

# The Popcorn War

## A Sequel to [Terms of Enhancement](#)

By Brantley Thompson Elkins and Jordan Taylor

### 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 Recifense 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?"

### III

“Join them? Did I hear that right?”

“I’m afraid so, *garota*.” Cristina 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.

Romana slipped her hand around her closest lover’s waist. She knew. Body language is sometimes louder than words. “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. No doubt we can 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!”

“Ah well, 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?”

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 through 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 when 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. 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 aquí, 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 rumble. 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 during the occupation, then died in childbirth, along with the child. He had never married again.

Romana had never asked why; it was always something passed over in silence. So she didn't bring it up now.

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, then picked them up and carried them out to the river and dump them – the last thing Manoel needed was dead bodies on his property. She got a better look at their faces in the moonlight outside,

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.”

## VI



When Cristina and Romana met Xuxa again, they weren't in uniform, skivvies or otherwise. Neither was their *lider*: 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 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.



Another pass, and then a serpentine stretch leading to the fertile plains of Campo Velho. The Grande Estrada here 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.

## 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 Pereira. 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. She missed Leopoldo so much...

This latest would-be bed partner actually looked promising. 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 *lider* 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...a noite,” Romana agreed.

### XIII

Nobody noticed Cristina and Romana coming to Barros' place the next night, 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 reassured him. "If I weren't already involved..."

"Is she?"

"Nothing steady. She had a lot of fun after the libertação, with one of the men, but he was rotated out a year later."

She decided not to mention that she and Romana had had their own fun together since then. Leopoldo was cool with that, bless him. Besides, he had something between his legs that Romana didn't, and he knew how to use it... She'd been celibate here of necessity, like her partner, but she could still dream...

"Like Bidu," Barros said, interrupting her reverie. "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 thought 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?”

Cristina shook her head. “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, Jorge 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 Pênises – 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...

*Segure-se firme*, he thought as he brought his rifle to bear. *Deixá-os chegar mais perto*. 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, chattering in alarm.

*Droga!*

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 being 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 licor. Oscar forgot all 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 frescao slewed as Jânio lost control, caught by surprise. But his surprise could last only moments.

"Paradi!" he yelled. "Pare o barco!"

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

"Não se mexa! Eu ainda tenho mais balas."

But the boat's momentum was carrying it past Oscar, and he had to slog through the shallow water on his side of the cabeças to keep up with it. Yet Jânio 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 frescao, hands over the side to show he was unarmed.

“Saia,” Oscar told him. “Venha aqui.”

Jânio did as he was told. The water under the boat was three feet deep, and as he slogged 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 had ever been any fight in his quarry, 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.”

“Eu não acho que é engraçado,” Jânio muttered. “Bad luck for me and my side. Good luck for you and yours – no need to ask if you’re working for *them*. 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 paid to have a back door, Oscar realized, and Fernandes had several. The main access, the one Jânio had just used, was through a hidden trap door on an island that concealed a levador large enough to bring the frescao to the surface. That was for smuggling weapons and trainees. But there were emergency exits concealed beneath vegetation on both sides of the mountain.

The Fernandistas had started out with a natural cave and its natural entrance behind the waterfall, which was still used for couriers; but their military engineers, all veterans of the Aurean satrapy, had built the rest. Now there were weapons 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 too were officially on the payroll of the mill – and the mill owners 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 explained as he headed down the main drag. “Estou levando-o ao inspetor.”

Townpeople 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 it how hard it was to keep up with demand for wire by 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 they notice you’re missing?” Tônio asked.

Jânio shrugged.

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

“Are they in on all this?”

“Você acha que eu sou um idiota, para dizer-lhes?”

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

“Este não é o momento para o humor,” she protested. Que tal... Natalia?”

“Concordo,” said Tônio. “We must report this to the authorities.”

“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, especially since gold is involved. We’ll need all the reources of the Legião *and* the Policia *and* the military. We must strike in overwhelming force, as quickly as possible.”

“Official communications may be compromised,” Cristina insisted.

“And yours aren’t?”

“We have a private code,” she said, and explained the arrangement with Xuxa, but without specifying the details. “I’m supposed to call from a public phone.”

“If you’re going to be speaking in code, mine should be good enough.”

Cristina decided to yield 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 stuck to the protocol.

“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.”

TO BE CONTINUED

Thanks to Jecel Assumpção, Jr., for vetting the regional Brazilian Portuguese