

# The Popcorn War

## A Sequel to *Terms of Enhancement*

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### Prologue

“It looks like popcorn.”

Raul had a habit of saying the oddest things at the oddest moments. The sergeant regarded the soldier with a paused thought and an equally paused stare.

Raul ducked as three of their buddies floated over them momentarily blocking the sun before crashing into a pile of camouflage several paces to the rear of their hasty. With an enemy this fast, they didn't have any time for much more than a hasty. They didn't normally even see her.

Sergeant raised his head to pop off a couple more rounds at the young woman standing on the trail. Everyone else must have had the same idea. Concentrated fire zipped in from every direction to careen off her body in every other direction. Sergeant noticed her breasts. He took a split second to notice how they never really moved despite all the kinetic energy pounding them. He noticed how the bullets popped off of her like... popcorn.

She squatted down to retrieve a small object that rolled to her feet and quickly surrounded it in her smallish hands. A muffled pop resounded through the thick jungle air before she dusted her hands off, smiling as ever. Despite the unnoticeable effect the grenade had on her, another thumped along the ground to her feet.

Raul could swear he heard a sigh from her. Both dared another peek at her. She muttered something about dummies, scooped up the device, and promptly nestled it between her plentiful breasts. Another, more muffled pop, and more dusting off. The firing continued, careening into her from everywhere. A pile of squished lead began to collect at her feet.

The girl hardly seemed aware that she was being fired on, let alone being hit frequently, as she tied her midnight black mane into a ponytail atop her head. Calmly she stripped out of her bikini top and stepped out of her shorts and boots. She stretched her sinuous body and set her self. She looked over at Raul. She winked, he blinked, and she was gone.

“Okay, yeah. Popcorn. It does look like popcorn. On my count disperse back to the ORP, three, two, one...”

A wind rocked the two off their feet and their weapons were gone. The two soldiers grasped their hands in pain. Another wind rocked them before they hit the ground. They felt themselves somehow attached to each other. A searing heat rushed through each of the soldiers' arms. Rifle barrels tend to get hot when fired in such long bursts. The wind rushed through again; their feet were bound.

Those who could hear over their own frustrations could make out the giggles of the young woman as she passed. A young woman who seemed to be there and then not there in a moment.

Raul and the sergeant had a mere second to catch their breath before they felt the ground leave them. It met them once again further up the trail in a clearing where the rest of the platoon had also started to get comfortable with the earthworms. She reappeared in front of the pile of heroes and smiled. It was a smile that could lighten any day, even one like this. The pile began to break out in subtle laughter.

“Well, camaradas, what should I do with you?” she asked.

She let her cheek rest in her hand for a moment to consider the many options available to her. Her eyes lit up and she snapped her fingers. The pile groaned from the exceptionally loud crack of her snap. She disappeared. Pallets began stacking up out of nowhere, some still smoking slightly from the friction with the air. She laid them out 6x6 and secured each one to the others with hemp rope.

Within seconds she was finished and two by two the soldiers were lobbed onto the pallet network. The young woman picked up the thirty of them much like a waitress serving up drinks and began the five-mile walk toward base camp. Before she could forget, she returned to the road. The transport was still there.

Without a driver, or need of one, she gripped the bumper and lifted the front end clear of the hard ball. Doing a once over of her surroundings she dragged

the dual ton troop carrier along the tank trail, tray plate of fried platoon in her hand. Another training exercise gone well. Romana was proud of herself.

“Raul?” she teased.

“Yeah?”

“It feels like popcorn.”

There was a message waiting for her at camp. Private Legion code, known only to the two dozen members of the Novo Recife detachment. Xuxa needed to see her right away, at the bridge – the once and future bridge.

I

“We should have kept those other tanks,” Cristina complained.

“The Fernandistas would have zapped them, too,” Leopoldo pointed out. “Anyway, without the bridge, how would we get them here?”

Leopoldo Alves and Cristina Miranda Medeiros were riding shotgun on a food convoy. It was boring duty, because the bandits never attacked convoys protected by Legionnaires. Somebody must be tipping them off. MI was working on it, but MI was in its infancy. Like everything else on newly-free Novo Recife, including the Legionnaires.

There weren't enough of them to guard every convoy, and those escorted by tanks and regular army detachments came under attack half the time. The Fernandistas had managed to improvise anti-tank weapons based on home-made piranha mix. Tanks were getting scarce, and tank drivers even scarcer.

“If only we could fly,” Leopoldo lamented.

If only. Military Intelligence would have loved it if the Legion could have tracked the Fernandistas by air, trailed them to their base or bases. But the bandits always knew when one of the few spy satellites would be overhead, and there weren't enough aircraft left from the destruction of the spaceport to cover all the gaps or all the territory.

Leopoldo and Cristina were riding in an open staff car, wearing only their Velorian-issue camo skivvies to advertise their presence. Behind them, the heavy trucks loaded with grain, produce and livestock stretched for half a mile. They'd been on the road for three days now, all the way from Campo Velho, without a single incident.

About halfway here, they'd passed Ciro and Arminda, going the other way. They were with a detachment from the regular army, headed out on a search-and-destroy mission after a convoy from Minas Oramas had been attacked the day before. The Fernandistas would be long gone by the time they reached the mining town, but maybe they'd get lucky and pick up a lead. They hoped so.

Through the pass now, into the plain. Rio Amado ahead. Their driver pulled off the road to the left, and parked. The trucks began pulling off to the right, lining up along the dock. Their drivers knew the drill. Construction crews were working on the new bridge, but it wouldn't be ready for months, and the food for a hungry Santo Antônio would have to be offloaded from the heavy trucks onto smaller vehicles that could use the temporary pontoon bridge.

The hardball ended here, for the time being, but not the hard times. There had been attempts to attack the construction crews and sabotage the project, but

they hadn't come to much. This wasn't friendly territory for the Fernandistas; moreover, there was a company of regulars billeted in blockhouses that flanked the bridge approach, and at least one of the Legionnaires was always nearby.

The sentries in front of the blockhouses looked bored. What would you call their firing position – a slowy instead of a hasty? It was a dull end to a dull journey, Cristina thought, and nothing to look forward to but an equally dull and fruitless journey back. But then two strange yet familiar figures emerged from the south blockhouse to greet them.

The first was Xuxa Sayão, the *lider* herself, the one they had chosen to coordinate their efforts in cooperation with the provisional government. It had to be important for Xuxa to be here. But Cristina's eyes really lit up when she saw who was with her: Romana Novais, her best friend in the world.

## II

They hoped it didn't have to do with the bridge. The bridge project had been a sore point between the Legionnaires and the fledgling government. Why couldn't the planet's new supermen and superwomen do the job themselves?

Policy for one thing.

The Legionnaires were soldiers, after all, not laborers. For one thing, their Velorian benefactors, James Kim'Vallara and Cher'ee Belan'gan, had made that clear from the outset, and Bidu Braga too had laid down the law before she left with them to lead the off-world Legion detachment.

"Pontes hoje, esgotos amanhã," she'd warned them.

Bridges today, sewers tomorrow. Come to think of it, Santo Antônio did need to upgrade its sewer system, although nobody had asked them to work on that...

There were practicalities, for another thing. Sure, they could lift multi-ton reinforced concrete sections – if they were standing on solid ground. But the Rio Amado wasn't solid ground; and even if it had been, lifting the sections into place would have been impractical. A born Vel could have hoisted them from above, but for flightless Legion enhancees it would have been a team effort at best, with all sorts of complications.

It wasn't that they were unwilling to help out in emergencies – if any of them were near at hand to rescue people from fires or accidents, or step between armed robbers and their intended victims, they never hesitated. But it would have taken time to train the Legionnaires for engineering work, even assuming it had been their duty – and now they didn't *have* the time.

"No, this doesn't have to do with the bridge," Xuxa told Cristina and Romana after ushering them into the blockhouse. "But we may want the general public to think it does. We'll need a cover story of some kind, to explain your absence in case anyone misses you. They know who we are. No helping that. But they also know *where* we are, at least when we're doing convoy duty."

What she was proposing was that Cristina and Romana go undercover.

"I know that you two can work together," she said. "The question is, can you work together without giving yourselves away? You'll have a lot of advantages. You'll be able to see things at a distance that no one else could, overhear things

that no one else could, move swiftly from one point to another as so one else could. But you can't be noticed, or it's all over. Not for you, but for the operation."

"What's the operation?" Romana asked.

"Find Fernandes. We can put him and his forces out of business once and for all, if only we can find him."

"How do we find him?"

"Join him, of course. Now do you understand why you not only can't let anyone out there know who you are, but can't let anyone know *what* you are? You'll be just a couple of *caboclinhas*, a couple of country girls. Think you can manage that?"

"We can manage," Romana said.

"Then you've got your marching orders," Xuxa declared.

Just like that.

\* \* \*

"Thanks for volunteering me," Cristina said afterwards.

She looked away toward the setting sun. An array of pinks, and yellows stretched across the sky. It reminded her of when she was a little girl. It wasn't so long ago when things were simple and she still had her innocence. War stole more than life.

"Where are you, Cristi?"

"In the past... Listen, we leave for Minas Oramas in 48 hours. Take some time off and tie up any loose ends you may have. I'm not sure how long we'll be gone."



“Is everything okay? I can stay here with you if you like. We could have some fun, just you and I, before we leave.” Romana patted Cristina’s taut bottom and smiled.

“You’re so *mau*! The locals had a hard enough time cleaning up after our rumble by the mountain pass. Not to mention the write up and the rock clearing detail. I don’t think so, girl. You’re hazardous to the environment!”

“Who can deny how much of a rush it is being so powerful now, though. Anyway, I think I’ll run over to visit my uncle. It’s been a few days. He probably needs some help. I’ve got him so spoiled ever since our enhancements; but, why not? He deserves it after raising a diabinha like me. Take care, sister.” Romana leaned in to squeeze her best friend, a small, endearing kiss touched Cristina’s cheek.

“You are too good for me, Romana.”

“That’s funny, I was thinking the same. See you back here in two days, okay?”

Cristina smiled. They’d had some wild times together, and it didn’t bother her that Romana might leave her for a man – if it was the right man. But the right kind of man was hard to come by, even in the Legion. And making a thing out of their supposedly shared preference helped discourage the wrong kind of men... though in her own case it didn’t seem to work with one particularly obnoxious man.

When Romana said she was running over to see Uncle Manoel, she wasn't kidding. Running was the easiest way to get to Flores Bonitas. There'd never been a road past the gorge where the Rio Amado cut through the Espinha Dorsal, only a narrow path cut into the rocky escarpment.

Even though she was in a hurry to beat the sunset, she paced herself to a mere 30 kilometers an hour. It wouldn't do to run into somebody coming the other way, although that wasn't likely. Growers came down the river on temporary rafts with their fresh flowers; the current through the gorge was too swift for them to make the return journey, so the growers would sell the wood from the rafts as well as the flowers and leg it back with their earnings.

She hadn't noticed anyone leaving earlier for upriver and figured she'd have time to slow down if she spotted anyone ahead of her. She'd have to slow at sharp turns anyway, aside from the possibility of running into concealed walkers, not doing so would cause her own momentum to carry her right into the raging water. No harm to her, but it would be hell on her clothes and she might lose her personal effects.

Xuxa and Bidu had come this way. During the war. Before Enhancement. They and their comrades had traveled slowly, in the dead of night, almost feeling their way up the path, until they got far enough above the gorge to build a makeshift raft and cross the river in calmer water. That crossing, too, had been at night, and they'd barely had time to get to their position in the Espinha Dorsal by dawn.

They'd been resourceful and brave. And they'd almost died. Because of Fernandes. They hadn't known then that their Comandante, the leader of the *Revolução*, had been trying to strike a deal with the Betas, to make himself the planetary dictator. They hadn't known that his failure to carry out the amphibious assault across the river that day had been an act of treachery rather than timidity.

Somebody must have tipped him off just as he was about to be exposed. He'd headed for his home province of Selvas Ocidentais and gone to ground with his followers. Sweeps through the area had been fruitless.

*Bastardo*, she thought. *Estamos vindo atrás de você. Vamos pegá-lo.*

*We're coming for you. We'll catch you.* And though she wasn't sure if Xuxa would have approved, she added, *Então vamos matá-lo.*

Yes, they'd kill him. Romana wished they would, anyway.

She made it past the gorge before darkness fell, began jogging at a steady pace of 60 kilometers per hour along what was now a broader path. Her night vision was good; another gift of enhancement. It took her only another hour to reach Flores Bonita, just in time for dinner with Tio Manoel.

She'd been so eager to see him that she'd never once looked back, never noticed the two men who had begun following her up the path. They were far, far behind by now. But they knew where she was going, and they had plenty of time.

#### IV.

*Outside Cristina's home, that same evening*

The bath must be wonderful for her. Vitor agonizes as he sees the hot water – it must be boiling hot – slip over Cristina’s olive skin as she pours it from cupped hands over her shoulders. The steam rises and surrounds her breasts as she enjoys the very thing that he can’t have.

The closeness he desires with her seems so far away now, even as the steam clears. He watches from a perch in a tree outside her open second story window. He can smell her. If he focuses hard enough, he imagines he can even *feel* her. She turns her head for a moment. Does she know she’s being watched? Does she want him to?



No such luck. His flush of desire becomes a flush of anger, and he remembers how he lost her.

*Three years earlier, at General Command*

Everything was perfect before those Velorians – the major and then the Protector – came and mucked everything up for them. They offered her a chance

at power, and she took it. Vitor pleaded that they be together. He begged to join her, but they had sternly turned him away. *Not a latent*, Cher'ee had told him. *Not qualified*, Major Kim'Vallara had confirmed. Cristina hadn't even looked back. Vitor seethed every time he thought of that bastard taking her away.

Though she was here, though she wandered the compound and saw him every day, she was taken – and by another woman! He'd tried to convince her too; and when she too rejected him it was more than he could bear. They were meant to be together and if he couldn't have her, then no one would. Surely a shot through the eye would kill her. They can't be invulnerable everywhere.

That day was sweltering and the air was thick. Males all over the compound could smell the sweet nectar of the Enhanced. She merely looked at him. The pistol was wavering in front her face, beneath her notice, or her care. She was so smug, so superior!

“Estás aqui, vais comer!” he shouted at her. *You are here and you're going to eat*. Lead, he meant.

But she only grinned at him calmly after the first shot. The bullet glanced off her cheek. Her hair flipped from her face and she smiled at him while rubbing away the smudge. The bitch was laughing. She was laughing at him.

He remembers the calm that came over him. The same calm that takes you when you're about to shoot a man. He'd done it before. The pressure gave on the trigger. Smoke kicked from the barrel covering her face. He dropped his pistol arm and began to shake. She was still standing.

She was still alive. She rubbed the water from her eye and her vision cleared. He could see it was irritated. He could see she was irritated. Cristina hadn't any pity left. Without a word, she turned her back on him. He couldn't hurt her anymore. And she didn't even report him, didn't get him into trouble with the major. That might have hurt *him* worst of all.

### *Outside Cristina's home*

He's shaking in the here-and-now. A snapping branch has brought him back to the present. He sees her wrapping a towel around her. His attention is diverted to the ground where a branch splinters against the dirt. *She's gone*. A high-pitched "zip" sound echoes the area.

"Merda, merda, merda!" he whispers anxiously. He begins to scramble for the trunk a few feet away. Time to get down. Time to go before something bad happens.

"Who's that monkeying around in my tree?" she asks. As if she doesn't know. She knows exactly who it is. Vitor stops. as if he might still get away with it. He watches her. Cristina sighs. Her towel is gone. There are little smoldering pieces of it lying about her and in a trail leading around to the front of her hooch. He watches her stride over to the trunk and place her hand against it.

"I'm only going to ask nicely once, Vitor."

He closes his eyes, hoping she'll just go away. *Sit still*, he thinks.

"Have it your way." He pops his eyes open. Her fingers curl into the flesh of the tree. She looks up once more at her prey. Vitor feels his world begin to crumble. The branch he rests on shakes him uncontrollably. Leaves rustle loudly

about him, yet he feels no wind. The branch kicks him high enough to flip him around. He reaches for another life-saving branch, latching onto it with both arms. His feet still dangle meters above the ground. She could come get him, but this is much more fun.

Cristina steps closer to the trunk and waves her arm back and forth. The thick, woody trunk leans over nearly coming out at its roots before returning only to lean the other direction. She taunts him as he is tossed around much like leaf himself, a big Recife leaf. He grasps with the last of his strength and is finally tossed clear of the branches into the field below. There is sky and then ground. A pain shoots through his leg, yet he is alive and thankful for that much before he passes out.

“This is getting old, Vitor. It ends tonight.” Cristina raises him up to the moonlight and glares at her prize in disgust.

## V

Romana had to cut short her visit to Tio Manoel. It wasn't because of anything he did. If anything, it was for his own safety.

Flores Bonitas was a quiet village of small farms and small enterprises. The road there wasn't passable for powered vehicles, but that didn't matter: the village had the river. Now that the War of Independence was over, Manoel had prospered in his sale of orchids downstream to Santo Antônio.

Tio Manoel was constantly experimenting with new breeds.



“I have a surprise for you,” he told Romana when she looked him up at the greenhouse. She knew better than to look for him at home this time of day.

What he had to show her seemed pretty typical at first – purple against yellow. But then she saw that the purple patches weren’t just patches, but took the form of the emblem of the Enlightenment.

“But how?” she asked.

“Magic.”

“I mean, really.”

“A chance mutation, in just one planting. It will take a lot of work to reproduce it, make it breed true. Years, most likely. I’ve sent to the capital for genetic tailoring equipment.”

“But that will cost a fortune.”

“I’m making a fortune now. Why let it sit in a bank?”

“I suppose you’re calling this new breed the Cheree.”

Cher’ee was the Velorian Protector who had helped liberate Nova Recife – mainly through the Enhancement of natives like herself.

“Of course not,” said Manoel, a trifle irritated. “I’m calling it the Romana.”

“You shouldn’t have,” she said, but Manoel could tell that she was fishing for a compliment.

“You’re as good as any Velorian. You’re here. And more to the point, you are my beloved niece.”

Manoel was childless himself. His wife had suffered two miscarriages, then died in childbirth, along with the child. He’d never married again. Romana had

never asked why; it was something they always passed over in silence. So she didn't bring it up now – any more than the deaths of her own parents and siblings when their truck had run off the road near Sul dos Rápidos. She'd been in her teens then and Manoel, newly widowed, had taken her in. In shared tragedy, they had somehow found strength.

They spent dinner talking about her recent training – she could talk about that, but anything to do with assignments was strictly off limits. Except for the business about the bridge.

Romana was abed in the spare room, ready for a night's sleep – enhancees still needed that, it seemed; at least she did – when she heard a sound at the door. She assumed it was her uncle, returning from the greenhouse. But then came that feeling of popcorn against her body. The sound of the firing was muffled; her assailants were using silencers. But there was no doubt that somebody was trying to kill her. The bullets were turning the bed into shreds of padding and feathers.

She leaped out of bed and caught her assailants at the door: two rough-looking men she'd never seen before. Robbers, most likely, stupid men who thought Tio Manoel kept a lot of cash at home. But they might be something more, and she couldn't take a chance. From the smell she knew they had already wet their pants when they realized what kind of woman they were dealing with. She broke their necks without hesitation, picked them up and carried them out to the river – and dumped them. The last thing Manoel needed was dead bodies on his property.

It was late. No one saw her going, but Manoel saw her coming back.

“Trouble,” she told him, and gave a quick explanation. She described the men as best she could.

“I don’t think they could have been from here,” he said. “But I’d have had to see them to be sure.”

“I have to go now,” she said. “Don’t tell anyone I was here.”

“Someone might have seen you. Besides those *salteadores*.”

“Just the same, don’t tell anyone.”



When Cristina and Romana met Xuxa again, they weren't in uniform, skivvies or otherwise. Neither was their *líder*: she was naked but for a cache-sex and imported mirrorshades that made her look like some *escravo da moda*, aping the latest fashions in Santo Antônio without even knowing that they'd ceased to be fashionable on any other world for decades.

She seated herself before Cristina and Romana on the lawn behind an estate house, the kind that never went out of fashion. This was it; this was where

they'd work out the final details before heading into the back country. But Romana wanted to get one thing out of the way first.

"*Nós podemos ter um problema,*" she said, and explained the incident at the village. "I couldn't take a chance," she said.

"You did the right thing," Xuxa reassured her. "If they were Fernandistas, they probably never had a chance to report to anyone what they were up to. If not... robbers are no loss. We have to be practical about these matters."

Cristina looked embarrassed.

Xuxa saw the look.

"It's nothing," the *lider* assured her. "You did the right thing too, reporting Vitor to General Command after you dumped him at the barracks. He'll get his walking papers, you can be sure of that. It's a shame, because he was really good at comms. But he'll find another job and, hopefully, another woman, I think your problem is taken care of."

Xuxa paused a moment.

"Taking care of Fernandes won't be as easy. You've got to find out about him and his base of operations without him or his people finding out about you. Then you'll have to come back to report to me. You can't afford to be caught with comlinks, and we can't be sure of the security of electronic communications in any case. Other forms of contact are even riskier.

"You'll take the bus to Minas Oramas. You'll dress like *caboclinhas*, you'll talk like *caboclinhas*, you'll act like *caboclinhas*. You won't do anything you couldn't

have before Enhancement. You'll jump at the sound of gunfire, run and hide if there's another raid.

"The rest of the time, you'll go about your jobs, hopefully at a restaurant or bar; that's the best kind of place to be seen and heard. You'll find the Labor Registry very helpful in that regard, but not in any other regard. Make up your own cover stories for being there; I've already arranged the cover stories for your not being *here*."

Again she paused for a moment.

"Don't lay it on too thick. Make it convincing. You'll complain about the government, – but not too obviously; just work it in here and there where it comes up naturally. You'll dangle the bait, and hope somebody takes it. Only then can you express sympathy for the rebels. And from there... find out as much as you can and get home."

"But if there's a real emergency?" Romana objected. "Something that changes all our plans? We need a way to alert you, without coming all the way back here. Some code word, perhaps."

"Any suggestions?"

Romana remembered her training session, and the attack on her last night.

"How about Popcorn? People will think it just refers to a party or something."

"Well, you'll be party girls. If it *is* a real emergency, you'll need to make it sound like something else, talking on a public phone. Be ready with some idle conversation that just happens to include how much you love our special

popcorn. But it will take a while for any of the rest of us to get there, and you'll have to hold the fort until then."

And so began what was later called Operation Popcorn.

## VII

Romana's bus, like others making the runs to Minas Oramas, had its windows plated over, the only view outside being through narrow slits – except, of course, for the windshield, which had been fitted on the driver's side with bulletproof glass.

A couple of militiamen rode shotgun – machine gun, actually – in a steel enclosure on top. But since the bus wasn't considered a vital resource, that was all the protection it got. There weren't any Legionnaires on board – not that the driver or the militiamen or the other passengers knew about.

Romana sat up front, Cristina in the rear. They had boarded separately, never looking at one another, never giving any hint that they knew each other. It was going to be hard enough on the road, but harder when they finally reached their destination – not only to avoid each other's company but to avoid giving any hint that they were enhanced. If the bus were attacked, they react in panic, even play dead if they had to.

Not that such an attack was likely, Romana thought. The creaky alcohol-powered vehicle wasn't worth attacking. No cargo, except whatever personal possessions the passengers had on them or stashed in the luggage bin. Nobody

important on board; anyone of any importance traveled with convoys, or flew in one of the few planes still available.

The Fernandistas hadn't shown any sign of anti-aircraft capabilities; without off-world sources of supply, they weren't likely to. But they might attack remote airstrips. That was why flights were never scheduled; a roll of the dice decided when a plane would take off, and pilots observed radio silence until just before landing – often overshooting their destinations or taking long detours to confuse spotters.

As the bus came around a bend on the Great Western Road a couple of dozen miles beyond the first pass, Romana could see a couple of men standing in its path. They were rough looking. Could be out for a lift, could be out for trouble.

They didn't move when the driver sounded his horn, so he slowed down. But as the bus neared a stop, there was the sound of gunfire. Not from the men in the road, but from the militiamen up top. They didn't aim at the men, though; just sprayed the road in front of them. The men scattered, shouting curses.

“Cachorros feios,” muttered one of the other passengers as the bus started up again. Only ugly dogs, not salteadores. That was probably about the size of it; they might have been lookouts for ordinary highwaymen, but they looked too scruffy to be Fernandistas.

The road went ever on, passing through scrubby plains interrupted by a few fertile lowlands where sugar plantations supplied a regional ethanol plant. There hadn't been any attacks on the plant, but perhaps that was only because the



Fernandistas knew they'd need it themselves if they ever achieved power – and the replacement parts would be hard to find.

There were two stops for nightly sleepovers. The driver and the shotguns had sleeping bags. Passengers had to find the best patch of ground and hope the chiggers didn't find them. Romana and Cristina didn't have to worry about the chiggers or the rough ground, but they weren't about to advertise that fact. When the horn sounded in the morning, they contrived to look as sore and dispirited as the other reboarding passengers.



Through Cobra Pass, then down a serpentine stretch leading to the fertile plains of Campo Velho. The Grande Estrada was better maintained, but it was also dangerous – a perfect place to trap a convoy. The government had learned

that the hard way, and now it had its own troops dug in on both sides, with remote trip wires in the neighboring hills that would, everyone hoped, catch any infiltrators.

It worked. The Fernandistas were conspicuously absent at the pass, and the rest of the way to Minas Oramas.

Not that it helps *us*, Romana thought.

## VIII

*A lot of consideration I got... yeah a lot... don't think you're not expendable, no... Fucking Velorian major never once said I was doing a good job... all my hard work... nobody ever stuck up for me... those Legionnaires were all treated special. Cristina was treated special. Got screwed just for wanting to screw her. Yeah, but they don't even know I was screwing them. They'll get theirs, all of them. When the Comandante saves up enough gold, even those Legion freaks will get it. Yeah, and when they get it, they'll know they got it from Vitor Santos. They'll be sorry then. She'll be sorry.*

## Interlogue

They didn't rate a courier ship, or even an official send-off. That's how it was with James and Bidu. Their departure from Velor was as unheralded as their arrival three years before had been celebrated.

They were exiles now, and they had chosen Novo Recife as their planet of exile. It was Bidu's homeworld, after all, and they had promised to return there

one day. It was just that they had expected to return in triumph rather than disgrace.

“I understand,” James Kim’Vallara – no longer a colonel, no longer anything – had told his mother after the verdict came down. “Bidu’s homesick, anyway. We’d already planned to visit there. It’s just going to be a longer visit now.”

Bidu had invited Naomi to come see them on Novo Recife one day, after the scandal over the Binkley’s World mission had blown over. But that wasn’t likely to happen any time soon. As the wife of Sigurd Utvandrer, the prime minister, she had to keep her distance from her errant son and his wife.

It would be a slow and tiresome journey aboard the *Leonid Gorbovsky*, one of Boris Eristratov’s ships – originally built for the project to relocate Domyrans to their new world. Eristratov had beaten the Scalantrans in a bid for the Novo Recife route, thanks to his own connections. Politics made strange bedfellows, even on Velor.

But Eristratov didn’t want to advertise the presence of the Kim’Vallaras on his ship. They were listed as Jean and Marie Lofficier, former Scalantran adopts who had left their former employer for Xemissa Galactica – the trading company created by Eristratov, himself a former adopt, and named for his wife.

“Look on the bright side,” Boris told them. “The courier ship will be bringing them a Protector. By the time you reach home, there’ll be some new recruits for the Legion. Velor’s accepted the principle, even if it’s disowned the principal.”

“We’ll find things to do along the way,” James said. Bidu winked.

## IX

It was Nanda Cardoso at the Labor Registry who had steered Romana – calling herself Natalia Rocha – to a job as a bartender at the Taverna Desprezível, the sort of place for loose talk by people with loose lips... once they'd had a few.

"You're in luck, Senhorita Rocha," Nanda told her, after checking out her papers – which looked like the real thing, having been issued by the real authorities. "The girl who had that job before just won the lottery. She couldn't wait to get out of here. Why you're so eager to get into here I can't imagine."

"I'm not eager, just desperate," Romana said. "*Sem eira, nem beira.*"

She launched into carefully-rehearsed sob story about having lost her land and the roof over her head when the new government had accused her husband of being with the Fernandistas and confiscated the family farm.

"He used to beat me, and when the government people came for him, he thought I'd informed on him. He swore he'd kill me, and then he broke out of jail somehow and I spent about all the money I had to take the bus as far as it would go."

"Well, you'll have a roof over your head now," Nanda assured her. "And Pinto's a pretty decent guy to work for even if he runs a dive. He already gets his jollies from the barmaids, so you can fend him off – *if* you bone up on the local drinks and how to mix them. He'll want to keep you as a bartender and keep his hands off you."

“I can pick it up fast, I swear.”

“I hope so. Good luck. Funny thing, though...”

“What?”

“The cook over at Três Irmãos just won the lottery, too. He’s heading back East. So the Barbosa brothers are going to be posting their job here, I expect.”

As *expected*, Romana thought. Just a couple of days later, she spotted Cristina headed for the restaurant. She shook her head, as if from a nervous tic, That was the sign for “Nothing yet.” A nod would mean one of them was onto something.

Her nervous tic persisted for days, and then weeks.

The work at the Taverna Desprezível wasn’t that hard. The most popular drink in Minas Oramas, as everywhere, was cachaça, distilled from sugar cane. Its low price made it the beverage most consumed by poorer people; for many, the only fun time was to drink a bottle over the weekend to forget their troubles.

But at the tavern, the miners usually wanted Caipirinha. Romana would cut a lemon in slices; put the slices and sugar in a glass; smash them together; add the cachaça, and mix it all lightly. It went down much easier than straight cachaça. After a few days, she could practically do it blindfolded.

She’d asked about house specialties at the outset.

“There aren’t any,” quipped Jânio Pinto, the owner. “Unless you count Tânia and Leila. And I save them for important customers. Like the inspectors.”

Romana came up with some just the same but, as she herself said, it was best to leave some of the ingredients unmentioned.

None of the customers bothered her. That was a surprise, even though Jânio had put the word out that she was off limits as soon as she'd proven herself. Before that, they must have assumed he had first dibs. Maybe he'd spread her sob story, the same one she'd told Nanda. Some of the looks she got actually seemed sympathetic.

There was this one man, tall and lean rather handsome, who looked at her every night but never said anything when she served him but "Muito obrigado." He didn't seem very sociable – the other customers, mostly miners, were crude and raucous in their conversation, but at least they talked with each other.

But this man – not exactly creepy, but certainly strange. She asked Jânio about him one night.

"I heard he's the new mine inspector," he said. "He showed up about six weeks ago. I don't even know his name, let alone whether he knows his job. But as long as he pays his tab here, *não tô nem aí*.

Maybe it didn't matter to him, but it mattered to her...

X

"Damos no couro?"

Cristina had lost count of the number of propositions she'd fielded since coming to work as a cook at the Três Irmãos restaurant. *Beat the leather*, sure. Most of the men who came in here were dirty and greasy from their work in the mines – and yet they expected women to fall all over them.

This latest would-be bed partner might have been promising, if she'd been inclined that way. He'd even introduced himself: Oscar Carvalho, a foreman at

the mill where they refined copper and turned it into wire for the power grid back East. But she couldn't take any offers, even appealing ones. If a man even tried to squeeze her breasts, let alone penetrate her...

“De jeito nenhum,” she told him. *No way.*

“Por favor?” he persisted.

“Absolutamente!”

That should have ended it, but the man actually apologized, and went on to praise her economy variation on Bolo Salgado, a beef casserole popular in Santo Antônio. In the capital, people had plenty of money to spend at restaurants.

One of the other favorites of the capital, caldeirada – seafood stew with octopus cooked with various spices and coconut milk – wasn't practical here. Forget about the octopus; the Oramas river here was too polluted by runoff from mine tailings to support freshwater fish, and it would have simply been too costly to truck in fish from further east – there wasn't any infrastructure of refrigerated transport and storage. But the miners worked hard enough to require heartier than various white and brown bean dishes. And for some reason they turned up their noses at buchada – goat stew.

The thing about beef was that it didn't really cost that much if you used all of it – and that really meant *all*. All mixed up, too: flanks, rumps, loins, hocks, whatever; plus heart, liver and other organs. Even offal.

People in Santo Antônio would have blanched at that, and surely lost their appetites if they'd seen what went on in the kitchen at the Três Irmãos. But Luana Azevedo, as she was known here, was a mistress of disguise in more ways than one, skillfully blending all the meat, tomatoes, peppers, onions and local spices in just the right combination.

Best of all, she could prepare it in large batches for when traffic was heavy. The three Barbosa brothers who ran the place – Paulo, Carlos and Felipe – appreciated her work. So, apparently, did the miners – at least, as long as there was plenty of beer to wash it down. But she hadn't actually had anyone praise her cooking to her face.

She thanked Oscar, who went into the classic what's-a-nice-girl-like-you-doing-in-a-place-like-this routine. She talked vaguely of having lost her job back in the capital when she wouldn't put out for some official who had friends who were also officials – “Você sabe a historia.”

Oscar nodded. He knew the story. They were all bastards, the people running the country, he said. They didn't really understand the needs of the people.

Cristina's ears pricked up. She'd been working here a month, and hadn't gotten a nibble. Neither had Romana, the last time they'd had a chance to exchange cryptic words while pretending to have bumped into each other by sheer chance.

It had all been uphill from Campo Velho to Minas Oramas on that rickety bus, and all downhill since then as far as the mission was concerned. She'd



heard about more Fernandista attacks, but they were all further east. The only fighting here was when the miners drank too much and started a ruckus and one of the brothers had to call policia. Was the mission a waste of time? But now there was a nibble. Perhaps it would turn into a bite. A shame, because Oscar seemed to be a nice guy – even hunted game in his spare time for the Barbosas.

She made a point of taking a break, walking Oscar to the door, and telling him that she'd have a special of macaxeira com charque – cassava with beef jerky – the next evening. And for dessert, souza leão, banana cake topped with cinnamon and sugar.

“Maybe we can talk again,” she said as she saw him out.

But then she saw something else that made her duck back inside. *Someone* else.

It was Vitor! What the hell was *he* doing here?

Should she tell Romana?

Of course... But she'd have to be careful about it. Nobody here knew that they knew each other, and they both wanted to keep it that way. She'd have to signal her partner on the sly.

## XI

Vitor isn't doing anything in Minas Oramas after getting off the bus except getting off the beaten track. He doesn't look around, doesn't do anything to attract attention to himself. He simply sets off on foot, as if he knows where he is going, as indeed he does.

Only he isn't on his way to visit friends or relations at the mines, or at some back-country farm. He is on his way to meet the Comandante himself, João Fernandes. It hasn't been easy to arrange the visit, despite the fact that he has established his bona fides by slipping government radio codes to Fernandista agents at considerable risk to himself. Double agents are nothing new, on Nova Recife or anywhere else, and the *líder* has to know that.

*O dia da vingança está vindo*, he tells himself, and a wave of warmth spreads all over his body. The Fenandista cause means less to him than his own private fantasies of vengeance. His cock hardens as he imagines Cristina bound in gold as he rapes her. He imagines all her kind brought low. The trick is to bring them all together at one time and one place, and he knows just how to do it.

He can hardly wait to tell Fernandes as he enters the cavern behind a waterfall that leads to the headquarters of the rebellion.



## XII

Cristina had managed to slip word to Romana while pretending to be just talking about the weather in a chance encounter – it had been hot of late.

“Estará mais fresco apôs a meia-noite,” she said, then whispered, “Sua casinha.”

The privy in back of the Taverna Desprezível stank. Minas Oramas was not yet blessed with a sewerage system. Pinto put up with a lot, but he didn’t put up with people just stepping outside to pee in the street – once he’d even come out and frog-marched an offender to the facility.

After midnight was late enough for the miners and other patrons to have stumbled home. The streets were deserted, That was the whole point. But

Romana took a quick look around anyway before slipping behind the tavern.

Cristina was already there, a worried look on her face.

“I saw Vitor tonight,” she said.

“Are you sure?”

“How could I forget him, *o vândalo*.”

“Did he see you? Could he have been looking for you?”

“How could he have known?”

“Xuxa would never...”

“It must be just coincidence. But if he’s here to stay, we’ve got a problem.

We can’t stay off the streets just to avoid running into him.”

They had been talking in low voices, and were startled to hear another voice, not at all low.

“Vocês tem certamente um problema.”

They turned to see a man a few paces away. He must have been hiding behind the casinha.

*The man in the bar*, Romana thought. She hadn’t mentioned him to Cristina.

*What can he be doing here?*

“Policia Geral!” he announced, flashing a badge. “Levante suas mãos!”

*The planetary police*, not the local *bobinas*. And he was armed with a needler –standard issue for the global force. With a silencer. That meant undercover.

Romana raised her hands, hoping they could talk their way out of this – whatever “this” was. She glanced at Cristina, who was raising hers more reluctantly.

“Um conchavo!” the man said angrily. “Meretrizes também, nenhuma dúvida! Um bom flagrante!”

Conspirators, he was calling them. Even whores. *He thinks he’s caught a couple of Fernandistas*, Romana realized.

“Quadrilheiro!” Cristina spat. Being called a whore must have really pissed her off.

It was exactly the wrong thing to say. Under the Aureans, quadrilheiros had been enforcers for the regime, the epithet having originated on Earth for posses who pursued runaway slaves.

“Luana!” Romana pleaded.

“Silêncio!” the man shouted. “Both of you!”

“This is all a mistake,” Romana said, trying to salvage the situation.

“No mistake. You’d better tell me where the other Fernandistas are hiding.”

*Crunch time*, Romana thought. *We’ll have to come clean with him.*

“Nós estamos aqui para caçar Fernandes,” Romana pleaded.

“Do you take me for an *idiota*?” he said, his anger rising. “Two young women out to catch him instead serving his men as *espões*? You’d better talk, and talk fast.”

“Nós não sabemos de nada,” Cristina protested.

“Wrong answer,” he barked. Then he aimed his weapon.

“This is for my brother and his wife, murdered by your salteadores!”

He fired at Cristina, then shifted his aim to Romana. “Maybe you’ll be more —”

The flechette was hanging from Cristina’s dress, right over her heart, but she was still standing and in no apparent pain.

She made a point of pulling the barbed missile out, tearing the fabric while calling attention to the awesome breast beneath it.

First shock, then understanding, showed on the policeman’s face.

“Vocês são realçadas!”

“Obviamente,” said Romana, deciding that she had better take charge of things. “Please forgive our brashness. My partner had a scare tonight.”

The policeman looked confused. “What could she possibly be afraid of?”

“A man I knew back home,” Cristina said, somewhat abashedly. “He was making a lot of trouble there. I saw him outside the Três Irmãos. I was afraid he might see us and expose us. I thought you might be working for him, or even for...”

“What I want to know is why the Policia Geral haven’t been informed about you and your mission here. I assume our missions are the same.”

“Não confie em ninguém,” Romana said. “That’s what’s Xuxa told us. We’re your allies, but we answer only to ourselves.”

“Not even Military Intelligence?”

“They may have been infiltrated,” Romana said. “All we know for sure is that the Fernandistas are getting information about the convoys. So this is being kept strictly a Legion operation.”

“Not that MI shares anything with us,” the policeman complained. “A mão esquerda não sabe o que a direita faz. They don’t trust us, either, any more than your Legion does.”

*Time to reach out,* Romana thought.

“But we can trust *you*,” she said. “You’ve just proved it.”

“By trying to kill you?” the policeman said, looking rather bemused. “You seem to be remarkably forgiving.”

Cristina blushed.

“Enhancement has its privileges as well as its powers,” she said. “We can afford to be forgiving, in circumstances like this, senhor...”

“Antônio Barros,” he said, putting away his needler and extending his hand.

“Cristina Medeiros.”

“Romana Novais.”

“Your dart didn’t even feel like popcorn,” Cristina added.

“Popcorn?” Barros asked. He looked bewildered.

“There’s no time for that now,” Romana cautioned her. And, turning to Barros, “We need to meet again at... a more secure location,” Romana said.

“I have quarters in company housing at the mill,” he said. “It’s pretty quiet there late at night. The hands will be sleeping it off.”

“Amanhã...à noite,” Romana agreed.

### XIII

Nobody noticed Cristina and Romana coming to Barros' place the next evening – and if they had, they would have put it down to a government official taking advantage of his perks to order a threesome.

Romana returned to her own pensão after they worked out the details of how they could communicate with each other. They also learned more about this man, a veteran of the Revolução himself, who had been ready to risk enemy fire in the crossing of the Rio Amado that never took place.

“Julio and I were in Santo Antônio to see off James and Bidu after the libertação.” He said. “We were drunk with happiness in those first days. Everything bad lay behind us and everything good lay before us. I'd already signed up for the new police force – a real police force, not like those Betan thugs and their toadies.”

“I was doing handstands where they'd parked one of their armored cars,” Romana recalled. “I know the feeling.”

“We thought Fernandes was the natural choice to lead the provisional government,” Barros continued. “Until those secret messages in the archives came out. He claimed they were forgeries, but they explained too much – about the amphibious assault that never happened. And then he disappeared. We thought it was just into obscurity. But then came the first attack – Julio had stayed with the Army, and he and his family were stationed at one of the old plantations...”



He paused for a moment. Cristina could see the pain in his eyes.

“That was when I decided I wanted to work undercover. I wanted to *find* them, and make them *pay*.”

When it was time for Romana to leave, he reached out to hug her, then thought better of it. “Adeus,” he said.

“You’ll be seeing her again,” Cristina said afterwards.

“Not the way I’d like to. You know how it is, with men like me and enhancees.”

“You’re nothing like Vitor,” she assured him. “And Romana’s... not exactly like me.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, she really likes men. She had a lot of fun after the libertação, with one of the men, but he was rotated out a year later.”

“Like Bidu,” Barros recalled. “Only she had her own man to go with her.”

“It doesn’t seem fair.”

“Neither does enhancement. Very few of us are Latents. But it’s a gift, and we know it, so we’re all ready to go where the Legion sends us. Novo Recife isn’t the only world with problems.”

She wondered what James and Bidu were up to, but Barros again brought her back to the here-and-now.

“This guy Vitor. What can you tell me about him?”

“He was stalking me.”

“He can’t have been any threat to you.”

“But he could be a threat to our operations. We work with the Army, even if we aren’t part of it, and we have to trust each other. I reported him to General Command, and they sacked him.”

“They didn’t court martial him?”

“He was a civilian. Worked in communications. He was doing a good job there; it’s a shame things turned out as they did.”

“Any question as to his loyalty?”

“He’d worked tirelessly for the Revolução, even volunteered to join the Legion – he thought he was in love with me. But he didn’t pass muster. Not his fault; he just wasn’t a Latent.”

“I’ve never understood about the Latents.”

“Me neither. Major Kim’Vallara theorized the genotype might have come down to some of us from the Dutch who ruled the Nordeste briefly, back on Earth. But nobody here can trace their ancestry far enough back to tell. And for all we know, the Galen may have been playing with the gene sets of other Earth peoples.”

“He can’t have been too happy about the Legion rejecting him, you rejecting him. Perhaps he was in communication with—”

“I don’t believe it. Whoever was leaking convoy schedules – it was before things came to a head with him.”

“Do you suspect anyone here?”

“Like we suspected *tu*?”

Barros raised his eyebrows. She had made a point of using the familiar singular.

“You’re not trying to make a play for me, are you? After what you said...”

“Far from it. But we *are* going to be comrades in arms.”

“As if Legionnaires *needed* arms. But about my question.”

“There’s this foreman at the mill—”

“He works with me. Playing a game. Like me. Like *vocês*.”

*Merda!* Cristina thought. *So much for that lead!* But she forebore complaining about it, saying only, “All detectives and no suspects.”

“Maybe we’re all on the wrong track. Everybody back East thinks Fernandes must be hiding out around here, because this was his home province. But he didn’t make any friends here as an Aurean servidor before he joined the Revolução. Work in the mines and the mill is always hard, but his gang made it harder. Just ask Oscar.”

“The Fernandistas never attack around here. But that could be just trying to throw people off their track.”

“They can’t have a military base near; that would be too big to overlook. But a small command center, perhaps, with good communications.”

“You’re thinking of Vitor again. That they’ve recruited him.”

“He might just be working somewhere. I’ll check with the Registry. But if he doesn’t show up there...”

“Then we may have a *traidor* on our hands.”

“And if we can catch him, we may have the whole liderança in our hands.”

“If you do find out something, get word to Romana, amanhã.”

“They’re used to seeing me at the Taverna. Nobody will notice small talk. Only it won’t really be small talk.”

“Exatamente.”

#### XIV

“Have you found anything to your liking?” Romana asked Barros when she brought him his first drink the next evening at the Taverna.

“Nada,” Barros said. It was the first time he’d spoken to her there. “Exceto tu.”

It sounded like a come-on, but she knew what it was all about: no record of Vitor at the Labor Registry.

“Anything doing at the mine?” she said, as if she were trying to change the subject, when she was actually sticking to it.

“Nada de novo.”

No sign of Vitor there, or around town, based on Cristina’s description. Cristina had managed to brief her on the run about Barros trying to run him down.

Nobody else paid any attention to their conversation, and there was nothing to add to it – wouldn’t be, unless Barros came up with another lead.

Jânio wasn’t there that night; he’d left word that he was out of town dealing with a supplier. She’d never known him to leave before, but what did she know? He looked happy when he returned; must have cut a good deal...

Romana didn't see Barros again for several days, but she kept up her role; people knew she had a grudge against the authorities, but the miners and mill workers didn't seem interested – some were even hostile.

“Didn't you hear the news?” a burly man asked one night. “They attacked another convoy out past Campo Velho. Killed the drivers. I knew one of them, Marco Amado. Left a wife and three kids.”

“Meus pesames,” she said – sorry – and offered him a refill.

The burly man came close to throwing the drink in her face, but Jânio happened to be nearby and managed to calm him down. Things were quiet for a few moments, and then the crowd at the bar went back to talking about... whatever they'd been talking about before. Romana tuned them out; listening wasn't her job.

The next day, when she reported for work, Jânio made a show of taking an interest in her. The day after that, he told her he had a surprise for her. It was a dress, a very revealing dress. Offworld design, obviamente. She tried to brush him off, but he was insistent. He even wanted her to get rid of the ponytail and let her hair down.

“It's just for me,” he said. “You don't have to wear it on the job.”

So she put it on. Just for him.

She knew she looked ravishing.



“I love it,” he said. “Any man would.”

Yet he didn’t make a move on her.

*Is he getting tired of Tânia and Leila?* she wondered. But she didn’t think it was a good idea to bring that up. She had to remain in his good graces, and yet she couldn’t encourage him too much.

“You could be very useful to us,” he said now. “And settle some old scores.”

Romana tried to conceal her shock. It was *Jânio*. It had been *Jânio* all along.

“Come with me,” he continued. “You’ll meet the Comandante himself. I’ve told him about you.”

“Right now?”

“I’ve promised him.”

“But—”

*I've got to tell Cristi and Tônio.*

“O que você tem?” Jânio asked.

“Nothing's the matter. I'm just... not dressed for it.”

“But you are. That's why I brought the dress. You'll be a real hit.”

*If I don't go, I may blow this whole operation.*

“Not to worry; you can wear a casaco over it on the way.”

*Anyway, what could go wrong? They're only human.*

“I've been waiting for a chance like this.”

*The literal truth!*

“Vamos!”

And so they went.

It was clear out, the stars looking down over the nearly deserted streets of Minas Oramas. Jânio had brought a lantern, and Romana followed him although she could see better than him.

Their path took them past Cristina's lodgings, and Romana hesitated a moment.

*No, she told herself. I can't risk it.*

Jânio led her past the mill, the glow of the copper cauldrons showing through the shabby windows – they didn't do any pours this late, but they weren't about to let the molten copper solidify. Then around the mine, a huge crater which she could see in all its ugliness as if it were day.

The road petered out after that, but Jânio found a path through the forest beyond. It wasn't marked, and the path wasn't beaten – this part of the route she could never have found for herself. They climbed a steep slope, zigzagging around the trees, and came upon a small stream: a tributary of the river that supplied the town, and the mine and the mill – which in turn supplied waste chemicals to the river.

There was a sound of falling water ahead.

## XV

Vitor can't believe his eyes.

Then he can't believe his luck.

He's just taking a break from work, heading to the exit for some fresh air, when he sees Jânio bringing Romana in. The sentries wave them past; they know Jânio. But it's obvious that neither they nor he know Romana. She must have wormed her way into his confidence somehow. Vitor knows he has to act fast. Seconds count.

"A rêde!" he shouts "A rêde!"

The sentries don't know why he wants them to drop the gold mesh net over the two visitors, but Vitor's tone of voice convinces them. One of them pulls the cord to release the net. Romana is quickly entangled; so is Jânio, but Vitor figures he deserves it for being taken in.

The other sentry sounds an alarm to alert the rest of the cavern. Meanwhile, the sentries have piled on to Romana, wrapping the mesh around her tightly.



They know the drill; the Fernandistas have always prepared for the possibility that the dreaded Legion might find this place.

Has Romana told anyone else? Vitor hopes not, and yet he hopes... he wishes it were Cristina caught in the net, later to be shackled in gold. He imagines having his way with her at last.

But if not... Romana will do.

## XVI

It was that time of the year. The cabeças de pênis were ejaculating, their spores spreading across the swamp. They grew in profusion here; that was why the place was called the Pântano dos Pênisés – Penis Swamp.

Not that Oscar Carvalho cared about that. He was out hunting patofalsos, which were native to Novo Recife but were said to resemble ducks back on Earth. He didn't have any idea whether that was true and, to the best of his knowledge, nobody else on the planet did, either.

The clumps of cabeças offered good cover, but the clouds of spores were irritating; Oscar had to breathe through a damp mask to avoid sneezing. That, and the fact that he was out at the crack of dawn, doubtless accounted for the fact that he didn't have any competition here. He should be able to bag a good haul for the Três Irmãos.

It meant extra income, and a chance to enjoy the fresh air – he'd enjoy it more once he'd made his haul and could take off his mask for the walk back to town – even if it meant extra work. He was still a full-timer at the mill, a noisy,

smelly place even for a foreman like him, let alone the hands – this was just one of his off-shift days. He'd have to enjoy it while he could.

Oscar noted passingly that the business ends of the tall plants no longer looked like penises after the heads exploded – as limp as old men's dicks. There was open water beyond, and a flock of patofalsos was swimming towards him out of the morning mist. The spotted kind instead of the striped, with beaks as bright red as the patterned dots on their backs. They fed mostly on floating plants, but their lightning-fast tongues could snatch insects on the fly as well as on the water...

*Steady*, he thought as he brought his rifle to bear. You had to be patient, wait for just the right moment. But at that very right moment, as the birds were coming into easy range, there came the sound of a motor in the distance. The patofalsos took to the air, chittering in alarm.

*Damn!*

The source of the noise soon came into view through the mist: a frescão, one of the speed boats driven by aerial propellers that were used for fast transportation across marshlands. The first thing Oscar wondered was why it was out so early. The second thing he wondered as it came closer was why it was operated by Jânio Pinto, whom he recognized as the owner of the Taverna Desprezível back in town. The third thing he wondered was....

*Fogueteiros?* There was only one use for rocket launchers, and it had nothing to do with liquor. Oscar forgot about the patofalsos, but he remembered his rifle. He had a more urgent use for it now. Jânio hadn't spotted him yet, his

craft was about to pass by diagonally; and he was looking straight ahead. Oscar knew he had only seconds to act. Shoot Jânio? No; he'd be needed for questioning. Only one right thing to do.

His rifle barked three times as he shot at the boat's propeller. There were sounds of tortured metal as blades bent out of shape by the bullets tore into the housing. The frescão slewed as Jânio lost control, caught by surprise. But his surprise could last only moments.

*"Freeze!"* he yelled. "Stop the boat!"

Jânio looked his way, wide-eyed with recognition, then made a move – doubtless to find a gun, instead of stopping the boat. But he lost his balance and fell down behind the prow. He might still be looking, though.

"Don't make any false moves. I still have more bullets."

But the boat's momentum was carrying it past Oscar, and he had to slog through the shallows on his side of the cabeças to keep up. Jânio finally cut the motor; he must be scared. Oscar kept an eye on the boat through the reeds, and as it slowed to a stop, he stepped through, weapon at the ready.

Jânio was squatting against the port side of the frescão, hands over the side to show he was unarmed.

"Saia," Oscar told him. "Venha aqui."

Jânio did as he was told, and approached with palms outstretched. The water by the boat was three feet deep, and as Jânio sloshed his way towards him, Oscar had a moment to shift the rifle to his left hand and use his right to retrieve a roll of wire he'd intended using to tie up the patofalsos by their feet. It

was risky, but he judged that if there'd been any fight in the man, it had gone out of him. And indeed, Jânio meekly allowed him to tie his arms behind his back.

“Não é meu dia de sorte,” the man muttered.

“My lucky day, though,” Oscar said. “Just not the kind I'd expected. Funny how things work out.”

“Bad luck for me and my side.” Jânio muttered. “Good luck for you and yours – no need to ask which *that* is. But also bad luck for one of your Legião meninas.”

And so the story came out. Jânio's luck had actually turned bad the night before, when he'd unwittingly led a Legionnaire to the Comandante's headquarters, thinking she was a new recruit. If a Fernandista agent who'd known her from before hadn't sounded the alarm and had a gold net dropped on her, it would have been all up. She'd worked at his bar; Natália, she'd called herself, but...

*Romana*, Oscar filled in, before Jânio spoke her cover name, Natalia.

Delivering the fogueteiros had been a punishment detail – that sort of work was usually assigned to ordinary grunts. He was supposed to meet a man with a carroça de carga, who'd hide them under a bunch of melons and distribute them to Fernandista guerrillas along the Grande Estrada while pretending to be trucking produce.

“Onde é a entrada?” Oscar demanded.

“Qual?” Jânio responded.

More than one?

*It always pays to have a back door*, Oscar realized, and he was soon apprised that Fernandes had several. The main access, the one Jânio had used this morning, was through a hidden trap door on an island that concealed a levandor large enough to bring the frescao to the surface. It was for smuggling weapons and trainees. But there were emergency exits concealed beneath vegetation on both sides of the mountain.

The Fernandistas had started with a natural cave and its natural entrance behind the waterfall, which was still used for couriers; but their military engineers, veterans of the Aurean satrapy, had built the rest. Now they had shops producing everything from rockets and road bombs to pirahna mix, ordnance experts to train guerreiros in their use, and detailed maps for planning attacks, often based on tips about movements of government forces from informers.

Oscar felt as if he'd struck a gold mine. But a moment's reflection told him that it wasn't going to be easy getting into the complex. There were a few hundred men there, but they were heavily-armed and, unlike Jânio, fiercely loyal.

*Esta vai ser uma grande operação*. They'd have to call in a lot of troops. But right now, he couldn't call in *anybody*. He hadn't brought a radio; too bulky, and no reason for it: why call the Barbosas about the patofalsos? Just deliver them in time for dinner! If only they had pocket phone service here, but that was available only in Santo António and a few other population centers. He cursed himself, nevertheless, knowing he'd have to walk his prisoner all the way back to town to deliver him to Barros.

“If you hadn’t talked too much, you might still be worth something,” he warned Jânio. “Any false move is going to be your last.”

Jânio went along meekly ahead of him, stumbling a bit here and there but not falling. Oscar was already thinking ahead. They were both well known in Minas Oramas, and it would be hard to explain the situation to people in the street – especially the fact that he wouldn’t be taking his prisoner to the local police station.

But chance was with him, since both he and the Policia Geral agent he covertly reported to were officially on the payroll of the mill – and the mill owners and workers had a thing about the traffic in pilfered or hijacked copper wire, which went far beyond the local jurisdiction.

“Eu peguei ele tentando vender fios roubados,” he told the townspeople as he headed down the main drag. “Estou levando-o ao inspetor.”

They looked curiously at him and Jânio, and he heard a couple muttering about how shocking it was that a bar owner should be involved in black market copper. But that was all. They knew how hard it was to produce enough wire to meet the needs of the rural electrification program, and thefts and hijackings made it worse because the wire never seemed to turn up being put to any legitimate use.

When they arrived at the inspector’s tiny office, Oscar found that Tônio already had another visitor: Cristina. She’d gone there looking for Romana...

Oscar told her the bad news.

\* \* \*

“How long before the truck driver notices you’ve missed your appointment?” Tônio asked.

“He was just told ‘today.’ Not when today.”

“How long before headquarters misses *you*?”

Jânio shrugged.

“Not until late tonight, ordinarily. I was supposed to head for the bar anyway, after the delivery. That’s where they’d be missing me. Only with Oscar parading me through town like he did, even Tânia and Leila will know the score by now. Maybe they’ll take the day off.”

“Are they in on all this?”

“You think I’m an idiot, to bring them in?”

Oscar chuckled. Jânio turned red. So did Cristina, but for a different reason

“Este não é o momento para o humor,” she protested. E a... Natalia?”

“Concordo,” said Tônio. “We must get word back.”

“I must report it to the Legião,” countered Cristina. “That was the arrangement.”

“Not with the Policia Geral.”

“Natalia is in danger—”

“Camaradas, we should be working together,” Oscar broke in. “You both need to get in touch with your superiors.”

“Official communications may be compromised,” Cristina insisted.

“And yours aren’t?” Tônio asked.

“We have a private code,” she said, and explained the arrangement with Xuxa. “I’m supposed to call from a public phone.”

“If you’re going to be using code, mine should be good enough,” Tônio said.

Cristina yielded on that, and made the call.

It was Leopoldo who picked up on the other end, and her heart was like to burst, but she remained outwardly calm and followed the drill.

“Bom dia, tio,” she said. “Everything’s fine here except that Natalia’s really tied up with work and can’t come to the phone right now. But if you can make it out here we’re going to throw a hell of a party. The more the merrier, so bring all your friends. You’ll love my baiano popcorn cakes.”

“That’s it,” she said afterwards. “Xuxa will understand. She’ll want to bring your people in. And the military.”

Tônio nodded.

“I’ll handle things at my end,” he said, “But that means getting back to Quartel General as quickly as possible. “I have a truck to hijack. And a plane to catch.”

He grinned as he turned to leave, and added:

“I leave Jânio to your tender mercies.”



*I have known pain before*, Romana thought, as she prepared herself mentally for whatever the Fernandistas had in store for her. That would give her an edge, even if her captors would never have believed it.

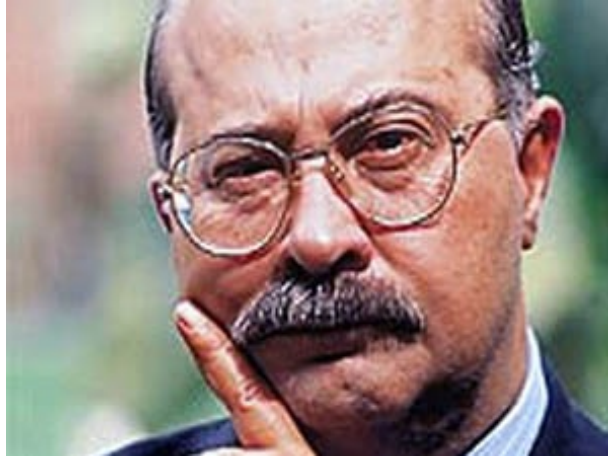
Members of the Legion hadn't been recruited at random; they had been veterans of the Revolução who had already proven themselves in combat. Some had even been wounded – Bidu Braga herself just before her rescue. They had had what it took then – Romana prayed that she would have what it took now.

She had been shackled to the floor of a chamber deep within the mountain.

The cavern had seemed endless, and the walls had shown evidence of fairly recent construction – marks of excavation. There were huge machines parked in some of the larger rooms; others were devoted to what appeared to be weapons laboratories and factories. There were dormitories and offices in mid-sized chambers.

*Eu poderia dizer muito a Xuxa*, she thought. *A hell* of a lot to tell her! If only...

She'd seen Vitor when she was captured. He was grinning from ear to ear, and thrust his crotch at her, as if he expected she'd soon be his. But she hadn't seen him since – maybe they were saving her for bigger fish. Even so, she'd never have expected to encounter the biggest fish of all.



João Fernandes' likeness had appeared in revolutionary propaganda almost as soon as the rebellion had erupted. It had been a younger version, of course; that had made for better propaganda.

There was nothing inspirational in the face of the man who confronted her now. He looked tired and haggard, but also stubborn. The Comandante must think he held all the cards now.

"Esta é uma agradável surpresa," he said. "Pelo menos para nós."

Big surprise for her, too, but not pleasant. What followed was just as surprising.

"Why are you working for foreigners?"

She couldn't believe her ears. He thought it was all about the Velorians? The man was *delusional*.

"The Aureans weren't foreigners?"

"They're gone, but the Velorians are still here."

*Does he really think we still have them planetside?* Romana wondered. *They'd have made short work of this place – spotted it from the air by tachyon vision and then taken it apart.*

Aloud, she only pointedly reminded him of his alliance with the Betas.

“They’d been assimilated,” he told her, with what seemed a straight face. “We could have worked with them.”

As if everybody didn’t know he’d already *been* working with them. That they’d have served as enforcers under his regime. But Fernandes suddenly took a different tack.

“You could work with me,” he said. “You could be co-ruler.”

And he gave her that *look*; he even reached out to touch her breasts, as if he thought she’d welcome his attentions, and believe in his promise of shared power. She willed herself to remain passive as he continued what he imagined to be his ministrations, refusing to give him the satisfaction of erect nipples.

He finally seemed to get the message, and turned to leave, looking back only once as he went through the door to her cell.

“Ela não tem sido cooperativa,” she heard him tell someone outside. “Vocês sabem o que fazer.”

Anything they *wanted* to do must be what he meant.

\* \* \*

“What can this mean?” Patricia asked.

She was new here, having arrived two weeks from *Alguna Parte*, a Spanish-speaking Enlightenment world three jumps away. She’d had quick

deepteach in Portuguese back home, but her briefing there hadn't brought her up to speed on what was happening on Novo Recife.

Xuxa had called them together at Cristina's place, far enough off the beaten track to avoid any unwelcome attention – her and Leopoldo and Raul. The other Legionnaires were off on escort duty. Patricia hadn't met Cristina or Romana, and Operation Popcorn was new to her when Xuxa gave her a rundown before playing Cristina's message.

“Gold,” Xuxa answered Patricia now. “It has to be gold. What else could it be?”

“But how could Fernandes...” Raul wondered.

“It doesn't matter. But we have to assume the worst – and move fast.”

“An attack on *us*?” Leopoldo asked. “Could Cristina—”

“On those *dear* to us,” Xuxa interrupted. “If Romana has told them anything under duress... even if she hasn't, they may have other sources.”

“Romana would *never*,” Raul insisted.

“We can't take a chance, camarada. Especially not with Vitor missing.”

“If he's gone over to them...” Leopoldo began. His concern was obvious.

“There's nothing we can do about that,” Xuxa said. “Not by ourselves. Cristina must have realized that; she said to bring all our friends. The regulars will have an advantage over the Legion, if we can get enough of them, and soon. It's firepower that will count, not enhancee power.”

“They’re spoiling for a fight,” agreed Raul. “They aren’t going to pass up a chance to put down Fernandes once and for all... if we can find him. All we know is that their headquarters *has* to be near Minas Oramas.”

As if on cue, Xuxa’s pocket phone buzzed. It was the only thing she was wearing besides her cache-sexe, which made it look incongruous.

The lider answered quickly, and her face took on a look that was somehow both troubled and relieved.

“É o supremo diretor da Policia Geral,” she announced a moment later. “He says he has news for us, something very important.”

Xuxa hesitated a moment.

“‘Você sabe o que quero dizer,’ he told me. I expect we all know what he’s talking about. He wants to meet with us, in a secure location.”

She turned to Patricia.

“We’ll have to get those close to us to another secure location,” she said. “I have one in mind, but you’ll have to gather them, and see them to the safe house. Chances are the enemy won’t know you by sight – yet. That makes you the best woman for the job, quite apart from the fact that the rest of us are going to have our hands full.”

Patricia nodded modestly, but felt a growing sense of pride. She was going to be a true Legionnaire at last. She’d been the only one chosen from her planet, but there wasn’t much for her to do there: helping emergency services and the like. Indeed, the lack of a pressing need was why the recruitment effort

had been rather perfunctory – just a public service notice in the media seeking volunteers for testing.

Not that the announcement hadn't attracted a crowd. But it was such a random crowd that the chances it included a Latent were minimal. Then again, perhaps Latents were simply rarer on *Alguna Parte* than on *Novo Recife*. Even here, they didn't exactly grow on trees. ¿Qué importa? It had been an honor for her to be selected, and a pleasure to be enhanced by her planet's Protector.

But there were drawbacks; it was the end of her love life; a lone Legionnaire had to be on call at full strength at all times, even if it was just to deal with traffic accidents and fires and the like. And she was discouraged from taking what pleasure she might have at firing ranges and the like: it was considered self-indulgent on her part, and bad for the morale of police and soldiers who might get all hot and bothered and not be able to do anything about it.

Her assignment offworld had made briefly the news, like the recruitment program itself; she'd even been interviewed. But she wasn't interested in any brief notoriety, and she had boarded ship without even watching herself on the newsnets. What mattered to her was that now she'd really have a chance to prove herself, and maybe have some fun in the bargain. But Xuxa brought her back to reality.

“Another reason for your assignment is that you don't know any of the people you'll be guarding, and they won't know you. There'll be no chance to play favorites if you run into trouble. You don't have any favorites now, and you'd

better not make any. You've got a job to do, and you must think only of the job. Only with your brain. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfeitamente."

"Bom."

\* \* \*

It was her tormentors' fundamental stupidity that worked in her favor. That and their attitude towards women.

She'd hadn't seen any women in the offices or laboratories or factories she'd passed on the way to this cell. Did they have comfort women hidden away somewhere, only not enough to go around? They'd have a hard time of it, having nothing of value to the Fernandistas but their bodies.

Her own body had proven more durable than she'd feared at first. Gold had less effect on invulnerability than on strength, she'd been told during her training. Even the Velorians didn't know why, but injuries on Velor had been rare and death by violence even rarer – nearly always in punishment for high crimes offworld and implemented by something called a layer sword.

Nobody here had a layer sword, whatever that was – just guns and knives. Vitor himself had come armed with a pistol, threatening to kill her if she refused to cooperate. She had refused, and was relieved to discover that while the bullets dimpled her skin and hurt like hell, they had failed to do any real damage. He'd come back with a knife and had even less success.

Vitor couldn't hide his disappointment, and must have known it; she never saw him again. Those who followed tried rape, and discovered that while bullets

and blades couldn't penetrate her flesh, their male organs could penetrate her down below. It was disgusting, but not all that painful, and it couldn't even have been that comfortable for the men, because she steeled herself to remain as dry as she could between the legs.

She wondered what they thought about that. Maybe they didn't think about it. Aside from calling her a whore and a bitch and bragging about their dicks, they'd yell at her to "talk" – they didn't even seem to know what Fernandes wanted her to talk *about*. It soon turned into an unpleasant but totally predictable ritual.

Romana lost track of time, and even the number of men. Her only consolation was that they didn't know about Cristina, and she wasn't about to give her up, or to give up anyone or anything else. Let them have their way with her; they were never going to have *her*.

## XVIII

"Choque e pavor," said General Januario Vargas. "That's the name of the Operation."

"It's Operation Popcorn," Xuxa countered. "We're spearheading it. We'll be the ones making the drop."

"And we're supplying the plane, even if you're supplying the shock and awe."

Xuxa demurred. The operation couldn't come off without Vargas, without the plane. And even after she and Leopoldo made it in, they couldn't secure the



entire base of the Fernandistas – too many of them, too many escape hatches. It had to be a team effort. That was what they were here for.

General Vargas had been their strategic planner by common consent from the get-go. Fernando Filho, supreme *diretor* of the Policia Geral, was the logistics expert – he'd been thoroughly briefed by Antônio Barros, who was back in the field seeing to it that the police carried out their role. But before he'd left, he'd been the idea man when it came to transportation – and not only because he'd practically set a record getting here by truck and plane from Minas Oramas.

Vargas had gone over the map Oscar had sketched, based on what he'd been told by the Fernandista agent he'd turned. It would take careful timing, with government troops working their way around the outskirts of the enemy fastness to avoid detection, then closing in and launching simultaneous attacks. The Legionnaires, dropped from the air near one of the entrances, would run interference – spreading chaos, taking out as many of the enemy as they could, and destroying stores and equipment.

*Finding Romana, too*, Xuxa thought. She thought back to their second meeting, just a couple of days ago.

“How soon can your people make it there?” she'd pressed. “We don't want any of the rebels getting away, especially Fernandes.”

“We've got all the buses lined up, checked out by our best mechanics. We've got the word out about that “landslide” at Cobra Pass, and Tônio's already had police set up roadblocks to keep anyone from finding out anything different.”

“But can we trust them?”

“They aren’t being allowed to get close enough to see for themselves. And we’re sending trucks loaded with picks and shovels, including the one Oscar brought us; earth movers to follow – though by the time they can arrive, there won’t be any point. The troops will be dressed as laborers, of course, but their union badges will keep them from getting mixed up with the enemy when the attack goes down.”

“And Leopoldo and me?” Raul asked.

“You’ll be a special effect.”

“I thought the bombs would be the special effect,” said Leopoldo.

“They’re only to help get you in,” Xuxa said.

\* \* \*

It was secure, and also obscure. Not even a proper house, only an armazém for storage of parts and supplies for river boats. But she’d gotten them there.

Sul dos Rápidos was upriver from Legion field headquarters on the west bank of the Amado, but below the gorge where the road gave out to just a path. It was farm country, devoted to crops like cassava, beans and chuchus – the last, which Patricia had never seen before, looked like fuzzy pears but were actually vegetables.

They’d needed a couple of trucks to accommodate the kin of the Legionnaires – those who had decided to take their chances with the convoy, rather than camp out in the selvas. Frankly, Patricia thought the second option

made more sense – she doubted that Fernandista hit men would take the trouble to scour the countryside if they couldn't find their targets at home.

The younger relations had apparently thought the same way. It was mostly the older people who couldn't rough it who'd elected to join the convoy. Those and the ones from the larger towns and the capital who were used to a more sedentary life. It could have been a problem if anything had happened; it would have been harder for them to duck, hide or scatter. That was the drill: they were supposed to duck, hide or scatter while she went after the attackers and drew their fire. But nothing had happened. She could relax now, and await word that it was all over at Minas Oramas.

They'd asked about what was going on, of course, but she couldn't tell them what she knew, let alone what she didn't. One of the things she did know was that Romana was in trouble, and she couldn't tell Manoel Novais the orchid grower about that.

Manoel had made it here on his own after getting word from a Policia Geral man sent upriver. He'd turned out to be the life of the party here, if you could call it a party, having brought a basket of orchids to add a touch of beauty to the warehouse, although they weren't as essential as the food she'd requisitioned from a nearby settlement.

The man had a sense of humor, too. He'd asked Patricia where she came from, and she'd told him: Alguna Parte. That came out in Portuguese as Algum Lugar. Meaning "Somewhere."

“Better from somewhere than nowhere,” he remarked. And more seriously, he wanted to know what Alguna Parte was like. No, she explained, her world hadn’t been seeded by the Aureans, or ever ruled by them, and nobody there knew just what part of Espanha back on Earth her people had come from, but it had been close to a thousand years ago. Scalantran years, of course, which was what everybody used because local years were all different and most people hadn’t known how long an Earth year was.

That meant she had to explain about the Scalantrans, who hadn’t been seen here as they had been for centuries back home. Xuxa had told her they had competition now; something to do with the same chain of events on Velor that had led to formation of the Legion, but she’d never taken any great interest in that. Except for Manoel, nobody here seemed terribly interested, either.

What they did take an interest in was that Cristina had family in Santo Antônio, where you could never be sure of the people across town or even next-door – some of them might be Fernandista sleepers. So they’d come here, taking their own car with a police escort to the Rio Amado, then a ferry to rendezvous with Patricia’s convoy on the west bank.

They were musicians, the Medeiros: Vicente a cellist and his wife Janaina a guitarist, both with the Orquestra Mundial. Their children Tais and Madalena were studying at the Academia de Música.

When Manoel saw that Janaina had brought her guitar, he insisted that she play something; Janaina chose a popular ballad. It was something of beauty

that they could share in a time of trouble, and Patricia would always remember it as one of the rewards for her service in the Legion.



## XIX

Romana heard the door open, heard footsteps and then the door close. Not again ... Not another one. She didn't think she could stand it again. She wanted to cry, to scream, but she'd vowed to not let them see her anguish.

Against her will she looked at him, looked up into his face. Strange – he didn't seem to have that look of hatred and lust. Even stranger, there was something familiar about his face.

She watched him approach and then it came to her. Marcelo! He had lived near her in Sul dos Rápidos when she was thirteen, fourteen years old. He was

about three years older than her. The cute boy and grown into a good-looking young man.

To her shame, she remembered she'd had a terrible crush on him, before she'd lost her family in that tragic accident and moved away. He'd awakened feelings in her that she didn't know existed and didn't know what to do about. She also remembered that he'd teased her, but in a gentle way. There had been a gallantry about him.

And now he was one of the enemy! How could that be, how could he be one of them? Long ago, she thought she could trust him, and now he was going to rape her.

She looked at his mouth, a mouth she'd once longed to kiss. He seemed to be trying to tell her something without making a sound. He seemed to be saying, "Forgive me."

Before she could react, he pulled down his pants, pushed her down and mounted her, just like all the others... But he didn't actually try to enter her, and, strangely, he leaned down to whisper in her ear.

*"Sinto muito. I'm so sorry. They said I had to. If I refused they'd shoot me as a traitor. But they can't actually see what I'm doing. Maybe they won't notice..."*

Then he began to make the motions of raping her, while in fact only rubbing his cock against her lower belly. And the same time he began shouting at her, the words his masters wanted to hear.

“Vaca! Puta! Boceta! (Bitch! Whore! Cunt!) Estou te fodendo! Eu vou encher você com o meu porra.”

Only he wasn't fucking her, he wasn't going to fill her with anything. It was all for show. Taking his cue, she gave voice to her seeming pain, and when he came – there was no faking it – she began to cry. But she wasn't faking, either...

Romana felt her heart breaking. She wanted to reassure him, to caress him and tell him how she had once wanted him. She thought of how, in a perfect world, they could have loved each other. Perhaps in a more perfect world to come they might still...

But before she could pursue that thought, there came the sound of what must be a huge explosion from somewhere in the complex – strong enough to shake the walls. An alarm followed, as the rumbling faded, the sound of a commotion outside.

It must be an attack. She could see that he too knew it. And as if nothing else had passed between them, Marcelo began worrying at one of her shackles. But then the door flew open; he dropped what he was doing as a guard stepped through.

“On your feet soldier!”

Marcelo was stunned as he turned towards the guard. “But I'm not–”

“We're all soldiers now! So pull your fucking pants up and get a move on. Grab a gun at the nearest rack!”

Marcelo, rising and fastening his pants, took a last look at her, a look of despair on his face, before he followed the Fernandista out into the corridor.

She heard the sound of shooting in the distance.

\* \* \*

As Raul and Leopoldo battered their way into the Fernandista redoubt, they knew Xuxa and other Legionnaires would soon be doing the same near the main entrance. But the two men had farther to go, and if they hadn't had the bombs to back them up...

The massive explosions that gouged a huge crater in the side of the mountain hadn't harmed the Legionnaires, but it *had* left them completely naked. They didn't have time to think about it just then, but when they broke through into the administrative area, they were reminded of their condition as some of the bullets from guns hastily picked up by Fernandistas who must have been riding their desks moments ago hit them in their privates. They must have already realized who and what they were up against, but the sight of the Legionnaires' cocks responding to what felt to them like tickling sent them into a panic, and they fled into a nearby corridor.

Raul and Leopoldo followed, but found they didn't have anything much left to do when they reached the office of Fernandes himself. The man had committed suicide with his own pistol, and the fight had gone out of his hangers-on – if they'd ever had any in them to begin with. A few had aimed their guns at the computers, presumably to destroy any records that would lead to identification of enemy agents in the field – but breaking their necks stopped them from doing any damage, and deterred the rest from trying the same.



“The only trouble is, we have to stay here and keep an eye on things,” groused Raul.

“Yeah, miss all the fun,” said Leopoldo. “We’ll have to have a big party to make up for it. Maybe an orgy.”

\* \* \*

Xuxa certainly didn’t need the elevator at the main entrance on the island; she ripped apart the cables that operated it, so nobody inside would be able to use it to get out. She and the comrades she’d chosen for the mission – Fabio, Modinha, Gilberto, Luiz and Giovanna – simply jumped into the shaft and ended up tumbled in a heap at the bottom, next to the fallen levandor..

The Fernandistas opened up on them with everything they had, showering them with bullets as they got to their feet. One of them – with presence of mind but absence of understanding – aimed at Xuxa’s breasts. The warm caress of cold lead turned her on; she’d have to do something about that – later. For now, she simply advanced into the gunfire, and the rest came with her.

Vocês não sabem que suas armas patéticas não podem ferir-nos?"she teased them.

The Fernandistas retreated in confusion, some stumbling over crates of small arms that had been awaiting shipment. They split up in the main corridor, apparently in further confusion rather than by design, and the Legionnaires did likewise, Xuxa taking Fabio and Modinha in the direction of the machine shops, the rest heading for where raw materials were stored.

The Fernandistas kept firing, some at close range, heedless of the ricochets – they didn't have any idea what else to do.

\* \* \*

Vitor hears the gunfire coming closer. He's been assigned to guard the machine shop – not much of an assignment. As if it was his fault he hadn't been able to force Romana into cooperating. Now he'll be blamed for the attack; maybe they'll even think he somehow got word out about....

He can't complete the thought, for the soldiers are coming through the door, firing back into the corridor. And then, coming after them, leading the attack... Xuxa, the bitch of bitches. Her uniform is ragged with bullet holes, like those of the two Legionnaires who follow. Why don't they keep any gold here? Not that he'd be able to get any onto them.

Stray bullets are flying; he can hear them bouncing off the walls or the attackers' invulnerable bodies. He feels a sudden pain in his chest and realizes it's the end...

\* \* \*

The waterfall entrance had been left to a militia detachment, given that it was the only one guarded by gold. Vargas and Filho were in overall charge of the operation, but the regular army and Policia Geral had worked their way around the mountain by night to cut off any Fernandista escape routes.

Oscar Carvalho, who among other things was a militia captain, had been detailed by Vargas to lead the assault, and he enlisted Antonio Barris as his deputy. Their force was made up mostly of miners, who had been called out for

what they believed was just a drill – then briefed after they'd left town. The miners knew Carvalho; they knew they could trust him to do things right. They knew Barros as an honest cop. Some even knew Romana, albeit as Natalia the bartender – only now revealed as a Legionnaire; the idea of a rescue appealed to their manly virtue.

They could hear the sound of a plane, and shortly after that a huge explosion at the crest of the mountain. That was their signal, and they began their advance, with the most heavily armed militiamen at the front. The second rank was armed with hooks, of all things – that was to clear the net, if the enemy had a chance to deploy it. Gold might not have any physical effects on them, but it might slow them up.

Their entry proved to be an anticlimax; only a few Fernandistas had been left to guard what they might still believe to be a secret entrance; the rest must have headed for the scene of the action – distant gunfire echoed from deep within the mountain. The miners made quick work of the defenders, suffering only a few minor wounds.

\* \* \*

It was only after the soldiers in the weapon shops had given up, those still alive having run out of ammo, that Xuxa noticed Vitor among the dead.

The other Legionnaires, having smashed the Fernandistas' weapons, had gotten busy on the machines that produced them. Nothing was going to be left but scrap metal. Gilberto, Luiz and Giovanna reported a few minutes later, having put their opponents out of action in a warehousing area. It was all over.

Except, Xuxa reminded herself, for finding Romana...

XX

"You couldn't have known," Oscar himself told him afterwards.

For weeks, Alberto Souza couldn't forgive himself. And yet, the captain had been right – how *could* he have known?

It was Alberto who had found the cell where Romana lay naked and shackeled. There was a man crouched over her, holding something in his right hand. It must be a weapon; could the Fernandistas have found something that would work on her? Filled with rage, he aimed his own rifle.

"Morra, escumalha!" he shouted.

But suddenly, he heard Romana shout.

"Não! Ele está libertando-me!

Too late, his finger was on the trigger, but Romana had startled him enough for him to lose his aim... almost. The man whose name he would learn was Marcelo Pereira took it in the left shoulder rather than the back; but he was bleeding heavily. It was only then that Alberto noticed that what he had taken for a weapon was a bolt cutter.

Romana was begging him to do something, and Alberto realized what that was: he ripped off his shirt, managed to tear it into pieces, and bound the wound to staunch the bleeding.

“Chamem um médico!” Romana shouted, and he ran to find the one assigned to his unit, whose only job up to now had been treating superficial wounds to militiamen.

Dr. Azevedo did the best he could, but thought Marcelo would probably lose the use of his arm. Souza was devastated; he couldn't even look at Marcelo – or Romana, now free of her bonds.

Oscar had told him word had been sent by com to the lider, now that the redoubt was secure and there wasn't danger of electronic communications being intercepted. But when Xuxa made her entrance, Alberto made his exit, not saying a word. They put him in charge of guarding prisoners, Dr. Azevedo came through later that day to tend to the wounded among them. They were still counting the Fernandista dead, and some of the other troops had charge of disposing of the bodies; at least, he had avoided that.

After some long-range discussions with General Command, most prisoners were offered amnesty, on condition that they be forbidden to carry weapons. They were also branded with tattoos for easy identification, but they were permitted to sign up with the Labor Registry, with equal access to any job openings. A couple of dozen high-profile prisoners, among them the men who gave the orders to Fernandes' secret field agents and terrorists, were shot.

By that time, the militia men were back at Minas Oramas, and celebrating with wild abandon, but Alberto didn't feel like joining in.

\* \* \*

They'd practically killed her with kindness, the day after. Neither Xuxa nor any of her other fellow Legionnaires had reproached her for her recklessness, following Jânio past the waterfall that day.

"You couldn't have known," Cristina said the day after she was freed, when she had tried to bring the matter up herself.

"I should have turned back, made some excuse, just as soon as we reached the entrance," Romana said. "I should have alerted you."

"But then both of us—"

"We'd have called in the militia."

*Only it would have been a lot tougher fight, Romana thought, And a lot of the Fernandista might have gotten way.*

Cristina tactfully, too tactfully, dodged that issue. So Romana dodged it too, for the moment.

"Anyway, we won. That's the important thing."

And it was. But not the *only* important thing.

She had to get her life back. And though it seemed absurd, she had a feeling that this somehow involved helping Marcelo get *his* life back. She'd gone to see him at the clinic in Minas Oramas.

Marcelo was out of danger; he'd never been in that *much* danger, but there could always be complications... like infections. Dr. Azevedo had given him shots and, after a few days, there hadn't been any complications. He could talk now, and wanted to know if *she* was all right.

"Claro," she said. "But what happened back there... after..."

“It was a madhouse,” he said. “Your people were attacking everywhere, and in the end, nobody knew which way to run. So my group didn’t even notice when I held back – I was afraid they might send somebody to finish you off. Some heavy weapon, they said the guns didn’t work. And I knew there was a tool cabinet nearby and...”

“Entendo. But how did you come to be there in the first place? How could you be working for Fernandes?”

“I wasn’t. Not the way you think. I was working for the Revolution from the start, when he was on the side of the people. We needed weapons and other equipment, and that was when he set up the underground weapons shops. I *helped* set them up; I was always a good mechanic, and he put me in charge of day-to-day operations. But we couldn’t tell anyone about them, even in Minas Oramas, or word might have gotten back to the Aureans. I couldn’t even contact my family.

“When the Velorians arrived, I didn’t know what to think. But Fernandes thought they were just another group of alien conquerors, and I believed him. Only, then these aliens helped win the Revolution without him, and he couldn’t abide that. I knew he was attacking the new government, but when I asked him why he said at first I just didn’t understand, and when I kept after him he accused me of disloyalty – suddenly I wasn’t the chief engineer any more, just a lathe operator. The security people said they knew where to find my family. The men I worked with bullied me; maybe that was the only way they could prove their own

loyalty. And then they had Security send me... I hadn't even known you were here, or what they were doing to you, what they wanted me...

"I'm sorry," he finished. "Now you know; you don't have to bother coming by here any more."

Romana left, but she checked with the General Command tech people, and the Security records Raul and Leopoldo had saved confirmed Marcelo's account. They had already proved their value in the Policia Geral's roundup of Fernandista agents. Now it was *really* over. Nova Recife was at peace.

But she wasn't. And when she came back a few days later, Marcelo had gone. Back to his family, she supposed – a family that believed him dead.

"I didn't tell him," said Dr. Azevedo. "It's against the rules and, anyway, I wouldn't know how to reach him. But his bioscan came back, and... he's a latent."

"Have you told Xuxa?"

The doctor shook his head.

"She's been called back East, Tônio said."

That surprised her. *So suddenly? Without notice?*

Dr. Azevedo saw that she was perplexed.

"I sense that there are... issues here, and I don't want to get involved. But I can trust you to do the right thing... about Marcelo... whenever you catch up with Xuxa."

Cristina didn't know anything about Xuxa's departure, either. But she had other news: before she left, Xuxa had urged her to offer a reward to Tônio Barros, despite her proclivities.



“I’ll be seeing him tomorrow night,” she said. “It’s for a good cause, after all.”

Romana didn’t relish the thought. Not because they had been an item before the operation; Cristina had already known that she liked men more. Rather, because having sex with anyone who wasn’t enhanced meant wearing gold. Just the thought of that was painful.

Cristina understood; she wasn’t going to report her encounter chapter-and-verse. In the event, Romana wouldn’t be around to hear it. She had nothing to keep her in Minas Oramas, and decided not to bother with applying for leave by phone. That was a breach of discipline, but she didn’t care any longer.

She hopped an eastbound bus. She didn’t try to call Xuxa from the bus station at the Rio Amado, but hitched a ride on a farm truck to Sul dos Rápidos. It turned out that Tio Manoel was still there, visiting with another family that had been taken under the protection of the Legion during Operation Popcorn. He was overjoyed to see her.

So was Marcelo’s family. The Pereiras, of course, *hadn’t* been under protection, and hadn’t known anything about her – but he must have told them a lot.

\* \* \*

It wasn’t until several days later that Romana would learn the reason for Xuxa herself having left Minas Oramas so hurriedly, and headed for the spaceport outside Santo Antônio instead of the Legion base on the west bank of the river.

The arrival of the *Leonid Gorbovsky* took everyone by surprise. Novo Recife had been expecting a courier ship with a new Protector, but not a commercial vessel – at least, not until it was time for Legionnaires to go to or return from rotation to other worlds.

An even greater surprise was that the *Gorbovsky's* only passengers were James and Bidu Kim'Vallara. They'd promised to come back one day and see how things were going on Novo Recife, but nobody had expected that any time soon. Col. Kim'Vallara, they'd heard, had been assigned to a war of liberation on Binkley's World, a planet that nobody here had heard of before, and word was that it was a difficult war that might last for years.

There hadn't been any com message announcing their arrival, and the first that Xuxa knew about it was when they reached Legion headquarters.

"We're here on vacation," Bidu told her.

"Vacation by order, sir," James amended.

"A misunderstanding," Bidu said.

"A fuck-up. I fucked up seriously. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and it turned out to be the right thing to do. But I never cleared it with Star Marshall Raul'lan, which caused serious public embarrassment to her – and to Sigurd and Naomi. It was touch and go whether the Senate would stand by the Theel'dara Initiative, Everybody agreed I'd better make myself scarce until things calm down."

"And how long will that take?"

"We'll be infomed."

“I’ll find a place for you and Bidu to stay. While I figure out how to deal with this.”

James told her the whole story, about how he’d lent his sanction to an affair between one of the new auxiliary Protectors and an Aurean Prime, believing that they’d fight together for the Velorian cause rather than joining the Dark Side.

He’d been right; they’d even turned the tide of battle during a counterattack by the Aurean fleet. James had never cleared his decision with Velor, or with Terri Raul’lan – who couldn’t let a challenge to her authority go unpunished. It was mostly show, of course: the executions of Oon’ah and Xanthra and the other Aurean prisoners she had ordered never took place – instead, they’d been deported to a world called Sanctuary that wasn’t part of the Enlightenment and that hardly anyone on Velor knew about. It was all a matter of face-saving.

But James’ disgrace was real, as was his exile.

Xuxa gave it some thought, and decided the next day to keep the truth to herself. She advised James not to talk about it. It was a time for celebration here, with the final victory over the Fernandistas, and nothing should cast a shadow over that.

## XXI

“You brought him back to us,” said Imaculada. “You saved his life.”

Marcelo himself seemed a bit embarrassed that his mother was so effusive. She was a country woman who'd never strayed far from home. Her husband Jorge traveled by truck downriver to sell fruits and vegetables to fresh air markets, but even he had never been to Santo Antônio.

The Pereiras had invited Manoel and Romana to join them for lunch the day after she arrived; besides Marcelo, their sons were Tomas and Filipe, both now in their twenties. They hadn't taken part in the revolution – too young at the time, Imaculada had insisted – but nevertheless regaled her with questions about her “adventures” in the war the the Fernandistas.

Romana didn't think that Marcelo had given his family a true account, or at least not a complete account, of how she'd “rescued” him. She had to evade their questions as if from false modesty – “It was nothing, really,” she insisted. She wanted to get alone with Marcelo, to tell him about being a Latent. That should have been left for Xuxa, she knew, but she thought she owed him.

The main course was torta de chuchu, a traditional dish that was called a pie only because it looked like one. Besides chuchu, its ingredients were flour, eggs, red onion, parsley and grated cheese. Imaculada didn't need any help preparing it; her culinary skill was... immaculate. But Romana volunteered to work on the salad and the jaco fruit dessert.

Tio Manoel didn't know anything about cooking beyond the simplest things, with which he had always been content. But he'd brought some of his prize orchids as a gift for the occasion to lend the Peireras modest home a festive air – he'd had a neighbor back in Flores Bonita look after them while

under protection. Sitting down to table with her uncle and the Pereiras gave Romana the feeling of having truly come home.

Jorge said a blessing; she remembered that the Pereiras were nominal Catholics although there wasn't a church in the village and she hadn't known them to travel to the nearest town that had one. She watched Marcelo across the table; his left arm hung limply, but he didn't need that to enjoy the meal, and she could see that he took real pleasure in it.

After lunch, Tomas insisted on showing her a dam Marcelo had once built along a stream that flowed into the Rio Amado – “his first engineering project,” he explained. It had created a small pond, enough to treat the family to fish now and then without having to try their luck at the river, or deal with the fishmonger in Flores Bonitas. But Marcelo himself seemed to be embarrassed again – he certainly couldn't take pride in his later projects; at least, not in how they had come to be used.

It was only late in the afternoon that she was able to get Marcelo to herself and tell him the news. But he seemed far from overjoyed.

“Why would they even *want* me?” he asked. “I was one of your *enemies*.”

“You didn't remain an enemy. Not when it really counted. And you were never *my* enemy. They could have killed you for your kindness to me. I can't forget that, and I'm not going to let Xuxa forget it, either.”

“You must be like my parents. They believe the parable about the Prodigal Son. That's what mother said after I told them the truth – about me and the Fernandistas. And about us.”

Romana was taken aback; she wasn't familiar with the Bible; he had to explain the story to her.

"Not quite the same as your own story. The Prodigal Son's parents were never threatened."

"But he only wasted his substance; he never betrayed his own people... and yet they understood – my family. And forgave."

He paused for a moment.

"The only thing missing was a fatted calf. They had to make do with chuchu."

Romana took advantage of the light moment.

"I'm sure Xuxa will understand, too. You could join us."

But Marcelo only frowned.

"What would she want with a one-armed super soldier?"

"We're not just soldiers."

"But that's the main thing. They send you to other planets to fight the Aureans and their allies, right? And I suppose there'll be more of that, now that you don't have any enemy here any more."

"There are still bandits... a few of the agents on the list back at the redoubt must have realized we'd learn who they were, and made themselves scarce. And there's also rescue work—"

"Which also calls for two arms, I imagine."

He saw the look on her face.

"I know you're trying to help," he amended himself.

“I feel I owe you,” Romana said. “And... I care about you. I still remember when we were teenagers here. You weren’t like the other boys. The way I felt about you...”

“I could tell how you felt about me. But you were a girl. A cute girl, but still a *girl*. I was too embarrassed to say anything. I thought I was all grown up myself, but I didn’t know how to deal with you. And then, when I heard about what happened to your family, I wanted to reach out, but I didn’t know how to do that, either... I was afraid of saying the wrong thing.

There it was, he had brought up her most painful memory.

There had been an agricultural fair that summer, and they’d started downriver in their truck for it. Only, somebody had to look after the chores at the farm – and as the oldest child she’d been elected. And she’d never seen her parents again, or Ofilia, or Erico.

Another driver had stopped ahead of them because a lobaltura had wandered into the road – native as opposed to Terran animals were rarely seen in settled areas, and people weren’t supposed to harm them if at all possible.

Her father apparently hadn’t had time to stop, and swerved to the right to avoid the other truck, but caromed off the embankment and into the river. Their bodies had never been found; nobody had managed to retrieve the truck. The other driver hadn’t known the family, and it was only days later that somebody at the fair put the pieces together and sent word to her.

“I couldn’t sleep after that. It know it sounds crazy, but I felt as if it were somehow my fault. But Tio Manoel brought me out of it when he adopted me.

And I managed to put it behind me. When I was enhanced, when I joined the Legion, I thought that nothing could hurt me, ever again. Only... you know.”

“And now you want me to join the Legion?”

“I want us to be together. And that’s the only way. It’s a second chance for both of us.”

\* \* \*

Xuxa was still working on how to handle the public introduction of James and Bidu when Cristina arrived in Santo Antônios to visit her Medeiros kin, who were appearing at outdoor and indoor concerts after their return from Sul dos Rápidos.

“How did it go with Tônio?” she asked, after they’d exchanged pleasantries and other news.

“I’m still not into men. But for the good of the cause, I can still have a man into me. If he’s a good man. And he was an eager eater, too. That helped a lot.”

Xuxa smiled.

“I still have to see about taking care of Oscar,” Xuxa said. I would have asked Romana, but...”

“Compreendido. I wouldn’t want gold anywhere near me if I’d been through what she went through.

There was a further development that day: the arrival of the Courier ship from Velor, with the new Protector.

The new Protector was named Johr’dan. But it turned out that she hadn’t been assigned to this world, and wouldn’t be serving on wormhole duty after



completing her groundside assignment. She was assigned to.... enhancement. It was yet another of the changes to come to Velor, and the Enlightenment.

“You know how much self-control it takes,” Johr’dan said when they met at the spaceport. “Not to wear gold, not to move as I come, to avoid harming the subject as I release the retrovirus. I’d read about the first enhancements by Kalla and Ju’lette. They were lucky, both in their self-control and choice of lovers – but others weren’t so lucky on both counts. We didn’t know about Latents then, or how to test for them. It makes sense to let some Protectors specialize.”

She must have realized that Xuxa and Cristina didn’t like being lectured on the basics, still less on ancient history, so she smiled at them.

“Anyway, I’ll be getting to travel a lot. And get to relieve the new Legionnaires of their virginity.”

She saw the look on Xuxa’s face.

“Yes, the women too,” she added. “So when can I start work?”

“We’ll get a list ready,” Xuxa said, with as much aplomb as she could summon.

\* \* \*

There was other business to tend to, however. Like Oscar. She’d asked him to come to the capital, supposedly to make an official report to the Ministry of Defense about his part in Operation Popcorn. He’d be in for a surprise!

Only, the surprises weren’t over for Xuxa herself.

There was a message waiting for her at the Ministry, forwarded from the Legion field headquarters – from Romana. What was she doing there instead of

back at Minas Oramas? The message itself explained that, and was very apologetic. But it was also very insistent that a place should be made in the Legion for Marcelo Pereira.

Romana was being impertinent at best, insubordinate at worst. She was letting her emotions get the better of her. Enhancement had been reserved for those who had served in the Revolução, and it should be reserved now for those who had fought the Fernandistas.

But that was all over. How would future candidates be chosen? On the basis of public service, perhaps? Or perhaps it was time for gestures of reconciliation, now that Novo Recife was at liberty and peace?

She'd have to think about that, after rewarding Oscar...

\* \* \*

Oscar Carvalho had once been afraid to die, but now he was almost afraid to go to heaven. Xuxa was sitting there right in front of him, on a beach outside the capital, wearing nothing – absolutely nothing. He had been invited to change that, with a gold necklace...



He was a bit nervous about that, knowing what Romana had gone through. But Xuxa insisted that her case had nothing in common with Romana's.

"I'm not going to be shackled," she said. "There's no way you could possibly rape me; I'll still be a lot stronger than you. You've been a hero; it's thanks to you we could get into the redoubt, and you were there for the attack. Had things been otherwise, I'm sure Romana herself would have offered to reward you. But things aren't otherwise. And I want it, I really *want* it. I want to feel a hero's hands and lips on my body, I want to feel a hero's cock inside me. Ah, if only you were a Latent, I'd want to *keep* you."

Xuxa's praise had him raring to go, but still he hesitated, as she stood before him in invitation. After all, Xuxa wasn't just another Legionnaire, she was the *lider*. And she had been a heroine even before her enhancement, one of the first Novo Recife to take up arms against the puppet government of the Aureans – at a time when that was practically an invitation to suicide.

"For God's sake, *put it on!*" she cried.

He did as she bade him, but after slipping the necklace around her neck, he put arms around her and drew her lips to his, kissing her passionately as he ran his hands up and down her back and felt her magnificent breasts with their erect nipples pressing against his chest.

He stepped back a bit, that he might brush them with his hands, and finger the bullet-hard nipples that no man-made bullet could harm. He cupped her breasts, filling his hands with the invulnerable flesh that somehow now yielded to his caresses.

“How can anything be so firm and yet so soft?” he murmured.

“It’s the Velorian gold standard,” she kidded him.

Oscar kissed his way down her taut belly, then buried his face between her legs, savoring the taste of her juices.

“Morda-me!” she urged him, and he bit her clit as hard as he could, knowing he could give her only pleasure. She moaned, and then shrieked.

“Eu estou gozando!” she shouted, and her orgasm was so violent that it shook his teeth loose from the object of his affection.

“Eu amo o seu grelo,” he said of it.

“Eu quero seu pau – agora!” Xuxa urged him as she lay back on the sand.

Oscar didn’t think he could have held out much longer, and eagerly plunged his cock into her. She threw her hands around his ass cheeks to squeeze them and urge him to fuck her as hard as he could.

“Eu estou fodendo uma heroína,” he shouted in joy.

But after she came for the first time, she flipped him over on his back, and took charge of the action.

“Eu estou fodendo um herói!

## XXII

Xuxa looked up Johr’dan the next day and invited her to field headquarters to discuss an urgent matter.

“This is strictly Legion business,” she explained. “Nothing to do with the civil or military authorities.

“Can I give you a lift?” the Protector offered.

That got a laugh out of the lider.

“Just as long as you don’t drop me!”

She’d never flown before, except by plane, and that had been quite a while ago – not that she missed it: she’d assigned Raul and Leopoldo to the aerial part of the attack on the Fernandista redoubt.

Johr’dan carried her face down for the journey to the west bank. It was a thrill to watch the countryside passing by beneath her, to get a bird’s eye view of the farms and villages. It was too high to make out the people, or even the vehicles passing along the Great Western Road.

But, coming in for a landing at field headquarters, Xuxa was reminded that there was still a break in the road: the bridge across the Rio Amado still hadn’t been replaced, and travelers still had to take ferries to continue their journeys to the West or the East as the case might be,

A thought formed in her mind. But she didn’t dare give voice to it. She had to deal with the problem Romana hadx dropped in her lap. Where was Romana, anyway? With Marcelo, she supposed. She’d have to answer for that. But Marcelo’s injury should be enough to rule out enhancement. That would knock some sense into her, put an end to her attachment to a former enemy.

So she put the question to Johr’dan, only to be put out by the response.

“That won’t be a problem,” she said. “Enhancement fixes anything that’s wrong with the subject, as well as conferring super strength and invulnerability. It’s just that it can’t add capabilities like—”

“Flight. I already knew that. But that isn’t the *real* problem.”

Now she had to tell Johr’dan about that real problem.

As they entered field headquarters, she saw Romana waiting.

“Speak of the diabinha!” Xuxa said.

Romana looked abashed. But then she spotted Johr’dan.

“You must be a Protector,” she said. “Like Cher’ee.”

“Yes, like Cher’ee. But my name is Johr’dan.”

“I’m surprised you have the nerve to show your face here,” Xuxa broke in.

“But I’ve got a good idea where you’ve been... and what you’re after. You’ve come at either the worst possible time, or the best.”

“I seem to be missing something here,” Johr’dan said.

“Meet Romana, the very errant Legionnaire who thinks you should enhance her friend with the bad arm. The friend who until only a short time ago was working with the enemy here.”

“Only under duress,” Romana said.

“And I suppose it was under duress that you left Minas Oramas.”

“I was looking for *you*. But nobody seemed to know where you’d gone.”

“I had urgent business, which is no concern of yours.”

James and Bidu still weren’t officially here, and Xuxa wasn’t about to let Romana in on anything to do with that.

“The business at hand here is a concern of mine,” Johr’dan said, steering the conversation back to enhancement – and the issue of Romana’s friend. “I’d like to hear the particulars.”

“If you insist,” agreed Xuxa. After all, she was dealing with a Velorian, and must show due deference.

So Romana told her story and, with some reluctance, Xuxa confirmed details that had been found in Fernandista records.

“Convert your enemies with love.” Johr’dan said after hearing them out. “That’s one of the principles of the Theel’dara Initiative.”

“More honored in the breach than in the observance,” Xuxa commented.

*Does she even know about that business with James on Binkley’s World?*

“There’s some resistance at home,” the Protector conceded. “But I’m a long way from home. And I believe in that principle. From what I’ve been told about Novo Recife, it would be to the good of the planet and the Enlightenment to apply it here.”

\* \* \*

“Mission accomplished,” Johr’dan reported to Xuxa, after completing her work on the new crop of Legion recruits. There were an even dozen this time, all but one of them veterans of the recent campaign. The one remaining...

Xuxa had made her peace with Romana, and with Marcelo, after giving them a stern lecture. Things had turned out well, even from her viewpoint – Cristina and Raul and Leopodo, Romana’s closest friends in the Legion, had all accepted the “convert.” But the lider had to make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that she was the lider.

James, too, was here at field headquarters. That had caused a stir, for none of the other Legionnaires had known he was on the planet. Xuxa had



announced that he and Bidu had simply returned as promised, and would be taking part in the celebration at Santo Antônio. But that wasn't why he was here with Johr'dan. They had to be here at the same time for her to pop the question – which drew startled responses.

“You want us to *what?*” James asked.

Johr'dan's reaction was more bemused.

“I thought I was building a bridge by enhancing Marcelo,” she said.

“It takes two to do the job,” Xuxa explained. “And how long is it likely to be before we have two Velorians here again?”

She had them there. A single Velorian could easily lift a concrete and steel bridge span, but guiding it into place was another matter. But with two, each holding it from one end, it should be a cinch. And with the completion of the bridge, the populated heartland of the planet would be reunited physically as well as politically.

“It's all a matter of symbolism,” she concluded.

“It's all a matter of. ‘We lift things up and set them down.’” James quipped.

\* \* \*

James and Johr'dan led the victory parade to the Palácio Planetário in Santo Antônio. Behind them marched the new Legion recruits, including Marcelo. Next came the veteran Legionnaires, and after them the officers and enlisted men of the Army and Minas Oramas Militia who had taken part in the campaign.

But the parade stretched behind all of them for miles. Hundreds of thousands of Novo Recifense civilians had come by foot from other towns and villages east of the Rio Amado, or ridden by bus or truck across the new bridge from more distant parts. There were marching bands and other performers from far and near. Millions more watched it all on television.

Assunção Gonçalves, who had recently been chosen as premeiro executivo by the Congresso Mundial, was expected to make a speech – but he kept it short, knowing that he wasn't the one people had come to see, or hear.

“Amigos e compatriotas,” he began, “We have come to the end of a long road.”

The reference wasn't lost of those who had traveled the Great Western Road and other roads to reach here, but they all responded with applause, understanding that Gonçalves meant to honor them.

[More to come. Speech by James. Private reception hosted by Xuxa for families of new recruits – with Marcelo's family insisting that Romana and Manoel be included as “practically family.”]

“Just what do you mean by “practically family?” Manoel asked. “Are they going to allow marriage in the Legion? Children.”

“Nobody's ever brought it up,” Xuxa said. “It would create a lot of complications. Should couples be rotated to other worlds together? Should there be maternity leave? It's all up to Velor, and Velor isn't likely to undertake any further drastic initiatives any time soon. They don't even know about the one I took with Marcelo, and Johr'dan won't say a word about it... nor James, I'm sure.”

Marcelo had come out of enhancement fever just in time for the festivities, and was arm-in-arm with Romana.

“Well, at least I have you as ‘practically family,’ Manoel told him. “And the rest of your family.”

The Pereiras, who were in high spirits anyway but had consumed high spirits at the reception, gave him a cheer.

“I’d always wanted to have a family,” he said, suddenly turning somber, “But when Caterina died, I just couldn’t. She was the love of my life, and I felt as if I’d *killed* her. I should have realized she wasn’t meant to have children, not after —”

“Tio,” Romana interrupted. “You never told me.”

“You never asked. And I was grateful for that at the time. But the time has come now to put the past to rest. And we can’t do that by hiding it.”

“Then it’s time to put my own past to rest, as you have, as Marcelo has.”

And she told him about the accident and her guilt feelings over it.

### Epilogue

They had returned to Sul dos Rápidos with the Perieras after the celebration. Xuxa hadn’t had any pressing need for them and, after all they’d been through, decided they deserved some time alone together.

They were fellow Legionnaires now, but here they were just a man and a woman, out for a walk along the river. Maybe they go all the way up the path

above the rapids, spend some time with Manoel – Marcelo, too, was calling him Tio now.

“Practically family,” Romana said. That had become a catchphrase with them. But it wasn’t out of the question that they’d be allowed to marry. Precedents were made to be broken when it came to the Legion – at least on Novo Recife. Xuxa had hinted as much, and that would mean they’d be treated as a married couple and rotated together to another world if one of their numbers was drawn. They’d be training together, in any case – Marcelo didn’t have any military experience

“I still don’t feel like a soldier,” he said, flexing his left arm – now enhanced, like the rest of him. “But I feel like a man again.”

“You’re whole again in body,” Romana said. “And I think that both of us are finally whole in spirit. Let us come together now, and share our bodies and souls as equals.”

“Why not just say, “Let’s make love?”

“Vamos fazer amor.”

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Note: “Rasga o Coração,” as performed on guitar by Celia Linde (to accompany the scene with Janaina Medeiros here), is available as a file (janaina.mp3) at the

Aurora Universe Readers Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/>

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