other's backs and passing around their pigskins of wine. She removed the bow from her back and one of the arrows from its quiver. The silk anaconda, milk-white in colour with empty black eyes, drew itself up to its full height and flicked a

questioning tongue at the young woman, who nocked her arrow and stood silently before it, unmoving, her eyes looking down the straight of her arrow.

The third girl, Benitz, led her troupe to the Square of the Cazzor. Dark-skinned and slight with short, tightly-curled black hair, she did not look the part of an apprentice *cazzor* fighter; she had, in fact, yet to stand alone in the ring with one of the red pigs, and the thought of doing so had given her many sleepless nights. She lived alone in the eastern hill favela and spent most of her evenings cross-legged on her thatched roof, looking down into the bowl of the city while she applied poison to her blowpipe darts. She came down into the paved streets rarely, usually only to continue her training under the veteran *cazzor* fighter Almecia, who was now a drunk and overweight, but who owed a debt of some kind to Benitz's late parents and had therefore agreed to apprentice the girl for free. Despite being the underdog to prevail in the tests and keep her place in the city, Benitz had the greatest audience in the first round. She was to tackle a *cazzor* for the first time, and at the Festival of the New Moon the people of Tigela enjoyed more than anything a spectacle of tusks, skill, and blood.

The circular arena on the northern shore was already half-full when Benitz came through the gates followed by her rowdy group, many of whom came making pig noises, holding up the tips of their noses with their thumbs. As Benitz caught her breath and made her way to the centre of the ring, the crowd fanned out up the stairs to the seats that rose up in circles around the arena, and there they began placing bets and pouring wine into each other's open mouths.

Benitz dropped to her haunches and, touching the sand beneath her feet, felt it rough against her palms. She looked to the sky and prayed that her parents might watch over her, then performed a slow turn about the arena, bowing to the crowds in each section. She found Almecia in her usual seat in the high stands, surrounded by older men who still remembered her when she was young and lean and athletic. Her hair was tied in stiff pigtails now, her arms crossed and resting upon her great stomach, her expression bullish.

'You're not ready, little *cazzorla*,' she had told her charge the night before. Benitz also knew it to be true, but she saw no other way to keep her hut on the hill.

The crowds, who had been chanting and drinking loudly, fell quiet when the beast gate opened and the pig emerged. It came slow and with a heavy gait, its great head low and hanging slightly to the left, as though it were being pulled reluctantly on a leash. Benitz observed its crimson hide, thick and leathery, glazed in translucent fur. She watched the hulking movements of its neck, thick as a tree trunk, and the aged, cantankerous aspect of its washed-out pink eyes, blinking moodily at the stands. The pig was old, she guessed, perhaps a hundred or two hundred years, judging by its low-hanging belly and the thick tusks that curved crookedly outwards from its hairy pink snout.

Benitz removed the knife from her belt and steadied her bare feet in the sand, clenching and unclenching her toes to test the friction. The *cazzor*, reaching almost Benitz's height, proceeded slowly forward, disconcerted by the fading light and its own sad misfortune at being away from the trees. It stamped its trotters with such force that the sand beneath the girl's feet danced across the ground and over her toes. The crowd roared in delight, and the great *cazzor* charged.

Margaredo paddled back to the shore with a howler bass across her lap. It was small for an adult, less than one metre long, but she was satisfied by the spectacle of her catch. She had been patient, watching several curious fish swim by until one of a reputable size and intellect had presented itself. She had waited over fifteen minutes for the howler, and despite its small size had reasoned that she might not get a better opportunity with the light dwindling and the forest horn due to blow within the half-hour.

When the howler had passed under the canoe, a hush had come over the crowd watching from the shore. The fishermen among them saw the change in the solemn young woman's expression, saw the muscles in her arms and legs and stomach tense, the minor readjustments of her body line. Margaredo leapt into the air from her canoe and came down like a fork of lightning over the water. The spear passed right through the howler's silver scales and the fish's signature cry sounded like a foghorn through the water as it died.

By the time Margaredo had laid her catch on the shore for the onlookers to inspect, Uxia had already slit open the silk anaconda and was separating its parts into a dozen clay bowls that had been laid out around the body of the felled beast. Her father stood before the crowd, narrating the actions of his daughter in a proud, booming voice.

'Faecal content from the small and large intestines,' he said, indicating the closest bowl, 'later to be mixed with hot water to treat diarrhoea. The fat, to be ground, its oil a treatment for muscle pain and haemorrhoids. That means you, Baroq,' he said to a white moustached man at his side. Some of the onlookers laughed as the old man smiled grudgingly. 'The kidneys will be burned, the smoke inhaled by those with breathing difficulties, the gall bladder dried and used to treat burns. The skin'—he paused and flashed an entrepreneurial smile at his audience—'cleaned and sold off to the highest bidder.'

Uxia, focused on her task and ignoring the minor errors in her father's explanations, removed the snake's black eyes in a final flourish. She had pierced them with a single arrow; now they would be steamed and eaten, a protein-rich delicacy. She had completed the dissection with speed and dexterity, and the watching crowd applauded her efforts generously, though some quietly found the display to be lacking in drama after the initial excitement of the kill, and many would have preferred to watch the fight in the Square of the Cazzor.

The audience at the ancient arena were indeed revelling in the spectacle, for the great pig was a sufficiently obstinate opponent with a mean temperament. The girl was skilful enough not to be killed outright and spoil the fun, but inexperienced enough to flirt with death on each passing attack. The pig had twice lacerated Benitz's right arm with its tusks, much to the delight of the more inebriated onlookers. Her arm was bleeding freely from the second attack, and she had yet to register a clean cut on the *cazzor*'s hide. Each time she had leapt to stick her knife into the pig's neck it had parried her attack with its tusks, either one of which could have ripped open her belly with a cursory drive. Many in the crowd bemoaned the girl's offensive skill, though purists among them acknowledged the deftness of her footwork and recognised that she had been well trained.

After several minutes, when the light was in its last throes and darkness was stealing slowly across the arena, the crowds sensed that the pig was beginning to tire. Benitz noticed it too, in its lopsided walk and the clouds of hot breath that escaped its nostrils with increasing regularity. As the two opponents circled each other ever more ponderously, the forest horn

was blown, and its song echoed through the brown walls of the city centre, across the cobbled streets and up the winding alleys that led to the sad favelas on the hill and the forests beyond.

Benitz's time was up. She swore under her breath and took the blowpipe from her belt, removing the cork from one of the poison darts. When the dart hit the pig in the neck and the beast fell forward, confused, onto its forelegs, the majority of the crowd booed. Their pigskins were empty and they had not seen a clean kill, but Benitz had been left with little choice; only one could leave a *cazzor* fight alive. She bowed to the audience and staggered from the arena holding her arm, followed by scattered groups of barefooted children, the only ones with enough energy to pursue her up the hill.

When she came to the square in front of the church on the western bank, Margaredo and Uxia were already there, inspecting their weapons under the glare of Quisarmo the mayor. The three combatants sized each other up for damage from the first round, and with the second horn went charging off through the city gate and into the forest.

'The bag of ham gave you a good game, by the look of you,' Uxia said, inspecting Benitz's red arm. 'How were his tusks?'

'Three foot,' Benitz said quietly, wincing as Uxia applied yarrow powder to the wound.

The three girls had convened in a clearing between white rubber trees, not half a league from the city walls. Benitz and Uxia were sat side by side on a felled log, half-decayed on the bank of an algae-covered pond. Margaredo sat on a branch above them, watching through the understory. Somewhere nearby a ghost owl released a long, haunting cry.

'Don't be too hard on yourself for killing the damn thing,' Uxia said to Benitz. 'The forest provides and we live in harmony with it; sometimes death is necessary.'

Benitz wetted her lips. 'Sometimes it is,' she said, thinking of the look in the *cazzor*'s eyes at the end; the waste of life.

'I trust you gave them quite a show on the lake,' Uxia said, looking up at the smuggler. Margaredo said nothing; her weak eye twitched as she stared through the trees. 'What do you aim to hunt once we separate?' Uxia went on. 'Another white silk would suit me nicely, last month the winner only needed a fat *capy* to see off the others, and she did nothing in the city but thatch a roof.' Still Margaredo said nothing. Uxia shook her head and smiled. 'Sometimes, river girl, I wonder if you even want to win.'

'And you do?' Margaredo asked calmly, keeping her gaze straight ahead. 'Are you in such a rush to have a husband chosen for you? To submit to a life waiting on pregnant men?'

Uxia laughed. 'All I want is a roof over my head and a healthy supply of wine. Husbands be damned, I wouldn't let one touch me. Done,' she added to Benitz, wiping the last of the powder from her arm. 'Now pass me my fix, or I won't be able to shoot straight.'

Margaredo tossed down the dead whitewood gecko and Uxia caught it.

‘Sure you don’t want a lick?’ Uxia said to the other two. ‘You’d be surprised how it sharpens your senses.’

‘And weakens your sense,’ Margaredo said, leaping down from her branch. ‘Let’s just get this finished,’ she said, picking up her spear from the forest floor.

‘If you don’t want a place in the city, river girl, why take part at all? Laroto’s out there waiting for you. Let Benitz and me finish this hunting trip alone; best woman wins.’

‘There’s only one way I can help the people of Laroto,’ Margaredo said. ‘And that’s with the wine-running money. If I don’t win tonight, I’ll never be able to trade with the drunks of Tigela again.’

‘So let Laroto worry about Laroto,’ Uxia said. ‘Frail women who didn’t prove their worth in their tests, that’s all Laroto is. Why do you care?’

Margaredo looked morosely through the trees.

‘Ah,’ Uxia said. ‘You have family there, do you? So spear them some fish; I hear you’re good at that.’

Margaredo brushed the curtain of hair away from her drooping eye and let both of them settle on the smaller girl. ‘You know, women don’t become hunters or medics in Tigela. Have you seen the boys of our moon? We’re more capable than all of them, and yet we’re competing for one place while they drink with their fathers and choose which one of us to drool over. And your father’s as bad as any of them.’

‘My father does what he has to do.’

‘Banishing women to keep the city population down,’ Margaredo scoffed. ‘With all the resources right on our doorstep. It’s only because men like your father don’t know how to use the forest that there’s not enough food—’

‘Enough,’ Uxia said.

She threw her bow to the ground and leaned up against the closest rubber tree. Margaredo took a step towards her.

‘You know your father will just see you tend to other men all your life,’ she said, more gently. ‘You’re skilled and you’re not stupid, and gecko tongue isn’t going to keep you from remembering that forever. Why not go to Laroto or one of the other forest villages? They’re poor, yes, but they’re resourceful, and they could use more women like you.’

Uxia fixed her eyes to the forest floor, saying nothing.

Throughout this exchange Benitz had remained seated, her eyes closed in quiet concentration.

‘Your arm still bothering you, little *cazzorla*?’ Margaredo asked.

Benitz opened her eyes and shook her head. ‘They’re coming.’

Margaredo and Uxia lifted their heads. They heard them now too. The men, in an advancing group, with poorly-made spears and palm shields full of holes, marching and chanting their way from the city walls.

Uxia picked up her bow and shook away her sombre mood. Her pupils were already dilating; the drug was quick to take effect. She fingered the feathers in her hair, as though to check all three were still in place. 'Our great protectors,' she said. 'They'll scare away half the forest.'

Benitz shook her head again. 'The *apazzar* is coming too. No, it's already here.'

The creature was stalking them. They knew it in the silence of the forest, a silence only broken by the distant singing of the drunks who marched ever closer.

Then they heard the roar. It was a deep, rolling thrum; heavy, wild, and ancient. They felt it through the soles of their feet, coursing through their bones. The sound stole the breaths from their throats.

'Let's bring this thing down,' Uxia whispered. 'Kill it and they'll grant us all places in the city. No one's ever brought down an *appazar*. We'd be heroes.'

Margaredo stood with one leg perched on a fallen log, her spear in hand, poised. Uxia nocked her bow and turned slow circles, ready for any sign of movement through the brush. Benitz loaded her blowpipe, held it to her shaking lips.

It came with slow steps, soundless. A cat from another time, bigger than two *cazzors* stacked on top of each other. An *apazzar*, black as midnight, eyes shimmering like distant stars. Leaves trembled as it crept beneath the understory, fungi crushed silently under its gigantic paws. Fire beetles scuttled away up their tree trunks, horned ants disappeared beneath the soil.

The *appazar* paused on the edge of the clearing behind a screen of ferns, its diamond eyes unblinking as it surveyed the three girls pointing their weapons in all the wrong directions.

'It's here,' Margaredo breathed. She couldn't see it, none of them could, but all of them sensed its presence.

The cat stepped through the brush and emerged into the clearing. It studied the girls for a moment, with their weapons now aimed squarely between its eyes, though none of them released. The cat lowered its head to the pond, keeping its eyes on the girls as it nosed away the surface algae and licked at the water.

Margaredo lowered her spear, and then Uxia lowered her bow, and Benitz dropped her blowpipe from her lips.

'We cannot kill it,' Benitz whispered. 'No good can come of killing a god of the forest.'

Just then the drunks of Tigela came crashing through the undergrowth, laughing and spilling wine as they tripped over each other. When they saw the girls and the great creature before them, the men raised their spears and let out a war cry. The *apazzar*, blinking slowly, bared its fangs and charged.

The cat moved with surprising grace for a creature so large. Its paws made no sound as it leapt over logs and darted around the pond, charging straight for the horde of men, a dozen in all. A few screamed when the cat came at them, and a half dozen scampered off in different directions, their shields and spears left forgotten on the forest floor. The *apazzar* killed two with nonchalant sweeps of its paws, and it roared as it stood over their bloodied bodies.

The three girls moved instinctively to surround the great cat. Margaredo scampered along the fallen log and took aim, her spear poised above her head. Benitz fumbled to reload her blowpipe; she dropped to her knees and closed one eye to take aim. Uxia kept her arrow nocked and took up position behind a tree.

Quisarmo, one of the few men to hold his ground, threw his spear at the *apazzar*, but it was batted away like a fly and the obese man fell backwards onto his elbows. As the black cat padded towards the fallen mayor, he began praying to someone beyond the canopy, tears streaming silently down his cheeks.

Bentiz, with shaking hands, blew her dart. It pierced the *appazar*'s neck, but the cat merely snarled and shook its head from side to side in discomfort; for a creature that size the poison would not be instantaneous. Margaredo then stepped forward and called to the beast. It turned from the whimpering man on the forest floor to observe the smuggler. The cat blinked slowly and then charged, and Margaredo waited until the last second to dive out of its way and pierce the cat's side with her spear. The smuggler avoided the *apazzar*'s mighty paws but crashed hard into the trunk of a tree and disappeared beneath a canopy of ferns. The cat skidded heavily onto its side, releasing a roar of pain that could be heard for leagues around.

Wounded and angry, it rose again to its feet, more slowly now, and made for the first person it saw: Uxia's father, so far a shrinking bystander, cowering against the bole of a tree.

Uxia lined up her shot and then froze with her arrow pointed at the creature's neck. She remembered how it had been when her mother died. Her father had patted Uxia's head with his hand. She remembered how he smelled of sour sweat and smoke, remembered the sound he made when he hocked up phlegm in his throat before he said what he did: 'She was a good wife, but she never gave me a son. Perhaps this is the gods' way of punishing her.'

Now she looked upon her father's terrified face, glistening with perspiration, horror in his white eyes. The creature lowered its jaws over the cowering man and suddenly, without being aware of making a decision, Uxia loosed her arrow. The creature stumbled, whined, its tongue askew out of its mouth, and then fell suddenly, heavily, its front legs landing on the body of Uxia's father, taking the wind out of him.

Seeing her father alive, Uxia lowered her bow and turned from the clearing, running her fingers along the feathers in her hair as she departed. Her father, who had turned over and was busy weeping into his hands, never saw her again.

‘You will make a fine wife for a man of your moon,’ Quisarmo said. ‘You will lead an honourable life, be loyal to your husband and provide a son for him.’

Margaredo sat on the rock in the middle of the favela square and sharpened her spear.

‘Who is to be my husband?’ she asked the group without looking up.

A thin boy with a sad paunch and prepubescent moustache stepped forward meekly and put a hand on his heart.

‘What do you think of my skill with a spear?’ Margaredo asked him.

‘It is fine,’ the boy said, smiling slightly. ‘You will provide many fish for me and my parents. You will be a good wife.’

Margaredo looked down the line of her spear with her bad eye closed. ‘You know, I could gut you with my little fingernail,’ she said quietly, not looking at him.

The boy’s smile slid from his face and he turned pale. Margaredo stood and started down the path towards the lake. ‘I’ve only come back to get my canoe,’ she said. ‘I belong on the river, not in a cage. Boy, help me carry it to the forest. It will be the first and last thing we do together.’

‘You were selected as the champion,’ Quisarmo objected. ‘It’s your duty to take your place in the city.’

Margaredo turned back but only to look at Benitz, standing ignored among the crowd. ‘Find us at the river,’ she said.

All eyes fell on Benitz, now the winner of the trial by default. Quisarmo, still shaken from his close encounter with death, approached the girl and begrudgingly raised her hand into the air.

‘She botched the *cazzor* kill,’ Uxia’s father protested, his mood even sourer than the mayor’s. ‘The gods would not forgive us if we declare her the champion. Let’s simply find my daughter and give her the honour she deserves.’

‘Your daughter’s not coming back,’ came a voice from the crowd.

Almeicia stepped forward from the circle of red-eyed onlookers. The retired *cazzor* champion shouldered Quisarmo and Uxia’s father out of her way to stand before her apprentice.

‘Uxia won’t return, and neither will the smuggler,’ she said to the men. ‘And if this girl’s got any sense, she won’t stay, either.’ She lowered her voice and spoke directly to Benitz. ‘You are not a *cazzor* fighter. You are not a warrior, nor a medic. I don’t know what you are yet, but you have a good heart, just like your parents, and you will find your place. It is not here in Tigela.’

And with that Almecia turned back into the crowd, elbowing away the old men half her size who so revered her.

Later that night, after the crowds had dispersed, complaining and unsatisfied, Benitz packed her meagre possessions. She sat one last time on the roof of her thatched hut, looking down over the bowl of the city, and the lake, which was black at the centre. She slung her sack over one shoulder and walked unchallenged through the city gate into the forest. Margaredo was already waiting by her canoe at the riverbank, leaning against her spear. Uxia stood close by, red feathers in her hair, her eyes clearer than Benitz had ever seen them.

THE END

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THE CASTLE OUROBOROS by Rob Bliss

Chapter 23

We donned our black robes in the anteroom at the foot of the staircase. Stitched on front and back of each robe was a large golden Ouroboros, our hooded cloaks were new skins which we proudly wore, our nudity beneath reminding us of our mortality. We were no longer statesmen and soldiers—we were the Elite of the elite—priests of the coming millennium.

I read passages from The Great Book of Saint Cyprian, and then myself and the cabal as one intoned the “Prayer of the Black Goat”. We ended the short ritual with the quatrain wherein the coming of Herr Hitler was foretold by the great medieval seer. (To my mind, the medieval era of this old Europe was perhaps the finest period the continent had ever experienced. Much more than the Renaissance or the Enlightenment—and not even comparable to the modern, degenerate era. I, and the cabal, wished in many ways to return the Teutonic race to its former mastery—to turn back time, essentially, to when a nation was able to fight and win its glory, and rule with an iron hand to maintain its prominence for centuries, if not longer. I dreamed for the knights of old to once again swarm across this beleaguered land, and cut down by mace and sword and bludgeon any who opposed us. But this would stay no dream—the cabal would construct it as the greatest of all realities.)

To conduct our ceremony, of course, we had to gag Cybele and Friedrich so that their pleadings and accusations would not interrupt my divine words. They struggled and their panicked stares followed our procedures: the passing of the golden goblet from member to member, the wine containing a droplet of each of our bloodlines, our pricked thumbs dripping blood into the nectar.

The boy was in his place between my sister’s legs. Her chains had been readjusted so that her legs dangled over the edge of the rack, ankles pinned to the legs of the immense table. Her wrists still held by the lengthened chains. I folded up the hem of my sister’s night dress until her sex was exposed for Herr Hitler’s duty and pleasure.

I gave a silent signal and the cabal, including Axel my guard (though I now know I should have kept him close to me at all times), silently shuffled from the dungeon’s torture room, back into the anteroom at the foot of the stairs, the door closed behind them.

Locked.

(I did not know at the time how it had locked, or who had trifled with the mechanism. I know now that it had been Gustav, that silent, treasonous shadow. All will become clear as the tale progresses.)

My sister screamed into her gag as the boy’s forehead became pasted with a thick sheen of perspiration in the candle light. It appeared as though he could not concentrate, found his victim’s writhing distracting. He asked me to force her to be more still.

I drew a blade from its mount on the wall: an authentic Teutonic sword, last used in Palestine during the First Crusade, rumoured to have been once wielded by Godfrey of Bouillon. A priceless relic for its value and its ability still to shed blood.

I held its razor edge to Cybele's throat as I smoothed a hand across her head, leaned into her ear to utter soothing phrases.

"There, there, my pet, hold still and it will all be over soon," I cooed. Her limbs held rigid, but her chest heaved with quickened breath. I kept my eyes on the fear in my sister's eyes, not looking up to her half-naked lover, not wishing to prevent his success at completing his fate. I chuckled and whispered into Cybele's petite ear, "Consider your good fortune—being an expectant mother should get you a more comfortable lodging in the asylum. Your son will be born in a madhouse. Perfect for an empire of pure sanity," I chuckled. "History functions on contradiction, as you well know. I love you."

Her gaze shot to my chin as she screamed behind the gag. I planted the softest kiss on her burning brow and nudged the blade a touch deeper into her soft, blue-veined neck.

"M'lord," a voice spoke from out of the candle-flickering gloom.

I looked up to see Gustav having arrived over the shoulder of Herr Hitler. The lad spun with fright, wrenched closed his cloak as he backed away from my servant. With fury and fright, he railed against the sightless man.

"You fool! You waste of flesh! Blind beggar—decrepit specimen of humanity! In my reign, your kind will be burned alive, torn limb from limb, eaten by wild dogs and devoured by vermin in open graves! There is no place for you in my world—you are a mistake, a disease, an abomination! How dare you defy my order for solitude during this holy ceremony?"

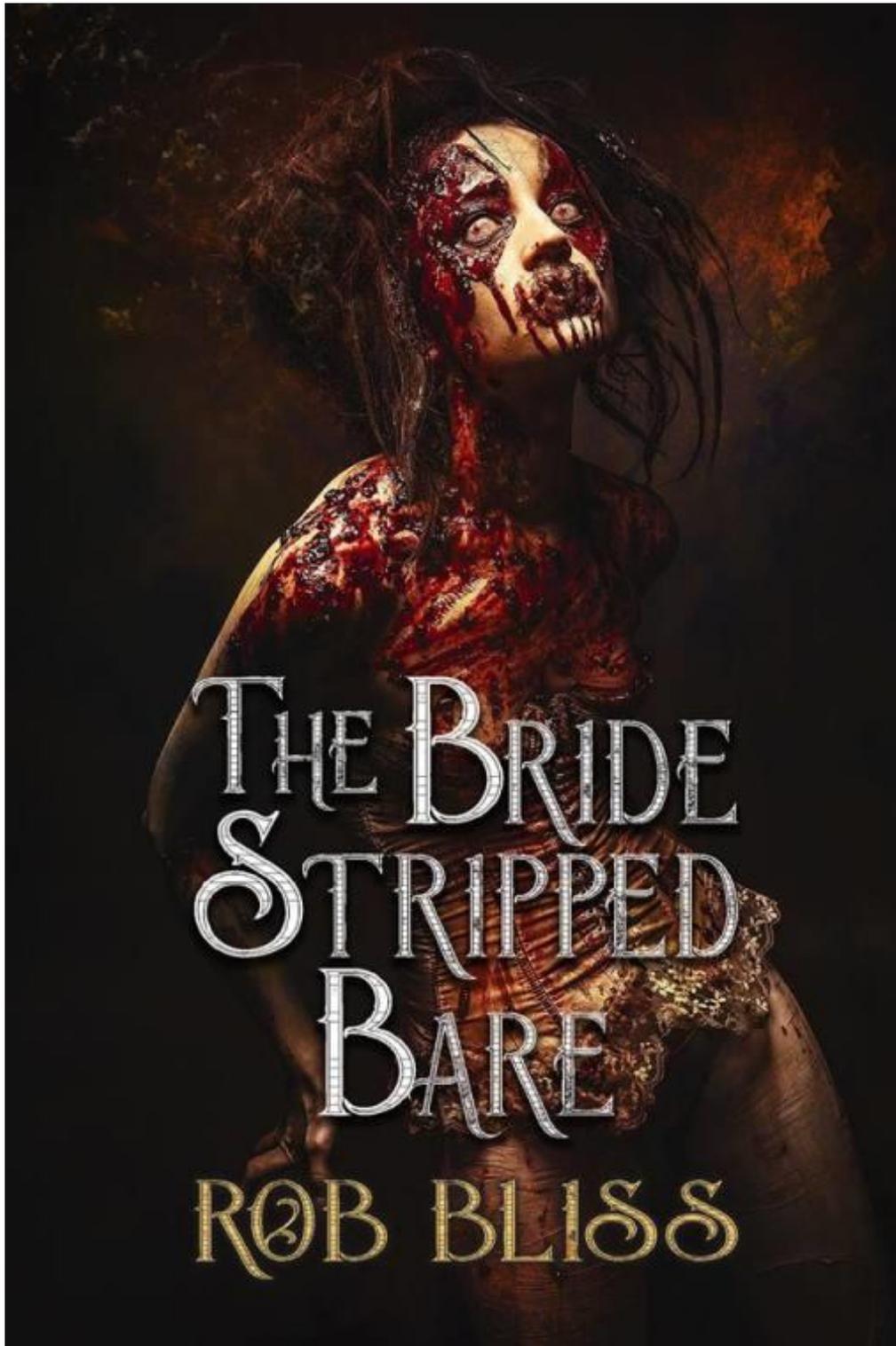
Gustav maintained his decorum. I, too, considered echoing the fury of Herr Hitler, but I knew there had to be some grave business afoot if such a loyal manservant dared to impose his person during such a critical moment in history.

I stood to full height, held the sword at my side like a cane, tilted high my chin and addressed Gustav after the boy had turned away, smeared sweat into his hair, and hid himself into a shadowed corner of the room.

"Yes, what is it, Gustav?"

With a slight apologetic bow, he spoke in his calm, factual tone. "I do beg the pardons of my master and his esteemed guest, but time, I believe, is of the essence in such a calamitous occurrence. It seems, m'lord, that the castle is on fire."

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FLIGHT OF THE ARCHANGELS by Cameron Walker

The bank of lights and controls filled the cockpit with a soft glow as he sat staring out at the vast expanse of the universe beyond. Stars, galaxies and nebula swirled by in a brilliant display of cascading light that danced before his cockpit in a dazzling array of colour as the ship hurtled through warp space. There was little to do but watch and wait as the ship travelled vast distances across the galaxy faster than the speed of light. It was something he should have been used to by now, but he could never get used to the silence and long hours of idle time. The commlink buzzed with conversation as the other members of his squadron chatted over the group channel. He zoned out, not listening to the chatter. Instead losing himself in his thoughts as he stared out at the starfield beyond. Archangel Squadron was his command. A brand new elite starfighter squadron piloting just as new starfighters of the same name.

The A-101 Archangel class starfighter was a new state of the art starfighter built to possess the highest possible performance in every area of starfighter specifications. Such as Speed, agility, acceleration, shields and armour. While boasting a lethal array of high-powered weaponry and the very best in electronics and computing to make its systems top of the line for the foreseeable future. With its elongated, narrow, sleek and elegant design it resembled a duel bladed ceremonial dagger of sorts. The most notable part of the starfighter's design being its wings, which folded around the cockpit and reached out in front of the starfighter. The design served not just an aesthetic purpose, but most of the ships systems were contained within the actual wings themselves, leaving the body of the ship spare to house her cockpit and incredibly powerful engines. This had allowed engineers to create a small, fast fighter that packed the punch of significantly larger fighter/bombers that were usually slow and cumbersome by comparison.

Lieutenant Rickard Firestar had been flying starfighters since he was a baby-faced kid fresh out of college. Now in his mid-forties he had two decades of experience behind him. The last five as a commissioned officer commanding squadrons of his own. Before being drafted into Archangel Squadron he had been in command of the Devil Dogs, leading the squadron in over a hundred combat missions from the onset of the war.

Archangel Squadron was made up of Ace starfighter pilots. All of them having scored a required minimum of ten kills to qualify for admittance and sit in the cockpit of the new Archangel starfighters. He reflected upon how he got to this point, due in no small part to the war that had waged across the galaxy for the past two years. It had all started when a consortium of private organisations banded together and designed a plan to launch a swift and brutal rebellion against the Galactic Federation to make an empire for themselves under corporate rule. The coup had initially begun as a protest against taxation, tariffs and government policy which they felt was unfair and hurt their business ventures while cutting into their profits.

A scheme was hatched to make war on the Federation with the mega-corporations and their business affiliates plotting in secret, building a vast and powerful army and armada to wage war on a galactic scale. The war was planned four years in advance with the consortium utilising their vast wealth, resources and connections to construct a mighty war fleet. While bringing their home worlds and other planets where they yielded significant power and influence under their sway. Whether it be by bribery, threats, intimidation, coercion or other less than scrupulous means they managed to bring hundreds of systems onto their side. The

consortium was not above looking beyond conventional forces to swell their ranks aligning themselves with notorious organised crime organisations, pirates, smugglers and mercenaries. It was a mixed bunch that banded together to declare war on the Galactic Federation and they very nearly delivered a death blow to the Federation at the beginning.

The war came suddenly to the unknowing and unprepared Federation with the Consortium launching simultaneous attacks on Federation bases and shipyards. In the span of a day several of the Federation's biggest shipyards were destroyed and five thousand ships of the fleet annihilated in one stroke.

Rickard was just glad the Consortium forces were led by apprehensive commanders of limited experience in warfare, or under the yoke of business executives who had too much of a hand in dictating their fleet operations. Whatever the case they had pulled too many of their forces away from the initial attacks, instead stationing them in defensive positions around the home worlds of Consortium leaders and positions of significant strategic importance. In ensuring they were well prepared and defended from any potential reprisals or counterattacks they had weakened the strength of the operation and many viable targets were left unmolested. Lieutenant Firestar scoffed at the thought. Fortunately for the Federation they had bungled a perfect opportunity to eradicate the Federation's ship building capacity and cripple the entire armada. A move which would have given them a massive advantage in the war to come.

As it was the Federation's armada saw the loss of twenty percent of its forces and the destruction of a third of their shipyards and factories used to produce fleet materials. The war had been raging for two years now with no end in sight as both sides fought fiercely to gain and protect star systems and entire sectors of space. The Consortium rampaged across the galaxy for the first year of the war, but their onslaught came to a standstill as the Federation recovered from the initial surprise attacks and began fighting back. For the past six months things had been at a stalemate of sorts with neither side gaining any significant territorial victories or launching any large scale offensives. The Consortium seemed to be at a loss as to what approach to take, with them seemingly trying to launch offensives against the Federation and fight a defensive war at the same time. The end result being that their sallies into Federation territory were always underpowered and driven off without any great difficulty. But the Lieutenant had a feeling that this was the calm before the storm and that much larger, uglier, nastier and horrific battles were to come.

A beeping in his ear shook him out of his musing and brought him snapping back to the situation at hand. The fighter's navigation system was altering him to their imminent exit from warp space, where they would arrive at their destination in the middle of a fire fight. The squadron had been scrambled in the middle of the night to provide much needed reinforcements to the world of Corros which was currently under attack from Consortium forces. Rickard wondered why they would bother with an attack on the relatively minor and unimportant world, but then Consortium forces regularly ran sorties into Federation territory usually being more of a nuisance than any real threat to the local systems that sat along the border between Federation and Consortium space. Occasionally they conducted raids deeper into Federation space on strategic targets. These attacks generally proved more troublesome than the sorties on border systems, with protecting the valuable assets from regular and random attacks putting a strain on resources and manpower.

“Okay, let’s get serious people,” he barked over the comm. The chatter instantly died as they all began preparing themselves for the battle to come. The next minute passed by painfully slow as the tension mounted and adrenaline began to pump through his veins as the Lieutenant gripped the yoke and grit his teeth, waiting for the fighter to drop out of warp space into the warzone. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the seconds counted down to zero and the cascading storm of stars abruptly died, being replaced with the view of a blue and green world appearing in front of them, as if by magic.

Numerous warships drifted lazily in front of the planet, bright flashes of weapons fire igniting like sparks as they exchanged salvos. A quick assessment of the situation showed two mid-sized Federation cruisers facing off against a Consortium warship. A third drifted, lifeless and venting atmosphere and debris into the vacuum of space. Two smaller freighters dashed about the battlefield exchanging volleys of weapons fire with two pursuing corvettes in a dog fight of sorts. From the looks of things, the cruisers weren’t faring too well against the significantly larger and more heavily armed warship. Squadrons of starfighters raced throughout the field of battle, buzzing around the capital ships as they engaged in dog fights between attack runs on the larger enemy vessels. Under normal circumstances sending one starfighter squadron as reinforcements wouldn’t be nearly enough, but these were the Archangels. Each one of them was easily worth three normal fighters.

The Federation warships in orbit around Corros began hailing him, requesting an audience with the squadron of starfighters that had just emerged from warp space.

He answered their hail and identified himself.

“Aren’t we glad to see you,” came the relief filled voice of Commander Cordell, commander of the planet’s defence forces. “But where are the rest of the reinforcements?”

“We’re it,” Lieutenant Firestar replied. “Archangel Squadron. Newly commissioned. We’re the best of the best sir.”

“Ah, well good to have you here, Lieutenant. As you can see, we’re taking a beating here,” Commander Cordell said.

“Provide us with commlinks to the rest of your fleet and we’ll get to work on evening the score a bit,” Rickard said, running an eye over his cockpit’s data feed to confirm everything was all green. The commander acknowledged and a list of data appeared on screen, being absorbed into the fighter’s system by the onboard computer.

“All wings report in,” Rickard said, beginning the pre-mission status check as the Archangels raced towards the battle.

“A2, reporting in. A3, we’re all green. A4, good to go sir. A5, ready to rock,” the pilots of his squadron acknowledged in consecutive order with all eleven of them signalling they were all primed and ready for a fight.

“Ready weapons systems and assemble in attack positions. Fighting trios Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta,” Lieutenant Firestar ordered. “2, 3 you’re on me.”

“Copy that. Acknowledged,” came the responses from the other two pilots as the others also acknowledged the order and broke up into their designated combat trios.

The Lieutenant then assigned them targets. Glancing at his display of the battle and quickly formulating a plan. “Beta you’re on the warship. Commence bombing runs and try to pull her attention away from the cruisers. Gamma, you’ve got their back. Engage enemy fighters around the warship and keep them away from Beta squad as best you can. Delta give the cruisers some extra support. Get the fighters harrying them off their arse and give them some breathing room.”

The trios all voiced their acknowledgement of the order and the three fighter trios broke off from the formation to attend to their respective tasks.

“What about us, chief?” Two asked.

Rickard’s lip curled into a feral grin as he narrowed his eyes at their targets. “We’re got the corvettes. Let’s go give them a kick up the arse they’ll never forget.”

“Copy that. With pleasure,” came the replies.

“Let’s see what these babies can do,” the Lieutenant said over the comm. “We’ll quickly find out if they live up to the hype or not.”

He thought it was a borderline insane situation for their first real experience in the fighters be during a battle, but what better test flight for the new fighters could there be?

He slammed his foot down on the acceleration peddle and the fighter reacted instantly, rocketing forward with a burst of speed that threw him back in his seat.

The other two starfighters matched his pace, flanking him on either side as the three of them raced towards their targets. The A1 Starfighters boasted an awesome acceleration and impressive top speed as the starfighters hurtled through space towards the battlefield.

As they approached the battle the weapons emplacements on the Consortium warship began firing upon them, powerful plasma cannon batteries spitting lethal bolts of super-heated energy at the small fighter craft.

Rickard weaved his fighter this way and that, dodging the deadly green bolts of plasma as they came at him. The barrage of weapon’s fire from the capital ship lit up space around the advancing Archangel starfighters. Each bolt of plasma from the powerful batteries being capable of blowing the small one-man fighters to pieces.

The Lieutenant watched out of his fighter’s canopy as the massive green bolts of plasma lanced out towards the incoming starfighters, smoothly guiding his fighter out of the way as they approached. The distance and sluggishness of the big guns making it easy for the fast and agile fighters to dance around the battery fire. As they swooped down into the battle, joining the fray around the besieged planet the fire from the capital ship ceased as enemy fighters noticed their presence and turned to engage.

An entire squadron of the Y shaped enemy fighters came screaming towards Alpha trio, opening fire as soon as they came into range, their blaster cannons peppering the Archangels with a shower of crimson blaster bolts.

Rickard's fighter danced among the onslaught of blaster fire, unable to avoid being hit by the oncoming fire due to the sheer volume sprayed in his direction. The fighter's shields greedily lapped up the lethal bolts of energy, easily absorbing them before they could damage the vessels hull. He restrained himself from returning fire by reflex. Instead waiting until the gap between the two groups of opposing fighters closed and he had a clear visual on the bogeys coming right at him. His itchy trigger finger tightened on the joystick's trigger as a spray of automatic return fire erupted from his guns, barrelling into the shields of an incoming ship. With one smooth motion, he spun his fighter up onto its starboard side and launched a pair of missiles at the enemy ship. The two projectiles flared across the starfield and smashed into the fighter with a brilliant flash of flame as it was blown to pieces.

Another fighter emerged from the debris of its comrade and came rushing at him, blasting away with its cannons as the two fighters came to a head, the gap between them becoming dangerously narrow as the chance of a collision became probable. Rickard flicked his guns over to their primary setting so they would emit semi-automatic bursts of more powerful and concentrated blasts and fired once, twice, three times into his opponent as the distance between them closed to a few hundred meters and he could almost see the pilot seated in his cockpit. At the very last second he opened fire with his missiles once more and dived below the blast that consumed his field of vision as the enemy was practical disintegrated.

The three Archangels completed their pass with the enemy squadron and regrouped, with the other two starfighters sliding into place on the Lieutenant's wings as he led them in their attack run on the hammer shaped corvettes pounding away at the smaller Federation freighters.

The three starfighters screamed through the void of space, weaving and dodging around oncoming enemy fire from fighters intent on taking them out or distracting them from their targets.

"Split up. Triangle formation around each corvette as we pass. Hit em hard and fast with everything you've got then swoop around for another run," Lieutenant Firestar said over the comm.

The other pilots confirmed his instructions and the three fighters broke off from their tight formation with Rickard climbing well above the first of the corvettes and the other two taking up positions that would bring them on trajectories along the corvette's port and starboard sides. Once they had moved themselves into position the three starfighters began their attack run in earnest, gunning their fighter's engines to max speed and pummeling the nearest corvette's shields with a barrage of blaster cannon fire. The ship's laser cannon turrets returned fire, frantically firing on the attacking enemy fighters as they swooped down upon them like carrion crows.

Rickard grit his teeth as he struggled to dodge the enemy fighters pursuing him. While simultaneously avoiding the anti-starfighter guns on the corvettes that were vomiting streaks of lasers at his ship. His fighter's AI computer system squealed in protest as multiple hits collided with his shields and the absorbed a blast from a torpedo that had grazed his port side.

He dived towards the corvette. His fighter spinning, weaving and dipping in a frenzy around the incoming fire as he unleashed a volley of blaster cannon fire at the small capital ship. The four cannons on his ship spitting out high powered bolts of energy. He finished his initial attack on the first ship with a couple of missiles that punched through her shields and ploughed into her communications array. A ball of flames and debris erupted from the impact as the array was destroyed in a hail of fire, taking a section of hull out with it as the ship began to vent atmosphere.

His wingmen assailed her port and starboard sides, their combined efforts weakening the depleted shields and letting their missile volleys slip through, blowing holes in her hull as the ship rocked from the blasts.

He pulled up as they closed on the second corvette and repeated the process, taking out her shields completely as the Federation freighters added their own volleys to the assault.

Rickard saw his chance and whipped his starfighter around to come back for a second run at the now defenceless corvette.

His wingmen shadowing him and bringing up his rear as the three of them tightened their formation so that they were almost flying as one and charged the doomed ship.

All three Archangel's opened up on the corvette with their blaster cannons, peppering the ship with red beams of energy that cascaded down upon the ship and blew dozens of small holes in her hull.

As one the three fighters opened fire with their missiles, launching six of the deadly projectiles that rocketed through space and drove themselves into her bridge in an explosion of flame, debris and bodies that tore the bow of the ship apart. Their assault left it a crippled and dying wreck, venting atmosphere and contents like the blood of a dying animal that had been mortally wounded.

The three starfighters broke their tight formation as they passed the dying capital ship, resuming their previous positions as they formed up for another pass on the remaining corvette. The starfighters strafed the Consortium ship, coming at it from three sides and hammering the hapless vessel with powerful bursts of blaster fire, plumes of flame erupting from the fissures they blew in its hull as they passed.

At the last instant the Lieutenant targeted the corvette's oversized engines and launched a pair of missiles as he cleared the ship. The missiles' path trailed iridescent flames as they erupted from the launcher and spiralled towards their target detonating on impact with a tremendous force that saw the engines explode with a dazzling blaze of light as the ship was ripped apart and annihilated by the blast.

“Archangel Leader to squad, all wings report in,” Lieutenant Firestar said over the comm, leading his fighter group away from the battle with the corvettes and towards the huge Consortium warship.

“Delta squad all good, chief.”

“Gamma reporting in, 10 and 12 are okay, but 11’s gone Evac. Ran into some heavy competition and had to punch out.”

“Beta here, sir. We came under heavy from the warship and lost 6, but 5 and I are still kicking.”

Rickard winced at the loss of one of their number, but considered them lucky they hadn’t suffered heavier casualties. In a battle such as this it wouldn’t be unusual for even an elite squadron to lose 2-3 of their number. He got brief reports from the other three squads to assess the situation and commanded them to form up with the freighters they had rescued from the clutches of the corvettes.

The Lieutenant opened a commlink to the freighters and requested they join the attack on the Consortium warship.

“We’d be more than happy to sir. Thanks a lot. You really saved our hides,” the grateful captain replied, as the two freighters changed course and came racing back towards the battle. Forming up with Archangel Squadron as they prepared for an attack run on the warship.

The Lieutenant switched channels to the lead Federation cruiser and began hailing them.

The commander of the ship quickly responded, eager to formulate a battle plan that could see them snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. “What do you need from us, Lieutenant?” Commander Cordell asked.

He brought his starfighter swinging around to form up with the freighters as they moved into position, the two larger ships covering the rear of the starfighter squadron to keep any enemy fighters off their tails.

“Concentrate all the power you can spare into your weapons systems and hammer that ship with everything you’ve got,” Rickard said. “We’re setting up for an attack run. Give em a few volleys and lay us down some covering fire,” he commed.

“Copy that, Lieutenant. Will do. Stand by, commencing artillery bombardment,” came the response after a brief delay.

“Confirmed,” Rickard said, cutting the commlink and switching back to the squadron frequency.

“Alright, boys, this is it. Form up on me and prepare for an attack run,” the Lieutenant said. “Delta you’re joining us. Gamma and Beta team up and follow us in. Target her starboard side while Delta join us in hitting em right down the middle. The two freighters got our six’s and will follow each flight in, dump their payloads of bombs and punch out,” Rickard added, laying out his plan for their attack run on the warship. “The Corros cruisers are going to soften em up a bit for us first, then we swoop in and hit em where it hurts.”

A chorus of comm clicks confirmed his orders as the Archangels arrayed themselves in battle formation and began cruising towards the huge Consortium warship, waiting for the cruisers to commence firing.

On board the lead Federation cruiser Commander Cordell stood at his post on the ship's bridge, facilitating the preparation for the battle to come. "Divert all the power we can from non-essential systems, clear out sectors of the ship if we have to. I want every cell of power we can get diverted to the ship's weapons and forward shields."

"Yes sir," responded one of his subordinates with a brisk salute.

The commander turned his attention to one of the comm stations. "Sound the evacuation order for all non-essential stations and sectors," he said. "Then seal them off and cut the power to all systems in those areas."

"Yes sir. Immediately," replied the senior comm officer, quickly setting to work on relaying the captain's orders.

"Have all remaining starfighters regroup for a counter-attack, keep the enemy starfighters off the archangels while they conduct their attack run," Commander Cordell said.

The captain turned back to the forward viewport, staring out at the large warship beyond while he waited for his orders to be carried out. This would be a close one. Soon they would be celebrating a close, hard won victory, or they would be dead. Steeling himself and readying his resolve he prepared himself for what was to come and waited those last couple of slow, agonising minutes while the ship prepared for the final onslaught.

"Captain, we are ready sir," his second in command said, coming to stand by his side. He nodded. "Open fire."

Archangel Squadron headed towards the warship at cruising speed, the battlefield having gone eerily quiet as both sides ceased fire and reorganised themselves. The Lieutenant tightened his grip on the control yoke between his legs as they inched closer to the warship, inhaling as he waited for the cruisers to commence firing. He didn't have to wait for much longer. The turbolaser batteries on the two cruisers opened up simultaneously with the warship returning fire as space lit up with a dazzling display of streaks of red and green energy as the two sides exchanged blows. The two cruisers worked together in their attack on the larger and more heavily armed warship, their batteries hammering the ship's shields with volley after volley of turbolaser fire. A burst of missile launches from the cruisers sped towards the warship, the flare of their accelerants blinking like stars in the darkness of space as they raced towards their target.

Archangel Squadron accelerated towards the Consortium warship, dodging and weaving around the sporadic blaster fire from the ship's anti-starfighter emplacements. The barrage of turbolaser fire from the Federation cruisers and the starfighters harrying the ship had most of the gunner crews distracted, their attention riveted elsewhere.

The warship returned fire on the cruisers. Its heavy turbolaser batteries opening fire and raining dozens of bursts of bright green plasma upon the smaller ships. Its concussion missile launchers unleashed a devastating broadside on the nearest cruiser. The cruiser's shields

flashed and buckled with the force of the impacts as they struggled to contain the bursts of high-powered explosives. A few slipped through and collided with its starboard side with intense flashes of light that hurled debris into the void of space as they blasted holes in her hull.

The Lieutenant led the assault, the rest of the squadron following his lead as they began their attack run. Lieutenant Firestar dived his starfighter under some incoming laser cannon fire and fired on the warship with his own guns, the starfighter's powerful cannons peppering the capital ship as he weaved this way and that to avoid the enemy anti-starfighter fire. The warship loomed closer as they raced towards it, filling his cockpit and obscuring his view of space around it. There was something menacing and ominous about the warship as it steadily grew, the air heavy with a tension so thick it made it difficult to breathe. Flashes of turbolasers impacting upon the warship's shields crackled over the invisible energy array that protected the ship from enemy fire, making it appear as if the ship itself were blinking with incandescent light. Its own weapons emplacements blinking with flashes of green and red as turbolaser batteries and laser cannon turrets fired on the federation ships assaulting it.

The Archangels closed in on the ship, mere moments away from initiating their close-range attack run when they opened fire, all ten Archangel starfighters launching missiles at the lumbering behemoth.

The twenty missiles sped through space trailing flames of exhaust in their wake before smashing into the warship's shields in a dazzling array of fiery explosions that momentarily obscured the ship from view. As the flames subsided the ship shimmered with a blue radiance as the bubble of its protective shields sputtered and died, the generator being unable to cope with the onslaught of the Federation capital ships and starfighters alike.

Rickard smiled when he saw the ship's shields falter. "Okay, boys, this is it. Her shields are down, commence close range attack run and hit her with everything you have. Stay low, move fast, switch over to torpedoes and dump your payload and get the hell out of there," he said via the commline to his squadron. The fighters' primary ballistics weapons were the magazine of six missiles they carried in each wing, but they also came equipped with two smaller cartridges of two high powered, unguided torpedoes, designed especially for battering capital ships.

He was met with a chorus of commclicks and affirmations from the other pilots as he rolled his fighter over to starboard and swooped in for the kill. The turbolaser batteries on the Federation cruisers ceased fire as they swarmed over the warship. Their own fighter squadrons and the two freighters supporting the Archangels and keeping the enemy fighters at bay while they conducted their attack run.

Rickard wove his fighter around the incoming streams of cannon fire, managing to avoid being hit by most of them as a few stray bolts collided with his shields. He dived low, flying along the length of the warship and peppering the hull with quad bursts of his cannons, taking out a laser turret that exploded in a hail of flame and debris. He brought his fighter up onto its port side as he screamed past a turbolaser cannon that was turning to assault the incoming fighters and settled his crosshairs on the warship's bridge.

The crosshairs blinked and became red, indicating a target lock. His thumb pressed the button on his joystick and a duo of torpedoes rocketed out of the launchers, propellants burning as

they shot towards their target. The torpedoes collided with the bridge tower in an explosion of flame, sparks and flying steel as pieces of the ship came apart and the bridge was engulfed in flames. The bright flash of the initial explosion quickly died in the void of space as other, similar eruptions speckled the ship's hull like a fireworks display. He sped past the lumbering giant and pulled up and away from the ship as he brought himself into position for another run.

The huge warship bucked with the force of the explosions tearing apart its hull as the Archangel's peppered the ship with torpedoes.

The Lieutenant hailed Commander Cordell on the lead Federation cruiser. "Your turn Commander. We've softened em up for ya, now it's time to finish them off," he said.

"Copy, Lieutenant. More than happy to do so. Thanks for your help. We couldn't have done it without you," Commander Cordell replied.

Lieutenant Firestar bid the Commander farewell before he switched back to his squadron channel. "Archangel's pull up. All wings pull up and clear the warship. The cruisers are going to rain hellfire down upon them and we don't want to get caught up in the storm," he said.

The archangels veered away from the warship, trying to put as much distance between it and themselves as they could. Rickard banked his fighter up and to starboard, pulling away from the ship as he watched the distance his fighter and the warship grow. From this altitude he had a good view of the ship and could see the damage his squadron had inflicted upon it.

The warship bled from multiple breaches in her hull that vented atmosphere, equipment and debris into space. Several fires raged inside the ship, being fuelled by the oxygen that was pumped through her interior like blood through an animal's veins. The two Federation cruisers had fared well against onslaught of the Consortium warship's guns. Both ships were damaged, but nothing that a few repairs couldn't fix.

He smiled as the cruiser's turbolaser batteries flared to life once more, a hail of deadly beams of energy hammering the considerably larger ship with a lethal broadside and tearing her apart from bow to stern. A series of internal explosions made the warship buck as electronics, weapons systems and internal mechanisms were struck by turbolaser bolts and exploded in a wave of fire and debris.

Rickard tore his gaze away from the sight of the crippled warship and turned his attention back to his squadron. "Well done, Archangels. I think we can call this a very successful first mission," he said. "Reform for planetary landing. Repairs, refuelling and some well-deserved r n' r awaits us," the Lieutenant ordered. "Here's to Archangel Squadron. These damned fighters are really something special. And with us at their controls the Consortium had better watch their backs, because we're coming for them."

THE END

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THE PIMENTA PUM-PUM by Francis-Marie de Chatillon

Part 1.

Winston was a lazy man if ever there was one. He lived in a small Jamaican village and mostly sat drinking beer outside of his tatty cabin on a similarly tatty sofa taking in the sun. He worked little and mainly lived off the efforts of his long-suffering wife. Yet he was a happy man. Long grass grew all around, rich and verdant; empty beer bottles popped up out from it like so many little heads. Banana trees grew freely, as did nettles and other weeds, and he kept a few chickens in a makeshift coop nailed up to one side of their cabin—a sort of corbelled-together improvisation painted in the Jamaican flag's colours. The chickens would eventually be made into a spicy jerk dish, which with rice and beans he couldn't get enough. He didn't make it, of course, his wife Martisha was the cook of the house. Winston persuaded himself that he would cook, but Martisha blew her top at Winston because he left such a mess whenever went in the kitchen. Actually, she blew her top at any opportunity, or so Winston reckoned.

As Winston sat eyeing an old beer crate that he thought could usefully be employed in the cabin as an improvised seat when his mates came back after a drinking session, he was wondering why Martisha was so 'off' most of the time now: usually she had a sense of humour, but not so nowadays. Not by a long chalk. But on the plus side Martisha had a kind heart and was still a fine looking woman—well-rounded with a great bum and breasts. Winston considered all these points, yet still wished that the milk of her human kindness would lactate a bit more in his direction these days. Which at the moment it certainly was not. He scratched his balls through his grubby shorts and then attacked his armpits. A chicken started to squawk and this seemed like a bad omen to Winston, and so it was. Martisha thundered out the cabin with an expression like a bag of cricket balls.

“You, Winston, are a bone-idle no-good. What I was thinkin' when I married you I have no idea. You sittin' there boozin' like you a rich man. Winston, it a disgrace! Move yourself to do sometin' or you will turn to stone or sometin' like.”

Winston sat with a face like a horse waiting to be shot. This was classic Martisha nowadays. No stopping her. Flew of the handle at anything. “And move them chickens, Winston! I fed up wid them things clucking and squawking in da night keepin' me awake when I got to sleep. Why you tink' dat a good place for chickens I don't know. You lazy, dat's why. Bone-idle Winston, dat's you.” She was full on angry.

“Now, Martisha, you be fair now. I ask you 'bout dem chickens and you said 'fine'.” He slugged hard on his beer, his amber consolation in moments of Martisha madness.

“Dat was den, Winston. But dem t'ings sendin' me half daft. Look dem scrawny t'ings. You got to fatten dem, Winston, for a good jerk. Shameful it is, tryin' to make a good jerk wid dem. And move dem, Winston. Now!” Martisha was on the war-path, no mistake.

First problem for Winston, was rounding up chickens. It was like trying to herd cats as far as he was concerned. He found a big old box about the grass and dropped it by the coop. His plan was to carry the chickens out to an old nearly collapsing shed about 150 yards away. That would shut her up. About two hours later the holes in the shed had been fixed and bits of the shed shored up so that it wouldn't fall down. The chickens were boxed up and then left

there. For Winston this was good enough reason for another cold beer. He'd worked up quite a thirst in the doing of, and he deserved it. Going into the cabin and opening the fridge he was intercepted by Martisha. He didn't even get the cap off the bottle.

"I want to talk wid you, Winston. Serious like," she said, eyeing him like a tigress might a goat. She indicated a sagging armchair and he plonked down, resigned to his fate.

"Winston, I not been getting' me dues off you for many a mont' now, and it getting me irritable like. You know what I mean by dues, don't you? A wife need her dues, Winston, and you not been giving da needed." She looked him straight in the eye and this always unnerved Winston. He started an attempt at placating her but her hand went straight in front of his face.

"Shot up, Winston! I just 'bout had enough of your talkin' round and round dis subject and it not changin'. I was chattin' to me modda 'bout it last night and she..."

"What! You spoke to ya modda 'bout dis? What wrong wid you, girl? You gonna shame me from arse-hole to Christmas now wid dis, you know." Winston voice had escalated many octaves and he was twitching and squirming like snakes were under him.

"I don't give a Frenchman's fleur-de-lis, Winston. You not givin' da needed and I 'tremely needful now." Winston let out a low moan. "I met dat Leroy friend of yours a few days ago and he say I fine looking woman even though you me husband. He lookin' and flirtin' wid his eyes at me he was, and me getting' all girly wid 'im too! So, what ya t'ink of dat now, Winston?" The captive audience that was Winston just stared at the floor and then another low moan involuntarily escaped him. "So Winston, me mudda she say you got to go and see da pimenta pum-pum woman who live in da forest at da back of da old Plantation House. You know where I'm talkin' 'bout?" Winston knew. Sometimes he'd clear off there with a couple of beers for a bit of peace and quiet. "You go there and you talk wid da pimenta pum-pum woman and she give you sometin' quick to put de fire back into you. She a long way in dat forest Winston, but you better go and do it, Winston, or I'll start talkin' to dat Leroy more often. You got me drift, Winston?" The last five words she said with particular emphasis. And Winston moaned again.

Now Winston loved Martisha but she could be a ball-breaker when the mood took her. But this? Going to see some old witch in the forest? "Answer's no, Martisha!" he said to himself. He stuffed the little map Martisha had given him to help find his way into his pocket and started walking along the narrow path that led to The Beer Shack, an improvised pub run by a friend called 'Teddy two-stroke'. He was called this on account of only repairing two-stroke engines—anything else didn't interest him. Now, Martisha hated The Beer Shack. She had an altogether different name for it based on BS due to all the foolish talk that went on there. Winston reached the pub—a shed with a long plank outside that acted as the bar—and ordered a can of Red Stripe, which Tommy ceremoniously open with a loud crack. Teddy wanted to go up-market and this was a route, he thought. Customer service sort of thing.

Winston sat sinking can after can in his misery and later the now despised Leroy came sauntering along. Winston moaned at the sight of him. "Well, hello Winston, me man." He said with full-on cheerfulness. Winston nodded and sucked on the Red Stripe. "You know, I saw your Martisha da other day, and she a good looking woman Winston. You a lucky man! You know dat, Winston?" Winston didn't answer. Frustrated and furious at this unwelcome

interference in his love life, he slammed his beer down sending froth all over the plank and walked off. He'd had enough of this. He was going to see the pimenta pum-pum woman!

Part 2.

The walk to the Old Plantation house was about forty minutes, but fuelled both by annoyance at Leroy and God knows how many Red Stripes, Winston was there in twenty. He weaved and tacked a bit admittedly, but a good pace nevertheless. The Plantation House used to be owned by the Dixon family who kept sixty to seventy slaves at a time. This accounts for why there are so many people with the surname Dixon around the area. Winston skirted the house and walk off into the forest, thankful he hadn't thrown away the primitive little map that Martisha had given him. The light was fading quite noticeably now and Winston was questioning the wisdom of trying to find a witch in a forest in the dark. He was also wondering what concoction she might wish to administer—would he drink it? Or would he rub it somewhere? He felt uneasy.

The path through the forest was narrow and twisting. It was also flanked by thick trees and branches that at some points almost made the path a tunnel. It was getting quite dark now and walking was going to be hazardous: an unlucky fall and a broken leg and he'd be screwed. And not in the nice way. There were stories that the forest was haunted by the ghosts of escaped slaves that were pulled apart by the huge dogs the Dixons released to catch them. These unhappy spirits could not rest because their bodies were eaten and so could not be buried. Winston, with these thoughts in his head, was looking around him anxiously for any strange shape or movement. A bird of some kind, startled by his intrusion, took off with a loud slapping of its wings and Winston jumped out of his skin, his eyes as wide as boiled eggs. It was impossible now to read the map Martisha had provided and he was certain that it was wrong anyway. A fork in the path, which should have been found quite quickly on entering the forest, had not materialised. The path he was on seemed to wander all over the place and it soon dawned on Winston that he was lost. "That Leroy! He nuttin' bot a bumbowhole!" he cursed. For Winston, Leroy was the root cause of bringing Martisha's complaint to a head. And then he fell. A branch he'd failed to see in the dark sent him right over into some tangle of undergrowth. "Dat Leroy he gonna pay for dis shamin' of me!" This he shouted into the thick darkness but then instantly regretted it: the ghosts might hear him.

It must have been about an hour or so later that Winston started running. It was a sort of blind running born of fear and panic: Winston thought he saw something shadowing him. He took off fast clunking his head on branches, falling yet again, and ran straight into a tree, gashing his head. When he finally calmed down he was hiding in some sort of bush with only his head sticking out. He was peering around muttering all manner of oaths, both realistic and fantastic, when he saw a small light through the trees to his right. "Bloodseed!" he said, wondering what it could be. After a few minutes he decided he'd better get out of the bush and find out what it was. He approached stealthily and then could see that there was a couple more; nearer still he could make out that they were hurricane lamps hanging from branches by a small dwelling. This must be the pimenta pum-pum woman, he thought.

As he got almost to it Winston could see through a window that an old wizened woman was sitting in a huge rocking chair gently going back and forth. "You can com' in, Winston. I been expecting you."

Winston stood up straight in surprise. “Blurtneet! How she know dat?” He slowly approached the door and when he put out his hand to push it, it swung open of its own accord. Winston groaned, “I not likein’ dis won little bit, me not.” Inside the hut was like nothing he had ever seen. It was dimly lit, bathed in a curious green light, and all manner of dried herbs, berries and leaves hung from the ceiling. It smelled like nothing on earth. Around every wall, arranged in rows and rows, were varieties of large and small jars and bottles. The whole collection was dusty and spiders’ webs hung from more than a few. Winston was looking hard at these as he went into the presence of the pimenta pum-pum woman. Through the light amber liquid inside them he could see green and red objects that looked like medium sized chillies. “I not likein’ dis won little bit, me not.”

The pimenta pum-pum woman’s face was a craze of deep lines and her skin a sallow, unhealthy colour. She was almost dressed in rags and her hair hung greasily around her face in tangles. Winston certainly didn’t want to see her teeth. “Please not da teeth,” he thought. He wondered what type of witch she was: white, black—or just out on her old little mad limb. She pointed to a wooden stool in front of her and indicated he should sit.

“Now Winston, I been expecting you and I know da problem you ‘ave, so don start tryin’ to fabricate ya way out da situation. I have jost wot ya need to get you workin’ ‘gain.” The pimenta pum-pum woman said this scoldingly, as if he ‘should have come to the doctor’s earlier’. She looked and sounded every inch the shrew.

“Now pimenta pum-pum woman, a proud man he don like chattin’ on t’ings like dis. It not respectable like.” Winston wanted the earth to swallow him. “Can I just ask wot dem t’ings floatin’ in dem jars? Dem look like dem chillies. But dem different. Never seen dem like dat before.” His eyes were wide as he spoke to her.

“Dem are Very special chillies form a very, very long way-away.” She looked dreamily out the window as she spoke.

“Like London?” Winston asked.

“Winston, you ‘ave da head of a coconut! Not London. Much farther, but it none of ya business. Ya business is fixing ya problem.” Again she scolded him and made him feel small. He couldn’t wait to get away.

Slowly, creakily the hag stood and grasped two bottles, one small and the other a jam jar sized bottle with the odd-looking chillies inside. With great care she decanted two of the contents into the smaller jar and filled it with the amber liquid. To Winston these were chillies of a strange type indeed. Again he wondered if he had to sort of rub this stuff somewhere and it made his eyes water at the thought.

“Now Winston, you follow me closely now.” He stood. “No Winston, me words. You coconut.” He sat again. “You to take da green one and ya girl the red. Got dat, Winston? You da green, ya girl da red.” Winston nodded energetically. He wanted to bet out of this creepy place quicker than a whippet from the traps. “And ya not to chew on dem, jus swalla whole. Dey slip down easy like, so it’s easy. Got dat, Winston?” Again he nodded.

“So der no rubbin’ nothin’ in on any part of me body den?” He was eyeing her suspiciously as he said this.

“No. you just swalla dem whole. Coconut!”

Winston left with the small jar and somehow made his way back through the forest without incident. He clung hard to the small jar for fear of losing it and an even greater fear of being made to return to the hag again.

Part 3.

The following afternoon in the cabin, he and Martisha were looking at the two chillies in the small jar. “What we gotta do, Martisha,” he said in a voice for educating small children, “is to swallow dem t’ings whole. Not chew dem. I da green, you da red. Got it, Martisha?”

Martisha turned the jar around in her hands peering at the contents. “Yes, me got it Winston. Swalla not chew. And ya know how I can swalla, Winston!” And she giggled excitedly at her sexual innuendo.

Winston took the jar and carefully opened it. He pulled out the green chilli and passed the jar back to Martisha who pulled out the red one. “Okay den, Martisha. One, two, tree...” And he popped it in his mouth and swallowed. Martisha watched wide-eyed for a moment to see if there was any fiery effects and, seeing nothing untoward, followed suit. It slipped down a treat. “Dem not much good as chillies, Winston. Not got a ounce of fire in dem. No good for a good jerk.” But it was good for what they wanted and it took but fifteen minutes before Winston had Martisha naked and spread on the bed.

Much later Winston got up leaving Martisha with the biggest smile he’d seen in months. Getting her breath, she lay there one large, very brown, berry-brown satisfied lump. The bedroom was chaos: the headboard lay half detached and the two bottom legs of the bed were completely broken off. Sheets were all over the floor where Winston had thrown them in the excesses of his passion. Winston had given her the needful and no mistake. “I t’ink I deserve a beer for dat, Martisha. Me scoring a century and more dan a couple of dem sixes over da boundary as well.” Winston was a huge cricket fan and liked the metaphor.

“Winston, ya did me proud. It been a long time. And all dat sweet and salty in me mout’ too!” Martisha sounded well pleased.

“Just give me a moment ta drink me beer, Martisha, and we go another innings.” He said, popping the cap on a bottle and swigging hard.

That night, back in the forest behind The Plantation House, the pimenta pum-pum woman was well pleased also. She crept around in the dim light yielded by the wax candles and paraffin hurricane lamps looking lovingly—almost in a faraway trance—at her precious bottles. She picked one, a demijohn full of her very special chillies from a long, long way away. The chillies, as if recognising her, began to slowly swim fish-like round and round in the jar. “Not long now, my lovelies. Not long now and all the Blue Planet will be yours.”

THE END

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THE WHEEL'S SPINNING BUT THE HAMSTER'S DEAD by Carlton Herzog

That was over 500 years ago. Contemporary scholars continue to debate how Circletarianism began. Professor P.A. Arnold of Halo University argues that “circles have always figured prominently in mysticism, symbolizing perfection, the cycle of life and the heavenly spheres. Why should we be surprised that circles would form the basis of a religion? Given that our universe rotates on an axis, that rotating spherical forms comprise virtually every astronomical body, and that gravity arises from the curvature of space, circles and circular motion in one form or another cry out to be the defining metaphysics of our age.”

In contrast, Professor Elvis Nang, of Corona College writes that “The idea people would lay down their lives in mass for no other reason than an infatuation with geometry is palpably absurd. Clearly something else was at work there beyond reverence for a closed plane curve.”

Have you ever had the feeling you were being watched by unearthly eyes, or whatever passes for eyes on other worlds?

I do. And in my case, it's more than just a feeling.

Mind you I don't mean anything so pedestrian as ghosts. For all I know, the dead do watch us. After all, what else is there for them to do. But let's face it—they can't touch us, and if they can't touch us they can't hurt us.

These watchers are something else entirely. They look at us the same way we look at a piece gum stuck to our shoe. How do I know?

I've met the bastards!

Maybe you think they're a figment of my imagination. But ask yourself, what are those shadows that always lurk along the corners of your vision, dancing just out of sight. While you're at it, ask yourself about those blurs that streak across your field of vision far too fast for your retinal shutter to resolve. Trust me, there are more things going on around us than fully meet the eye.

Case in point: the urban legend of how the Circletarian Church began. I'm sure you've heard of that group of fanatics infatuated with the closed plane curve. No? Well according to their bible *The Book of Circles*, circles come straight from God, since our universe rotates on an axis, rotating spherical forms constitute virtually every astronomical body, and gravity arises from the curvature of space.

If circularity were the only metric, Circletarianism would have tanked by now. But there's more to the story, a story I was sucked into and from which I have still have a blistering afterburn.

The case I am about to relate involves two physics graduate students: Wanda Cricetus and her lover Eddie Chambers. You see, Wanda Cricetus did a swan dive out a four-story window. Chambers claimed that Cricetus had “gone crazy” and jumped head first through a plate glass

window. I had to determine whether she had committed suicide or had been shoved by Chambers.

At this point, it's best to let Chambers tell the story. To that end, I have included a transcript of my interview in its entirety.

THE EDDIE CHAMBERS INTERVIEW

We met on March 14, Pi Day. At the Circle K bar. It has the only round pool table in the world. Einstein would have loved it. Curved space and all that. We were both drunk and horny for physics. Got to talking about hidden dimensions, parallel worlds, and string theory. All the sexy stuff we'll never be able to prove.

Then we played a game: squaring the circle. That's where you make a square equal in area to that of a given circle. But you can only use a compass and a ruler. Can't be done. Squaring the circle is just a metaphor for a hopeless enterprise.

Then we went back to her place. That's where I met her hamster, Speedy. She loved that rodent. Said his spinning calmed her. Said, the weather changes, the markets rise and fall, my moods swing this way and that, but he just keeps running like some living metronome keeping time for the world.

If you ask me, it was a marriage made in some crazy inter-species heaven. And I don't know if it was the liquor or what, but the more I looked at her, the more hamster-like she appeared right down to those large pouch-like cheeks of hers. But my inner hamster has always had a thing for round ears, small dark eyes, and tiny hands covered in down.

We went to bed. I get up the next morning. I go into the living room on my way to wiz. The hamster wheel's spinning, but old Speedy is deader than a doornail. I think 'momentum' and go do my business. I come back and he's still not moving, but that old wheel is just clicking along.

I get Wanda. She asks What's making it spin?

I say, I don't know, but I'm putting it on You-Tube.

She says This goes against the laws of motion. There's no energy being put into the system, so friction should slow it down."

Me, I think the whole thing is a hoot and a half. I say This was foretold in the Book of Revelations...and it shall come to pass that the blind shall bite horses and dead rodents shall spin in their cages.

Wanda didn't laugh. She got all serious: Maybe it's a residual haunting—a death that's doomed to be repeated over and over.

I say, Maybe he's too stupid to go into the light.

She says, It could be a psychokinetic event. Maybe our repressed feelings are providing the energy for a poltergeist event.

I say, Wait is that Patrick Swayze over there?"

She says, You're a dick.

I asked, Does this building have a history of paranormal activity?

Wanda said, No. Besides, hauntings supposedly come with cold spots and floating furniture.

I had a flash and said, Maybe something is trying to speak to us in the language of pattern using the most useful and ubiquitous pattern in the cosmos, namely circles and circular motion. Remember the old Pioneer 10 mission. It used a schema of circles to represent our solar system. It also had a star map of 14 pulsars—spinning neutron stars—and two adjacent circles joined by a straight line to represent the hydrogen atom. All that was code to tell whoever found it where earth is located, when Pioneer was launched, and our physical dimensions.

She said, You're grasping at straws.

I say, Hurricanes, tornadoes, ocean convection. Everything is composed of spinning particles that orbit a central point. Further, everything begins in a spinning disc of gas and dust that evolves into round spinning planets orbited by round spinning moons and the whole kit and caboodle revolves around spinning stars. Most stars form binary systems orbiting one another. Stellar black holes, neutron stars, brown dwarfs are all round spinning objects. And everything in every galaxy forms a great disc that revolves around a central supermassive black hole. And what do the galaxies do? They orbit the centre of mass of their local group and those orbit the centre of mass of a super galactic cluster.

And let's not forget even space itself is expanding outward in all directions like a great constantly inflating circular balloon carrying all that circularity with it and is itself rotating.

Wanda said, Then maybe—and this is a mighty big maybe—it's a reverse Butterfly Effect. All that cumulative cosmic circular motion creates pockets of kinetic backwash that erupt in small random bursts of rotational energy.

I say, I don't think this a random physical event. No there is intention behind it. And we should capitalize on it. Think of us as Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

She asks, God? Is that your default position when you can't explain an event? I thought you were a scientist?

I say, I don't care about the actual why. I'm talking about how we spin it, and I say we spin it as divine revelation. Think about it: we can't prove what the cause is. That means nobody else can either, so we can call it whatever we want, and I say we call it something that will be worth money.

Wanda tells me, People won't buy it.

I say If you tell people what they want to hear, they will believe anything, they will buy anything, and they will vote for anybody, regardless the facts or lack thereof. Why else do you think the world is such a mess? Because the devil has it in for us? Or because we are gullible, wilfully ignorant and intellectually lazy. Every sleaze bag from snake oil salesmen to politicians thrives by that truth. Why can't we be the same?"

I'm not sure what part of my little diatribe pissed her off. But a moment later, she started hissing and shaking and showing her large prominent teeth in what can only be described as an animalistic threat display. Even then, I didn't expect what happened next. She grabbed the hammer she had been using to hang pictures and charged at mesh swung at my head claw-end forward. I blocked it with my palm. So instead of bashing my brains, she digs a chunk of meat from my hand.

Now, we're running in circles around the coffee table. I slow down and try to catch her hand. But I miss and she slams the hammer into the side of my head. My blood sprays her in the face. We start running again. I can feel my flap of scalp bouncing as I go. Things were not looking good for old Eddy.

Through it all, I can hear the clicking hamster wheel. I'm thinking, 'Just keep running, you little turd, and all will be well.'

Then I must have slowed down because the next thing I know she's hooked my ear. She yanked back and tore it off. She was stronger than she looked. Crazy people are like that. Nut muscles.

I smacked her in the face with the laptop. Then she brought the hammer down on my forehead. I heard my skull crack. My legs buckled, and I dropped like a bag of dirt.

She stood over me. Grinning and panting. Then she laughed. First, it was a soft chuckle. Then a full-throated guffaw followed by the hysterical cackle of a lunatic. She had gone around the bend and was not coming back.

Then something behind her grabbed her attention, but I didn't know what. She got real quiet and turned her attention in the direction of the cage. She screamed No! A moment later she sprints across the living room and dives head first through the picture window."

It took a while, but I got to my feet. I staggered toward the broken window and looked down. She had pancaked on the pavement. Looked like a human swastika from up here. I called you. And that's when it hit me that the wheel had stopped spinning. End of Transcript

I sent Eddy to the hospital. The EMTs couldn't send Wanda's body to the morgue. Multiple lightning strikes had fried the facility's refrigeration unit.

I had the EMTs black bag the body and haul it back to the apartment. I taped garbage bags over the window, pulled the drapes, and cranked up the AC as high as it would go.

I sniffed around the apartment for clues. As I'm coming out of the bedroom, I hear a steady clicking sound. That old hamster wheel is just spinning away dead hamster and all.

I'm a hard-boiled sceptic so I say, Cheap parlour trick. But I was like the kid whistling as he walked past the graveyard.

A moment later, Speedy starts shaking. Next thing I know the little prick is running on the wheel. I say, Zombie hamster, big deal.

I hear the zipper being pulled down on the body bag. I turned and saw two mangled arms pushing the bag apart. Wanda sat up, looked me dead in the eye, and spat blood and teeth. Her face was peppered with glass and rock and sauced with blood. Her toothless mouth was where her nose used to be, and her nose rode high into her left eye. Any cubist worth his salt would have loved it.

I didn't skip a beat: What do you want?

Whatever it was that had reanimated Wanda and was now pulling her strings said to see what makes you tick.

I say, I'm no clock.

It says, We want to study you. If you were a chimpanzee, we would give you un-stacked blocks and a hanging banana. But humans are explanation machines, so we give you novel situations and observe your reaction. I believe you call it enrichment.

I say, Anthropologists.

It says, Just like you, detective.

I say, I don't toy with people or put them under a microscope.

It says, Of course you do, but where your questions are formulated through language, ours are situational.

We watch how your mind lights up when faced with a mystery. We watch how you explain it. The difference between an anthropologist and us is that we operate in real time rather than sift through the musty past.

I say, Perhaps, but you could also be a figment of my imagination.

It said, If you really believed that you would have left by now. And that would have been a shame, since this little test isn't over yet. We started with three subjects. First, there was the sceptic, who wanted to suspend judgment pending further investigation. Second, there was the shameless opportunist who wanted to make a profit regardless of the whys and wherefores. And there's you: who is open-minded to any possibility. The only question is what you will do with the information.

I said, I want to keep my job, so I'll keep it to myself. But I am curious as to who or what you are.

It said, We are the children of your mind. A parallel stream of human evolution that began not in some primordial hydrothermal vent but in the lush caverns of your own fertile

imaginings, first as primitive inklings, then as thoughts, and finally as fully evolved creatures in our own right that can move between the solid and virtual worlds as easily as you can between air and water.

In short, the collective unconscious of mankind is a shadow biosphere comprised of exotic matter with its own biology, chemistry and physics. Think of us as being similar in some small way to neutrinos and dark matter, but vastly different in most.

Unlike your kind, we are functionally immortal, and so our knowledge is cumulative over generations.

I said, I get it; you're smarter than us. But why reanimate a hamster? Why not some other miracle?

It asked in return, It's an inside joke. Have you ever heard the expression the wheel's spinning but the hamster's dead? It's a euphemism like the lights are on but nobody's home. It's our way of saying that your kind goes through the motions of a civilized society, but inside you are still the same knuckle-dragging primitives who skittered about the savannahs of Africa millennia ago. The problem is two-fold: you don't learn from your mistakes, and you don't learn that you don't learn. How many wars do you have to fight before you understand that in war there are no winners—everybody loses?"

I said, Point taken. But I have a report to file that will in no way shape or form mention this little dialogue. And unless, you want to visit the city morgue, you might want to vacate that corpse.

With that I walked out and never told another soul about what took place. I took an early retirement and stayed off the radar. Now and then I find myself looking over my shoulder to catch a watcher watching me. Stupid really. I never actually saw one. What makes me think I can do it now? In any case, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

THE END

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SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE by Rex Mundy

3. Half as Old as Time

Black but beautiful, in the words of the Bible, she was; dark skinned and lithe, young and sweet faced, more girl than woman if truth be told. Clad in antique chainmail like a Norman knight from the Bayeux Tapestry, she sat her camel proudly. Her eyes gleamed bright in the light of our guttering campfire and scorn turned that beauty bitter as Herzog turned to level the rifle at her. Then... I don't know what happened, but somehow the gun was dashed from the sergeant hands by an invisible force, and it clattered to the rocks.

Before any of us could try to recover it, more mounted figures trotted into the firelight, each one clad in mail and indisputably female, though I could not at once identify their racial type. Though dark skinned, they had straight hair, slim lips and slender, pointed noses, features more akin to the Berber and Arab people of *l'Afrique du Nord* and Arabia than the negroes of further south, though I noted variants in physiognomy and colour, as if these people were racially mixed. They surrounded us.

The first one, the girl who had so strangely struck the rifle from Herzog's hands, spoke to the others. I could not understand a word she said, but it was not the tongue of the Touareg who had pursued us. And yet, who else could these women warriors be? So far out in the desert, they could only be the Abandoned of God. Then I remembered how unwilling the Touareg had seemed to follow us into this wilderness of stones.

Another woman spoke, this one an older female, with a scarred visage. She shook her head in negation of the younger one's words, and ran her finger across her throat in a gesture that was unmistakable. An argument broke out. At length, the girl flared her nostrils and gave an imperious turn of her head, then gestured to some of the others, who dismounted and surrounded us. Some paused to pick up our rifles and equipment.

The girl rode up to us. She looked down at Ned Storey, and he returned her gaze unafraid, though he seemed uncomfortable. She purred at him. 'Ma temoused?'

Herzog stepped forwards. 'Ma'am,' he said, 'I am in charge here. Whatever you want with us, you'll kindly discuss it with me.' He had come off worse from the fight; he had a split lip, and a black eye, while Storey was immaculate.

She looked derisively at him, and he repeated himself, or so I surmised, in another tongue. Not the one these women seemed to speak, but something more like that of our Touareg enemies. The girl replied in the same tongue. 'Eket n Ales ur en issin haret!' she began, but this was only the beginning of her harangue.

'What's she saying?' I hissed.

Herzog didn't look at me. 'She says that we have strayed into her people's territory. All men found within their domain must be slain or taken to their queen, dependent upon their suitability.'

'Suitability?' I echoed. 'Suitability for what?'

But my question went unanswered as the women bound us to a coffle—the long pole to which slaves are tied—and slung this between two camels, which they urged onwards as they began to ride towards the cliffs. They also brought the sergeant's horse along, but that was the last I saw of the unfortunate creature.

I stumbled on rocks unseen in the darkness as I went with my companions. My wrists were bound to the coffle with rawhide, and I was forced to jog along to keep up with the trotting camels. All around us the sound of galloping hoofs was deafening as our captors rode through the darkness alongside us. Where on earth could they be taking us?

We rode up to a line of cliffs, slowing only slightly as we approached. At first I wondered if they expected the camels to climb this blank, featureless wall. Then I saw the riders entering a narrow fissure, so narrow as to be invisible under these conditions.

It formed the mouth of a narrow, winding tunnel that opened up until it was wide enough for two camels to trot abreast. It went on and on into the mountain, like an entrance into the underworld. It was bitterly cold, even after the icy chill of the desert night. Were these mysterious women troglodytes? Did they dwell in some Jules Verne world beneath the ground?

The women rode through the tunnel in utter darkness, without a single wrong turn or misstep. They knew this route as well as I know Piccadilly. But for me and my fellow captives, it was a difficult journey, a journey in the dark, in the freezing cold, a complete contrast to the gruelling desert trek we had endured previously.

'Where do you suppose they're taking us?' I muttered during one brief halt when the camels were watered at the stream that ran along the tunnel floor—the stream, I realised, along whose lower reaches we had made our camp.

'Into the hell that all legionnaires are bound for,' growled Herzog.

'But we can't waste time like this,' I insisted. 'We must get back to Fort Elise and inform the commandant of the massacre.'

'We must speak with their queen,' Ned Storey muttered. I turned my back on him.

What had he meant by signalling to the enemy? I had seen the blazing torch brandished in an unmistakable signal the moment I had awakened. Under better circumstances, that would have been enough for a summary court martial. Did he not know that? Again I remembered what I had heard about Storey. No doubt when he had seen that everything was over for him in England, he had made a break for it and gone to sign up with the Legion. I had made the same choice, though under somewhat different circumstances...

Before we could continue our discussion the order was given for the march to continue. Onwards we trudged into the echoing depths of the desert mountain. I was weary, bone weary, feeling as if I could not walk another step, when at last my eyes detected an unexpected light filtering in from ahead. I looked up. Bright against the darkness of the tunnel was a narrow opening through which streamed what looked like daylight. Had we been walking so long? Or had we come through at last into that world within the world where the inner sun stands at an eternal noon...?

The riders led us out onto a wide shelf of sandstone, and I saw that we had come through the mountain and were looking down upon a broad green valley. It was so startling to see that verdant expanse in such latitudes I almost forgot my disappointment on realising that we were still on the surface. Fields of crops grew down there, surrounded by palm trees that swayed in a warm breeze.

In the middle of the valley stood a tower, and at its feet were the stone buildings of a city. We galloped towards it, raising dust clouds as we rode.

Slaves looked up from the fields where they toiled as the women warriors rode by. A roadway of worn stones wound through the fields, heading for the city. The architecture that I saw as we drew closer was ancient, reminiscent of Sir Arthur Evans' recent excavations at Knossos. We rode up a street lined with buildings of stone lined with colonnades of pillars. Reminiscent in many ways of classical architecture, it nevertheless spoke of something far older.

An almost palpable sense of utter antiquity emanated from those buildings. And yet for all their solidity, it seemed that this was a city very much in its last days. The streets were almost deserted, and many of the buildings were in ruins. At last we came to a halt at the foot of the tower. Here the women warriors dismounted and led us through a yawning archway into an audience chamber that took up the whole ground floor of the tower.

An aged and withered female sat upon a stone plinth, clad in rich robes of cloth of gold and indigo, clutching a royal sceptre and wearing upon her wintry brows a circlet of gold from which jutted stylised sun rays. Her rheumy eyes fell upon we three captives as we were thrust forwards. The girl who had led the riders spoke to her, but she held up a hand, and climbed down from her stony throne, and with the aid of two plump, shaven headed eunuch slaves hobbled up.

First she examined our weapons, which the women had brought with them. Some of the eunuchs carried trade matchlocks of the sort used by the Touaregs, so these folk were not unaccustomed to guns, but after she tried to fire it at one of her slaves, and all it produced was a dry click—it was my rifle, and I had left the safety catch on—she turned to look searchingly at each of us in turn.

I met the queen's eyes unflinching, but it was like gazing into the hollow eye sockets of Death itself. She turned to study Storey, placing a withered, skeletal hand on his arm. He looked uncomfortable. Herzog interrupted, speaking in the same tongue he had used on the girl, which he had told us was Tamasheq, the language of the Touaregs.

'Ewîn en Tamet!' he began.

She raised a hand and one of the eunuchs struck him across the face. Now both eunuchs aided the queen as she returned to her throne. She brandished her sceptre and spoke at length in her alien tongue. When she had finished speaking, she sat back.

The girl turned to us. Her eyes brimmed with sadness, but it was a sadness reserved for Ned Storey. She addressed Herzog, whose ruddy, battered face had been made redder with the imprint of the blow. At her murmured words, however, he went pale as milk.

Then we were hustled away down endless stone corridors, dimly lit by torches. Our captors were not the women who had brought us here, but rather more of the eunuch slaves. It occurred to me that such were the only men, if that was the right word, I had seen since coming to this strange city. We were thrust inside a dank, stinking cell, and a barred gate was slammed to behind us.

‘What is happening?’ I asked. ‘What is this place? And what the devil did the queen say? What is to happen to us?’

‘These folk are called the Azzi,’ said Storey suddenly. ‘According to the girl, their warriors capture men for two reasons. One is to provide breeding stock, for they live without men. Those who are deemed unsuitable for this,’ he added sardonically, ‘become slaves. Our eunuch guards are a good example.’

Herzog stared at him. ‘You understand their language?’

Storey shook his head. ‘Only Tamasheq, as you do. Though I daresay I speak it rather better... You must realise I understood everything you said to the girl.’

Herzog looked bitter. ‘Then you know the queen’s judgement,’ he said.

Storey nodded. ‘I have been deemed fit to join their breeding stock,’ he told me. ‘Both you and Mundy here are... cut out for a different fate.’

4. Durance Vile

‘Who in heaven’s name are these people?’ I asked. ‘Why have we never heard of a place like this on the edge of French territory?’

‘And why have not the French sent a punitive expedition to crush it?’ asked Storey. He shrugged. ‘The Azzi must keep themselves to themselves, but the Touareg fear the area. I doubt they will follow us.’

‘Women warriors,’ I mused. ‘In the Sahara.’ It rang the faintest of bells. Something I had read long ago, when but a boy. ‘Of course!’ I cried. ‘Diodorus Siculus.’

‘The classical author?’ asked Storey, studying me.

‘He claimed that the Amazons had their origin in Libya.’ I turned to Herzog. ‘Those of Asia Minor were preceded by an earlier nation of women, from these parts.’ I ran my hand down the dripping dungeon wall. ‘This city is ancient,’ I whispered. ‘Are the Azzi the ancestor of the Amazons?’

Sergeant Herzog snorted. ‘Amazons!’ he said. ‘They’re nothing but a myth, man!’

‘Our captors are no myth,’ Storey muttered ominously. ‘It seems we will never leave this place. I don’t know whose fate will be the worse.’

He crossed over to the barred exit and peered out, testing the bars as he did so. They were firm enough. 'Let's hope the Touareg follow us here.' This last he said in the faintest of murmurs, but I caught it.

I drew Herzog to one side. 'Sergeant,' I whispered. 'We can't trust Storey.'

He gazed at me in silence, his eyes cold and hard. 'Why do you say that?'

'He... he's in league with the Touareg,' I hissed. 'You saw him signalling! I think he brought about the ambush that almost wiped out our two patrols.'

Herzog studied me impassively. 'Why should he do that?'

'I don't know that, but what I do know is that he's a murdering, thieving swine,' I muttered fiercely. 'That's why he's here. In the Legion.'

'And why did you join the Legion, Private Mundy?' Herzog asked sardonically, and I gaped, speechless, then looked down at my feet. The sergeant clapped me on the shoulder. 'Don't answer that,' he drawled. 'It's a question no legionnaire should ask another. We all have sins on our heads. What matters now is that we get back to the fort to warn the commandant. We'll achieve nothing locked up in here.'

He went to join Storey and both of them tested the iron bars. There was no guard outside, but the Azzi must have known there was no need for one. Despite the decrepit nature of the city, those bars were immovable.

Herzog found a fallen rock and began to pound on the bars. 'What are you doing?' I demanded. 'You won't get through them like that!'

'And you'll bring down the guards.' Storey seized the sergeant's wrist and forcing him to drop the rock. 'What will that achieve?'

There was a shout from outside the cell. Looking up I saw two eunuch guards levelling matchlocks at us. Herzog pushed Storey away and addressed them in Tamasheq.

The two eunuchs looked at each other doubtfully, then one turned and lumbered away. The other remained outside the cell, watching us with a glower on his flabby face.

'What did you say?' I asked Herzog. The sergeant did not reply.

'He said that he wanted to speak to the queen,' muttered Storey. 'That he has important information that will benefit her. A cunning enough ruse, I daresay! It might even work...'

It did. Half an hour later, the eunuch returned with a large iron ring of keys in one paw. While the other covered us with his matchlock, he unlocked the gate and dragged Herzog outside, then slammed the gate shut again and locked it.

'What about us?' I shouted as they hustled Herzog away. 'Put in a good word for me, won't you, sergeant?'

Then they were gone. Despondently, I glanced at Storey, who gave me an imperturbable look, and sank down to crouch on the ground, his back to the wall.

‘We may have a long wait,’ he said.

I remained standing, glaring down at him. Herzog had left me alone with this thief, this murderer, who had conspired with the Touaregs to slaughter my comrades.

‘When you killed Sir George,’ I said suddenly, ‘what did you do with the Jewels of Amon?’

He didn’t look up. ‘I didn’t kill the baronet,’ he said wearily. ‘Nor did I steal those relics.’

I laughed. ‘It was in all the papers two years ago. Scotland Yard was on to you. Flambard of the Yard himself was onto you! But even the good inspector didn’t guess where you had ended up. Remembered what Wren told us at school, did you? Took the boat train in disguise? All the way across France, to the enlistment office in Marseilles? To Sidi-bel-Abbes for a spot of square-bashing? Then the white kepi of a true legionnaire, and sign on for five years hard slog?’

‘Is that what you did, old chap?’ Storey asked sardonically. ‘You must have had some reason for joining the Legion yourself.’

‘By gad, it certainly wasn’t murder!’ I shouted hotly. Here we were, two renegade Englishmen, forced together by circumstances—and I hated him in that moment. How I hated him.

The anger and frustration I had felt when my own sins found me out boiled over and I threw myself at the older man, who rose lithely to his feet and met my attack with a swift, scientific uppercut.

Furious, I put up my fists. ‘We’ll settle it here and now!’ I barked. ‘Like gentlemen. Or are you no longer capable of such behaviour?’

Storey stripped off his jacket and raised his own fists. ‘Very well.’

We circled, probing the air. I came at him with a succession of wild sledgehammer blows which he deflected, before cracking me across the jaw again. I fell to my knees, then flung myself at his legs, bringing him hurtling down.

‘Didn’t know we were playing rugger, old chap,’ he said as I straddled him, a fist raised. ‘You didn’t learn to fight so dirty at the old school.’

Mockingly humming Kipling’s *Gentlemen Rankers*, he seized my wrist, then hauled down on it until we were face to face. Then he twisted and spun, sending me flying to the ground.

He rose, dusting himself down. ‘I didn’t learn jujitsu at school either,’ he confessed. ‘One of my famous cases took me to Japan.’ He grinned at me. ‘Had enough?’

But I was furious. I charged across the small cell, fists clenched. Effortlessly, he seized me in a headlock and kept me there as I tried to punch him.

‘All I need do,’ he panted, ‘is increase the pressure—and then I’ll be sharing my cell with a corpse. I don’t really want that. It would be highly unpleasant.’

I relaxed. ‘All right,’ I gasped. ‘Bit unseemly, really, two Old Boys scuffling like we were still in the schoolyard.’

He let me go, dusted off his hands—and I struck. My aim was off, and I got in no more than a glancing blow to his jaw before he retaliated, sinking a fist into my solar plexus that stretched me out on the cold floor. He seized me by the neck.

‘Really, old man,’ he said, ‘I can only view this as a mercy killing.’ His fingers tightened around my helpless throat.

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PLANETOID 127 by Edgar Wallace

Chapter VII

LOOKING up, he saw a head and shoulders come over the edge of the quarry into which he had fallen. Apparently the man was not prepared to take the risk of following, for presently the sound of his footsteps died away and there was silence.

He lay for half-an-hour motionless, recovering his breath. Although his arm was bruised he could move it and no bones were broken. At the end of his rest he rose cautiously to his knees and explored the position so far as it was revealed by the moonlight.

He had fallen twenty or thirty feet down a steep, chalky slope; but he was by no means at the bottom of the quarry face, and he had to move with the greatest care and circumspection. Presently, however, he found a rough path, which seemed to run interminably upwards. It was nearly half-an-hour later when he came to the road. The car was gone, and he walked back the way he had come, hoping that he would be able to retrieve his motor-bicycle intact, though he had his doubts whether it would be usable. To his delight, when he came upon the machine, he discovered it had suffered little damage other than twisted handlebars. His run home was without event.

Apparently his hasty exit had been heard, for the house was aroused and two manservants were searching the grounds when he came in.

“I heard the gate go smash, sir,” said the butler, explaining his wakefulness. “Lord! I’m glad to see you back. Somebody’s thrown over that stone in the courtyard...”

He babbled on, and Tim was so glad to hear the sound of a human voice that he did not interrupt him.

There was no sleep for him that night. With successive cups of strong coffee, brought at intervals, he sat poring over the manuscript, page by page, almost incredulous of his own eyes and senses. The sunlight poured in through the windows of the little study and found him still sitting, his chin on his palms, the manuscript before him. He had read it again and again until he knew almost every word. Then, locking the papers away in the safe, he walked slowly to the instrument room, and gazed in awe at this evidence of the dead man’s genius.

Something within him told him that never in future would human speech pulsate through this network of wires; never again would that queer little amplifier bring within human hearing the thin sounds of space. Even the code was gone: that vocabulary, reduced with such labour to a dictionary of six thousand words.

He turned the switch and set the little machine working; saw the multi-coloured lights gleam and glow. This much the mechanics had succeeded in doing. But the words that filtered through light and charcoal would, he thought, be dead for everlasting. He turned another switch and set something working which Sir Charles had described as a miniature air pump, and stood watching absent-mindedly as the piston thrust in and out. If he only had one tenth of Colson’s genius!

His hand had gone out to turn the switch that stopped the machine, when:

“Oh, Colson, why do you not speak to me?”

The voice came from the very centre of the machine. There was no visible microphone. It was as though the lights and the whirling wheels had become endowed with a voice. Tim’s heart nearly stopped beating.

“Oh, Colson,” wailed the voice, *“they are breaking the machines. I have come to tell you this before they arrive. He is dead—he, the master, the wizard, the wonderful man...”*

The servant! Mr. Colson had told him that it was the servant who had spoken. The astral Colson was dead. How should he reply?

“Where are you?” he asked hoarsely, but there was no answer, and soon he understood why. Presently:

“I will wait for you to speak. When I hear you I will answer. Speak to me, Colson! In a thousand seconds....”

A thousand seconds! Colson had told him once that wireless waves travel at the same speed as light. Then he was a hundred and eighty million miles away, and a thousand seconds must pass—nearly seventeen minutes—before his voice could reach through space to the man who was listening.

How had he made the machine work? Perhaps the mechanism had succeeded before, but there had been nobody at the other end—wherever the other end might be. And then:

“Oh, Colson, they are here... goodbye!”

There came to him the sound of a queer tap-tap-tap and then a crackle as though of splintered glass, and then a scream, so shrill, so full of pain and horror, that involuntarily he stepped back. Then came a crash, and silence. He waited, hardly daring to breathe, but no sound came. At the end of an hour he turned off the switch and went slowly up to his room.

He awoke to find a youth sitting on the edge of his bed. He was so weary and dulled that he did not recognize Chap, even after he spoke.

“Wake up: I’ve got some news for you, dear old bird,” said Chap, staring owlishly through his thick, heavy glasses. “There’s a Nemesis in this business—you may have heard of the lady—Miss Nemesis of Nowhere. First the burglar man is killed and then his boss is smashed to smithereens.”

Tim struggled up. “Who?” he asked. “Not Hildreth?”

Chap nodded.

“He was found just outside Maidenhead, his car broken to bits—they think his steering-wheel went wrong when he was doing sixty an hour. At any rate, he smashed into a tree, and all that’s left of his machine is hot iron!”

“Hildreth! Was he killed?” Chap nodded.

“Completely,” he said callously. “And perhaps it’s as well for him, for Bennett was waiting at his house to arrest him. They’ve got proof that he employed that wretched burglar. Do you know what time it is? It’s two o’clock, you lazy devil, and Sir Charles and Stamford are waiting to see you. Sir Charles has a theory—”

Tim swung out of bed and walked to the window, blinking into the sunlit garden.

“All the theories in the world are going to evaporate before the facts,” he said. Putting his hand under his pillow, he took out the Professor’s manuscript. “I’ll read something to you this afternoon. Is Elsie here?”

Chap nodded. “I’ll be down in half-an-hour,” he said.

His breakfast was also his luncheon, but it was not until after the meal was over, and they had adjourned to the library, that he told them what had happened in the night. Bennett, who arrived soon after, was able to fill in some of the gaps of the story.

“Hildreth,” he said, “in spite of his wealth and security, was a crook of crooks. It is perfectly true that he was tried in Australia and sent to penal servitude. He had got a big wireless plant in his house, and there is no doubt that for many years he has made large sums of money by picking up commercial messages that have been sent by radio and decoding and using them to his own purpose. In this way he must have learnt something about Mr. Colson’s correspondent—he was under the impression that Colson received messages in code and was anxious to get the code-book. By the way, we found the charred remnants of that book in the car. It was burnt out, as you probably know. That alone would have been sufficient to convict Hildreth of complicity in the murder. Fortunately, we have been saved the trouble of a trial.”

“None of the code remains?” asked Tim anxiously. The detective shook his head.

“No, sir, none. There are one or two words—for instance, ‘Zeiith’ means ‘the Parliamentary system of the third decade,’ whatever that may mean. It seems a queer sort of code to me.”

“That is very unfortunate,” said Tim. “I had hoped to devote my time to telling the history of this strange people, and the book would have been invaluable.”

“Which people is this?” asked Sir Charles puzzled. “Did our friend get into communication with one of the lost tribes?”

Tim laughed, in spite of himself. “No, sir. I think the best explanation I can offer you is to read Mr. Colson’s manuscript, which I discovered last night. It is one of the most remarkable stories that has ever been told, and I’ll be glad to have you here, Sir Charles, so that you may supply explanations which do not occur to me.”

“Is it about the planet?” asked Sir Charles quickly, and Tim nodded.

“Then you have discovered it! It is a planetoid—”

Tim shook his head. “No, sir,” he said quietly. “It is a world as big as ours.”

The scientist looked at him open-mouthed.

“A world as big as ours, and never been discovered by our astronomers? How far away?”

“At its nearest, a hundred and eighty million miles,” said Tim.

“Impossible!” cried Sir Charles scornfully. “It would have been detected years ago. It is absolutely impossible!”

“It has never been detected because it is invisible,” said Tim.

“Invisible? How can a planet be invisible? Neptune is much farther distant from the sun—”

“Nevertheless, it is invisible,” said Tim. “And now,” he said, as he took the manuscript from his pocket, “if you will give me your attention, I will tell you the story of Neo. Incidentally, the cryptogram on the stone reads: ‘Behind the sun is another world!’”

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POLARIS OF THE SNOWS by Charles B Stilson

4. Hurlled South Again

When his strong form had bounded from her view, the girl turned to the little hut and shut herself within. She cast herself on a heap of blankets, and gave way to her bereavement and terror.

Her brother's corpse was scarcely cold at the bottom of the abyss. She was lost in the trackless wastes—alone, save for this bizarre stranger who had come out of the snows, this man of strange saying, who seemed a demigod of the wilderness.

Could she trust him? She must. She recalled him kneeling in the snow, and the courtierlike grace with which he kissed her hand. A hot flush mounted to her eyes. She dried her tears.

She heard him return to the camp, and heard the barking of the dogs. Once he passed near the hut, but he did not intrude, and she remained within.

Womanlike, she set about the rearrangement of her hair and clothing. When she had finished she crept to the doorway and peeped out. Again her blushes burned her cheeks. She saw the son of the snows crouched above the camp-fire, surrounded by a group of monstrous dogs. He had rubbed his face with oil. A bright blade glittered in his hand. Polaris was shaving!

Presently she went out. The young man sprang to his feet, cracking his long whip to restrain the dogs, which would have sprung upon the stranger. They huddled away, their teeth bared, staring at her with glowing eyes. Polaris seized one of them by the scruff of the neck, lifted it bodily from the snow, and swung it in front of the girl.

“Talk to him, lady,” he said; “you must be friends. This is Julius.”

The girl bent over and fearlessly stroked the brute's head.

“Julius, good dog,” she said. At her touch the dog quivered and its hackles rose. Under the caress of her hand it quieted gradually. The bristling hair relaxed, and Julius's tail swung slowly to and fro in an overture of amity. When Polaris loosed him, he sniffed in friendly fashion at the girl's hands, and pushed his great head forward for more caresses.

Then Marcus, the grim leader of the pack, stalked majestically forward for his introduction.

“Ah, you have won Marcus!” cried Polaris. “And Marcus won is a friend indeed. None of them would harm you now.” Soon she had learned the name and had the confidence of every dog of the pack, to the great delight of their master.

Among the effects in the camp was a small oil-stove, which Polaris greeted with brightened eyes. “One like that we had, but it was worn out long ago,” he said. He lighted the stove and began the preparation of a meal.

She found that he had cleared the camp and put all in order. He had dragged the carcasses of the dead dogs to the other side of the slope and piled them there. His stock of meat was low,

and his own dogs would have no qualms if it came to making their own meals of these strangers of their own kind.

The girl produced from the remnants of the camp stores a few handfuls of coffee and an urn. Polaris watched in wonderment as she brewed it over the tiny stove and his nose twitched in reception of its delicious aroma. They drank the steaming beverage, piping hot, from tin cups. In the stinging air of the snowlands even the keenest grief must give way to the pangs of hunger. The girl ate heartily of a meal that in a more moderate climate she would have considered fit only for beasts.

When their supper was completed they sat huddled in their furs at the edge of the fire. Around them were crouched the dogs, watching with eager eyes for any scraps which might fall to their share.

“Now tell me who you are, and how you came here,” questioned the girl.

“Lady, my name is Polaris, and I think that I am an American gentleman,” he said, and a trace of pride crept into the words of the answer. “I came here from a cabin and a ship that lie burned many leagues to the southward. All my life I have lived there, with but one companion, my father, who now is dead, and who sends me to the north with a message to that world of men that lies beyond the snows, and from which he long was absent.”

“A ship—a cabin—” The girl bent toward him in amazement. “And burned? And you have lived—have grown up in this land of snow and ice and bitter cold, where but few things can exist—I don’t understand!”

“My father has told me much, but not all. It is all in his message which I have not seen,” Polaris answered. “But that which I tell you is truth. He was a seeker after new things. He came here to seek that which no other man had found. He came in a ship with my mother and others. All were dead before I came to knowledge. He had built a cabin from the ruins of the ship, and he lived there until he died.”

“And you say that you are an American gentleman?”

“That he told me, lady, although I do not know my name or his, except that he was Stephen, and he called me Polaris.”

“And did he never try to get to the north?” asked the girl.

“No. Many years ago, when I was a boy, he fell and was hurt. After that he could do but little. He could not travel.”

“And you?”

“I learned to seek food in the wilderness, lady; to battle with its beasts, to wrest that which would sustain our lives from the snows and the wastes.”

Much more of his life and of his father he told her under her wondering questioning—a tale most incredible to her ears, but, as he said, the truth. Finally he finished.

“Now, lady, what of you?” he asked. “How came you here, and from where?”

“My name is Rose—”

“Ah, that is the name of a flower,” said Polaris. “You were well named.”

He did not look at her as he spoke. His eyes were turned to the snow slopes and were very wistful. “I have never seen a flower,” he continued slowly, “but my father said that of all created things they were the fairest.”

“I have another name,” said the girl. “It is Rose—Rose Emer.”

“And why did you come here, Rose Emer?” asked Polaris.

“Like your father, I—we were seekers after new things, my brother and I. Both our father and mother died, and left my brother John and myself ridiculously rich. We had to use our money, so we travelled. We have been over most of the world. Then a man—an American gentleman—a very brave man, organized an expedition to come to the south to discover the South Pole. My brother and I knew him. We were very much interested in his adventure. We helped him with it. Then John insisted that he would come with the expedition, and—oh, they didn’t wish me to come, but I never had been left behind—I came, too.”

“And that brave man who came to seek the pole, where is he now?”

“Perhaps he is dead—out there,” said the girl, with a catch in her voice. She pointed to the south. “He left the ship and went on, days ago. He was to establish two camps with supplies. He carried an airship with him. He was to make his last dash for the pole through the air from the farther camp. His men were to wait for him until—until they were sure that he would not come back.”

“An airship!” Polaris bent forward with sparkling eyes. “So there are airships, then! Ah, this man must be brave! How is he called?”

“James Scoland is the name—Captain Scoland.”

“He went on whence I came? Did he go by that way?” Polaris pointed where the white tops of the mountain range which he skirted pierced the sky.

“No. He took a course to the east of the mountains, where other explorers of years before had been before him.”

“Yes, I have seen maps. Can you tell me where, or nearly where, we are now?” he asked the girl.

“This is Victoria Land,” she answered. “We left the ship in a long bay, extending in from Ross Sea, near where the 160th meridian joins the 80th parallel. We are somewhere within three days’ journey from the ship.”

“And so near to open water?”

She nodded.

Rose Emer slept in the little shelter, with the grim Marcus curled on a robe beside her pallet. Crouched among the dogs in the camp, Polaris slept little. For hours he sat huddled, with his chin on his hands, pondering what the girl had told him. Another man was on his way to the pole—a very brave man—and he might reach it. And then—Polaris must be very wary when he met that man who had won so great a prize.

“Ah, my father,” he sighed, “learning is mine through patience. History of the world and of its wars and triumphs and failures, I know. Of its tongues you have taught me, even those of the Roman and the Greek, long since passed away; but how little do I know of the ways of men—and of women! I shall be very careful, my father.”

Quite beyond any power of his to control, an antagonism was growing within him for that man whom he had not seen; antagonism that was not all due to the magnitude of the prize which the man might be winning, or might be dying for. Indeed, had he been able to analyse it, that was the least part of it.

When they broke camp for their start they found that the perverse wind, which had rested while they slept, had risen when they would journey, and hissed bitterly across the bleak steppes of snow. Polaris made a place on the sledge for the girl, and urged the pack into the teeth of the gale. All day long they battled ahead in it, bearing left to the west, where was more level pathway, than among the snow dunes.

In an ever increasing blast they came in sight of open water. They halted on a far-stretching field, much broken by huge masses, so snow-covered that it was not possible to know whether they were of rock or ice. Not a quarter of a mile beyond them, the edge of the field was fretted by wind-lashed waves, which extended away to the horizon rim, dotted with tossing icebergs of great height.

Polaris pitched camp in the shelter of a towering cliff, and they made themselves what comfort they could in the stinging cold.

They had slept several hours when the slumbers of Polaris were pierced by a woman’s screams, the frenzied howling of the dogs, and the thundering reverberations of grinding and crashing ice cliffs. A dash of spray splashed across his face.

He sprang to his feet in the midst of the leaping pack; as he did so he felt the field beneath him sway and pitch like a hammock. For the first time since he started for the north the Antarctic sun was shining brightly—shining cold and clear on a great disaster!

For they had pitched their camp on an ice floe. Whipped on by the gale, the sea had risen under it, heaved it up and broken it. On a section of the floe several acres in extent their little camp lay, at the very brink of a gash in the ice-field which had cut them off from the land over which they had come.

The water was raging like a millrace through the widening rift between them and the shore. Caught in a swift current and urged by the furious wind, the broken-up floe was drifting, faster and faster—back to the south!

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