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STRANGE NEW WORLD

MARCOS BOWLUS

The trip between Egypt and Jerusalem had taken hours already, the environmental shielding on his sand skimmer shone a faint orange, the barren wastes flying by below were scattered with husks of tanks and bones, scorch marks still clinging to a battle field no one wanted to remember. The desert heat was unbearable, the air conditioning system on Gregor's sand skimmer was whirring and clicking, the canned air it spat out smelled like burning plastic and ammonia. Gregor's pale skin didn't take the heat well, his head was dripping with sweat, and his shiny new Imperial envirosuit was losing the battle to keep his body cool. The layer of gel between his skin and the suit's interior mechanics felt like lubricant, but it also kept him hydrated. He hit a few buttons on the archaic machine's control panel, and his futile efforts to cool the machine rewarded him with nothing but a blast of hot air and smoke, then a screech of warning sirens.

As Gregor guided the sputtering vehicle through the air over a sea of sand, he glanced wearily at the clock on the control panel, its face cracked in four places. "Great, Opius is going to kill me," he muttered, pushing the throttle on his skimmer to the limits. The massive sea of sand and debris gave way to a small city after what seemed like days, the glowing semi-sphere of environmental shielding was flickering and hazy, but the symbol of the Emperor shone a bright, electric purple in the middle. That was where he wanted to go, but the only docking bay he could access was in the Provincial district. Gregor brought his craft to a hover outside of the docking bay shield gap, a hole in the net of energy absorbers, and began transmitting the codes Opius had given him. He hovered at the edge of the shield, the sand skimmer's altitude barely holding level, and Gregor could hardly see out the view ports. As Gregor waited, the air conditioning system began to smoke terribly; the air became thick and stank of electrical fire. The warning lights on his skimmer flashed and beeped and whined, but still Gregor hovered in the intense heat. The docking bay was empty, save for two Imperial fighters and the abandoned shell of a transport left over from the Great Purging. Gregor was coughing on the smoke pouring out of his air conditioning unit when the speaker clicked to life.

"These access codes are out of date. State your business in Jerusalem," crackled the receiver.

Gregor slammed his fist onto the speaker button, and shouted "Business with Opius Brutus! Craft in distress, let me land damn it!" Finally, the shield around the city opened for Gregor, and he brought the smoking, sputtering skimmer down on the landing pad. The skimmer hit the platform with a bang, the propulsion system, hover system and life support system lights all flashing wildly. A man approached the skimmer slowly, he

was dressed in a purple, nearly skintight envirosuit, its collar extending nearly to his chin, three insignia were on his shoulder, and a pistol was slung in a holster on his hip.

Typical

officer's flight gear, Gregor thought. His dark brown eyes were furrowed, but despite the intense heat the man was not sweating a bit. Gregor opened the hatch of his skimmer, a

cloud of smoke rolling out of the craft as all the system lights died in unison. Gregor leapt out of the smoking hulk, checking his pockets before he approached the officer, who was tapping his boot impatiently on the concrete. The envirosuit was squishy on his

skin, and he felt like he was going to pass out from all the smoke he'd inhaled, but he clenched his hand around a small box in his pocket, his key to freedom.

"You're two hours late, you ruined the skimmer, and I'll bet you haven't even got what you were supposed to bring us. I knew we never should have trusted you," the officer snapped through clenched teeth, his voice low and threatening.

"Don't get lippy with me, you piece of shit... I got what you asked for, and you worthless imperial dogs didn't even give me a decent ride," Gregor hissed, though his face remained calm. It didn't do to attract too much attention in these colonies. "What the hell would I have done if that thing had broken down out in the battle fields? Asked for a ride from one of the dead soldiers?"

The officer's lip twitched, his hand sliding to his pistol slowly as he stared silently at Gregor. He took a step towards Gregor, his wiry frame stretched at least six inches above Gregor. "Get one thing straight, you provincial vermin, Opius Brutus calls the shots in the Holy Lands, and if you piss him off, you'll join those dead heroes out there," he said quietly, then turned motioning for Gregor to follow him.

They walked out of the docking bay and into the town, sirens and commands to remain indoors, shouted through loudspeakers suspended by small jet systems, were more

than enough to drown out any conversation. Gregor spat on the ground, the moisture drying up almost before it even hit. He walked behind the man, glancing about the city. There were men lying in the streets, some dead, some only missing a limb, and the houses looked like they could fall at any time. Others were hiding in their houses, some deformed from all the radiation and mutant strains of disease in the air, others mutilated from their fighting in the Great Purging. Ancient relics of the Islamic Front could still be seen beneath the Imperial construction, what little had been done. Great spires proclaiming the will of Allah had been scoured with lasers, and now bore Imperial doctrine. Ancient mosques were in ruins, the streets were just paths cut through the rubble. Posters calling for the removal of 'Opius the Mad', probably put up by the men lying wounded and dead on the road, were being torn down by legionnaires, their metallic

body armor and large ion rifles were more than enough to stop protesters without force. The unit of Legionnaires fell quickly into step with Gregor and the officer as they passed,

and Gregor suddenly wondered if this were all worth it. The contact on Mars had told him that Opius would pardon all of his Imperial offences, and pay him handsomely, if he

brought a package to Jerusalem. Now he wondered exactly what he was carrying.

The dusty streets were lit with an unnatural, bright purple glow once Gregor was led into the Imperial District. The sound of sirens died almost immediately once they passed through the checkpoint. The city's environmental shielding under the Imperial Banner was top of the line; the citizens in this area all looked healthy, religious, and terrified. There were Imperial legionnaires marching along the packed earth everywhere,

their segmented body armor looked nearly angelic, the Holy Cross imprinted on the heads, chests and shoulders of every suit. Their short barreled ion rifles had a constant blue light in the barrel and electrical hum coming from them, misleading the naïve to their deadly nature. Gregor had seen the carnage of the end of the Great Purging, entire

squads of men ripped to pieces by the weapons, their wounds cauterized by the heat. Gregor glanced at one of the legionnaires following the officer and him, and noticed that their armor was definitely more powerful, their Imperial sigils purple instead of silver. Gregor swallowed hard and tried to keep an even pace, Urban Cohorts were the rivals of

the Praetorian Guard, who were only deployed in the Imperial Heartlands, and were known to keep order in colonies by any means necessary. The Urban Cohorts kept straight ranks and their weapons were at ease, but Gregor knew one wrong move would mean his life. As they entered into the provincial citadel, he saw why the citizens were terrified. Men, women and children were crucified in the citadel gardens, legionnaires were using native people for weapons training, blood was running through drainage ditches throughout the yard. The screams were drowned out, mostly, by the sounds of ancient classical music, something called "Beethoven". The gates, reinforced and magnetically locked, slammed shut behind them, and the officer spun on his heels to face

Gregor.

"So provincial, what do you think of the home of Opius Brutus?" shouted the officer over the screams, music, and electrical discharges, a smug smile on his face. He

had his pistol in his hand, and the cohort soldiers had begun circling around him. "Does the artwork meet your liking?"

Gregor smiled as evenly as he could, he hoped that the sweat would be taken for the heat. He tried to keep his voice steady, his heart pounding in his ears. "Opius has a fine taste for gardening. As for me, I'm just here to drop this off," Gregor casually said, pulling a small case out of his pocket. It was a dull silver box, devoid of any markings. "Opius sure wouldn't want it to be opened without him there." The officer lowered his pistol when Gregor spoke, grimacing at the thought of Opius' wrath should the life form escape. Opius' plans were many, but he would not let this one fail.

"Fine then, provincial, you'll go and see Governor Brutus," The officer hissed, waving at the Urban Cohort. The soldiers acknowledged the officer, turning and joining in the slaughter.

Gregor was led through the garden to a large, bright purple, imposing, and spiked door. There were gun holes, laser wires, and probably a few more security systems on

the door, and there was a group of four Legionnaires standing at perfect attention, despite the blood and screams. The door opened vertically, the spikes and wire sliding in with a cacophony of clicks and bangs. The hallway behind it was lined in columns, each bearing a symbol of one of the Imperial Houses. All fourteen of them, seven to a side, save for the Brutii, were defaced. Fecal matter, blood, paint, bullets, all sorts of things had been sprayed and shot into the columns, some so badly damaged it looked like they could fall at any moment. The smell of the room was horrendous, decay and corruption, the bitter metallic smell of arterial blood mixing with the rank foulness of human excrement. A single door was at the end of the hall, no guards anywhere. The officer merely stood at the entry way, motioning for Gregor to continue. Gregor swallowed hard again, the sweat covering his body felt as disgusting as the slickness of the floor under his boots. He stepped into the room, the door behind him illuminating the grisly scene he was walking steadily into. When Gregor was halfway into the room, the door behind him slammed shut with frightening speed. A loud hiss of hydraulics was Gregor's only clue that it was closing, and when the light went out, he knew he was stuck.

Four years in Mars Colony 2 had taught Gregor to survive in absolute darkness, the enforced labor system was little more than slavery. They only sent scientists and soldiers from the actual Imperial class, the rest of the four thousand colonists were Provincials, like Gregor. To become an Imperial, all one had to do was join an Imperial House, and accept Imperial training, a very flowery way of saying brainwashing. Everyone on Earth had to bow to Imperial law, but Imperial Doctrine was only taught to those who accepted the training. Gregor had earned his place on Mars Colony when he crippled a member of the Maximii, one of the Senatorial houses, in a bar fight. The Brutii, resident masters of Mars, had offered him a way out, and now it looked like he was just going to die in a worse place than Mars. The stench in the pitch black room was working its way into Gregor's head, his footsteps in the squishy, slick floor echoed off the high ceilings. He worked his way towards the door, keeping himself straight by putting his feet directly in front of each other as he walked. After what seemed like hours sliding his feet along in the reeking darkness, Gregor's hands touched metal, the door he hoped. He fumbled around on the wall, the fingers on his envirosuit were slimy on the inside, but the wall felt sticky, the contrast was horrendous. He finally found a small panel by the door, and pressed the only button on it. The door opened, into a small, round room, the floor covered in a film of water and foulness. The room was perfectly white on the walls, and there were receptacles for clothing. Gregor didn't like the idea of taking off his envirosuit, he'd grown accustomed to the strange feeling, and being nude was simply not an option. He stepped slowly into the room, his footfalls releasing small

splashes of the film on the floor, and looked for a second exit. Before he could do much, a jet of water began spraying from the roof, washing the foul fluid off of Gregor and out of the room through drains in the floor. After the water finished spraying, the door behind Gregor closed slowly, and a door opened into a brightly lit, clean, well furnished room.

There were lounging chairs, tables covered in fruit, and men in white gowns, their head shaved, walking around serving several men, all wearing green and white robes, seated around a large table. There was a man standing at the head of the table, seemingly praying, his head raised high, and his Imperial robe flowing around him like a purple aura. He was middle aged, his black hair fading towards grey, but his face was still firm, his eyes and mouth closed firmly. Gregor stepped into the room very slowly, he tried to be as quiet as he could, keeping his feet close to the ground as he walked, but one of the gowned men saw him quickly, and began trying to escort him towards the table. The men at the table heard, and turned to look at what was happening. The man at the head of the table's eyes locked on Gregor as they shot open, piercing grey eyes, bloodshot and dilated. He opened his mouth and spat out something pink, a spray of red staining the otherwise white room as it flew through the air. What hit the table was something pink, something that looked like it should be living. It looked like a tongue, chewed and pulpy. As he began to speak, blood ran out of his mouth, trailing down his chin and onto his purple robe.

"Ahh... So my little present has finally arrived," the man said, his voice deep, but cracked and hoarse. If not for the depth of his voice, it would seem this man hissed, rather than spoke. He stepped around the table, trailing his fingertips across the shoulders of the men he passed, their eyes all on Gregor, their faces were all bearing bite scars, some even missing parts of ears or a nose. "And who are you... the provincial my father sent to do the task? Hrrm... You wish to know what you are carrying, I presume."

"Your... excellence," Gregor stammered his stomach twisting like a knife was in his gut, his knees straining not to buckle. "I honestly don't care. All I know is that I was told to bring this to you, and I'd be free."

The man, who Gregor presumed to be Opius Brutus, Opius the Mad, motioned for Gregor to follow him. They walked through the white, pristine room to a sitting deck, hanging out of the wall and surrounded by a nearly invisible layer of environmental shielding. The view was on the wastes of the Great Purging battle sites. The desolation was complete, no living thing, plant or animal, moved in those sands, and the sand looked like a sea because of the intense heat distortion. The waves of ruin were almost more than Gregor could stand. The two men were silent for a time, a small smile graving the lips of Opius. He closed the door between the deck and the main room, enclosing himself

in the room with Gregor. He extended his hand, stained red around the fingers and palm,
and into this Gregor hesitantly pressed the container in his pocket.

“Tell me, provincial, do you know anything of the Great Purging?” asked Opius, wiping the blood from his mouth with the sleeve of his robe. “Do you know why we Imperials fought so hard to bring our order and prosperity to the world?” Gregor was dumbstruck, he couldn’t believe this man. The Holy Roman Empire had done nothing but make the planet nearly uninhabitable, and most people resented their rule silently. He

simply stood, staring as Opius seated himself on a white lounging chair. The purple robed man leaned back luxuriously, hanging his feet over the edge. He motioned for Gregor to sit across from him, and Gregor did, very slowly, with a decided squishing sound from his suit.

“The Purging was a noble effort, but it is simply impossible to bring true order to the world, or at least it has been. You provincials do not see the glories for what they are, and reject our noble efforts to change you to betterment,” Opius continued, his eyes lighting up and his face becoming animated, lively, and all the more terrifying. He held up the container, showing it to Gregor as though he’d never seen it. “This is the key. With this, all will see the power of our empire, all will kneel before the Emperor, and his voice the Pope. None can stop it, and you my friend, will be the bearer of that news. You will live through this only to tell the world what you have done. The Purging will begin again, the greatest war this planet will ever see. My father, he will fight me, but you, you are the enemy still.” With that, Opius opened the container, a fine red mist sifting into the air.

The smell it released was horrendous, something like badly rotted flesh burning. Gregor’s eyes watered, his lungs closed to the noxious stuff. Opius the Mad breathed deeply, his bloodshot eyes growing clear and his mouth drawn tight in agony, yet he looked like he was laughing. Gregor shot up from his seat, gagging and squinting, and slammed his fist onto the button to open the door. The gas, which was filling the air quickly, flooded out into the room beyond. None of the men at the table tried to stop Gregor as he stumbled through the room, coughing and gagging, and out into the chamber he’d come through before. The hallway he’d entered through was open to him,

and he nearly collapsed when he reached the foul room beyond. The final door was still closed, but the door locked glowed green, showing it would let him pass. Gregor took a few seconds to gather himself again, his lungs still burning and his eyes dry as a bone, before stepping back out into the courtyard.

The legionnaires in the courtyard were waiting for him; their weapons pointed at him, the officer standing by a pile of corpses laughing softly. They led Gregor to the gate, and the officer stepped towards him as they opened it for him. “Goodbye, provincial... you’ve done more for us than you could ever imagine,” he said, his eyes cold and his smile fake and mocking. They did not stop Gregor when he turned to run, nor did anyone follow him as he half ran, half stumbled, the whole way to the docking bay. His craft was still sitting there, smoking and useless, but Gregor dared not stay here

any longer. He was coughing violently now, his eyes burning and his skin felt like it was on fire. He moved farther down the docking bay, into another hanger, and saw a small, fast imperial fighter, open and waiting for its pilot, who was talking with a docking crewman. Gregor knew stealth was out of the question, his violent hacking and inability to stand straight ruled it out. With every ounce of strength he had left, Gregor sprinted for the machine. The pilot shouted for him to stop, but before he could get his gun out Gregor was in the fighter closing the lid. In seconds, Gregor had started it up and set the engine to full throttle. The blast of heat from the engine kicking up was certain to have killed both the pilot and the dock worker, the flames filling the room behind the fighter as it took off.

The fighter took off quickly, its deflective shielding allowed it to slice right through the city's inferior energy barrier and whip into the air with frightening speed. Gregor was up in the air over the battle field before he could even get his bearings, trying to guide the unfamiliar craft on the best judgment he could. He knew he'd never make it to a city before they shot him down or he crashed, but he had to let someone know what had happened. He'd let something terrible fall into the hands of a madman, and the world was going to suffer for it. Gregor pressed his thumb on the communications tab when it blinked red, releasing a hiss of static and a furious bombardment of threats from the controller in the dock tower. Gregor switched channels quickly to an open channel, and struggled to speak.

"Attention, anyone who can hear me... Opius Brutus is mad, he's got some... terrible new disease... I gave it to him..." Gregor gasped into the communicator. A cacophony of voices began responding, asking for a repeat, for anything else, for clarification, but Gregor was too confused to respond. His vision was growing murky, his body felt light and cold, but he was still controlling the craft as easily as before. His thoughts were turning cloudier, angrier, all he could think of was revenge. He looked at his hands, watched them coolly bringing the fighter around to face another fighter which had just flown out over the battle field. He could feel his body losing control of itself, and something like hands trailing along his skin, and he thought he could hear voices, whispers, in his ears, but couldn't understand or look to see who was speaking. With a last, desperate gasp of air, Gregor's mind gave in to the force that had invaded his body, and he never saw the ion blast tearing its way through the vessel and sending his vessel crashing down into the city again.