

TEXT ADVENTURE

*'THE
SCARLET
WOMAN'*

by
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Lieber

1

October, 4064.

Mars.

Βαβυλων η μεγάλη, η μητηρ των πορνων
και των βδελυγματα της γης

Piro stared at the pink planet and then stared at the neon green words inscribed upon its surface.

"The fuck?" he asked, to no one.

The RAGNAROK set down near the southwestern corner of the B. Visible from space, each character turned out to have been a computer projection—that is to say, metadata—and not, he now concluded, a typographical feature of the planet's surface. Piro wiped the annoyance from his short-term memory and proceeded to investigate his immediate surroundings.

"Sand," he remarked into his commlink.

A dust storm loomed.

Piro erected a small shelter and inserted his probes into the cool, indifferent sand.

The RAGNAROK returned to orbit.

2

October, 4048.

Mars.

Not much had changed. The red sand continued to look and feel very much like red sand.

Piro was nonplussed. She just sort of laid there.

Nevermind, execute the mission.

After several hours walking he happened upon a couch, aligned against the remains of a partially collapsed wall. The structure, what was left of it, appeared to have been furnished in a cheap, spruce wood

paneling. The whole mess stood isolated in the middle of a dry salt lake. Pages from an old magazine were stuffed into crevices in the wall.

Piro looked behind the couch.

The panther stared back at him, eyes piercing his face. The cat stood poised upon a pile of rubbish. Silent communication seemed telepathic in nature. In any case, he could understand what the cat was trying to say.

These questions were... above his pay grade.

Piro logged into his weapon.

3

October, 4064.

Mars.

His chronometer seemed to have repaired itself.

Fine, proceed.

Making his way across the desert, Piro retrieved various artifacts. Shards of quartz, loose wreckage from old aircraft, some miscellaneous paperwork.

The airfield was in poor repair.

Piro filed his report and then turned in for the evening, setting up camp on the far side of the dry salt lake. From his backpack he produced several small containers: tinned meats and cheese, a beer, 500 mg acetaminophen.

Disposing of the consumables, he thought of his father.

That night, as always, he suffered no dreams.

The RAGNAROK settled into a silent landing on the dry lake bed. Cargo doors unfurled, her invisible crew dispersed one-by-one into the desert sunlight. Peering through the morning air, each crew member spied the Martian vista, paused briefly to reflect, and then got back to work. The concern for efficiency was evidenced by the smooth transit from observation to action. Loading proceeded more quickly than was necessary for government work.

Piro was careful moving up the boarding ramp. Uncharacteristically groggy, he felt uncertain of his precise location. This would prove troublesome if he drifted off course. But, as he ventured further into the craft his confidence seemed to return. This was, after all, his home.

Safely in orbit, Piro input a request for his usual hot tea. This, finally, brought him fully awake. He perused crew reports and then drummed his fingers on the arm-rest of his captain's chair. Slowly, his thoughts returned to his mission.

A Martian base might prove suitable, given the proper funding.

Piro submitted random queries to the RAGNAROK, hoping for some interesting juxtaposition amongst the syntax errors. When this approach failed he decided to resume the surface of the planet. Further study would confirm his intuition. Or, failing that, he could simply ask the cat.

The RAGNAROK complied.

October, 4048.

Mars.

"Isn't she smothering you?" asked the panther.

"She's always like this. You wouldn't understand." Piro considered what he wanted to say next. Then he added: "It's her way. My mother is from a different time."

He punched in a quick status report, fired it off to the RAGNAROK. Approval received, he felt free to resume the conversation.

"I admit, sometimes I don't know what she wants from me."

"Breaks you down, but neglects to build you back up," continued the cat. "How does that prepare you for the future?"

He conceded it was a fair question.

Piro observed as the panther settled back on its haunches and then flattened out on the rubbish pile, resting its face on its paws. Suddenly, he realized that its markings had changed. He looked again and now there seemed to be two cats crouching behind the couch, both occupying the same space on top of the stack of debris. With the interference pattern it was difficult to tell where one panther began and the other ended. Their tails seemed to be intertwined. On second thought, perhaps both panthers shared the same tail. He shook his head and squinted his eyes just as the fluctuations finally settled down.

Then, silence.

This seemed to conclude the discussion.

October, 4064.

Mars.

Once again aboard the RAGNAROK, Piro reviewed recent events. One cat that had become two. One set of markings that had translated themselves into another. The persistent question of the obscure architecture and furnishings that were situated amongst unusual geography. Finally, the collapse of the waveform.

Wary of misunderstandings, Piro decided to undocument the mission. Unanswered questions might sour the acquisition program. Budgets were tight, while imaginations still yearned for controversy. The process would be difficult enough without accusations of poor planning or incompetence.

The RAGNAROK informed that orbit had been obtained. The invisible crew, as always, awaited instructions. Piro continued to pace the bridge, thoughts detached from his present surroundings. At length, he issued a command.

Forward, Mother.

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