

“Passengers please vid left, best Ring view,” the stewardess said.

Ten thousand Ks below, the Ring slowly spun, the freshly departed home, the vast plaz span that encircled Terra. Passengers’ eyecams flickered red, white, red, as they videdd pix to rel/frenz Solwide. Although steadily gaining speed, the *Gaitania* was still close enough that Sidi could see different Zones, the Hibernizone’s blinding green, the white, snow-bound Zlav Zone, and the Darwin Zone’s oddly shifting red and brown.

“Stewardess, toadjuce cocktail please,” Sidi said.

“Certainly, sir.”

Bulky yet chic in an orange grav suit, the four-legged stewardess moved with a lowgrav's spidery grace. Three gnomish Marzzs, already upmess from toadjuice and splendidium, ordered more as she passed. The gambler and his woman ordered Kaff.

Janya sighed and tossed back long, lustrous, jet-black hair.

"Two already, Sidi," she said. "You're upmess. Isn't Ring famous Janya Pribarat Popsing 2500 company enough?"

"You make me want to celebrate," Sidi said. "The Ring's most beautiful, popular woman and me on an all expense paid trip to Luna's most exclusive pleazurepod. Just to write a puff piece in the *Holo Times*. Of course I'll drink."

The stewardess served the cocktail. Sidi sipped chilled, dark gray sludge. A psychotonic spasm rippled outward from his limbic cortex.

"Mention us in the article," the gambler said, small, nervous, in a flashy, poorly cut bizcloak. "Phayd Patel Gamer 3250 and Xiao Chan Pro 6500, both from the Wide Open Zone."

"I'm paid to come," the woman said. Tall and robust, the tawny woman was covered with phosphorescent tattoos, universal symbols of her calling.

"No offense, but how do you rate a trip to Ca'Paradiso?" Sidi asked Phayd. "You're no big cred punter."

Phayd grinned and said, "Big enough to win high holo karte five times at Da Arkadyathon. This is my prize from Lord Autocrator Teddon Wydboy himself."

"Congratulations," Janya said. She turned away and looked through a port.

Seamlessly fused protons and antiprotons from the antimatter engine propelled *Gaitania* Lunaward. The Ring was now a black, featureless band around Terra.

Luna drew near. Blotches burgeoned and resolved into sharp-edged craters, seas, and rilles. Gleaming

pleasurepods, brightly colored dots when viewed from the Ring, stood revealed as immense plaz domes that spanned whole craters. The *Gaitania* fired counter rockets and entered Luna's feeble gravity. Expertly steered by her captain, the luxury Solship slipped into a deteriorating orbit that led to the near side's southernmost crater.

The *Gaitania* approached the convex plazdome that covered the former Bailly Crater like a boil's soft white head. Probed by the Solship's blunt tip, the dome's gelatinous skin gave way like a balloon prodded by a finger only to slowly part and admit the sleek racing craft and seal off the vacuum of space. The ship hovered over a vast green bowl, an enormous spread of terrain covered with towering hardwood trees and palms.

"Vid, Janya, nothing but jungle," Sidi said.

"Scary," Janya said.

The *Gaitania* landed on open, level ground.

"Passengers disembark now. Hope flight enjoyed," the stewardess said.

The entry hatch's doors opened. Typically rude, the Marrzrs barged ahead of everyone. Sidi chuckled, shrugged, and stepped out after the others. Semi-tropical heat and a vegetative reek hit him. They stood in the courtyard of a red marble Italianate villa big as a two-K Indoo Zone condoblok on its side. A muzoplayer emitted an antique Terran tune.

"Ah, my human guests," a deep, loud voice called.

A biojeered giant strode over. Although massively muscled and over two mikes tall, he walked with lithe, quick grace. Dark haired and bearded, he wore a Renaissance prince's somber black.

"I greet everyone personal," he said. "Meet the big guy himself, the Dominus Giovanni. Welcome to my little piece of heaven, over one hundred thousand square Ks."

Introductions were made. Giovanni ignored Phayd, complimented Janya, but gave his real attention to Sidi.

“You’re the journo who’ll make this place big,” he said.

“That’s me. Sidi ibn Farouk Journo 2500, top wallah *Indoo Zone Holo Times*. Believe it, Dominus. Every Ring punter will spend big cred if Ca’Paradiso’s luxe like they say.”

“Nothing finer in Sol. You folks don’t want to rest, do you? Why not take a tour? You can see the villa later. Bassotto!”

Thuds grew in volume and intensity. An enormous, long-necked beast slowly trotted into the courtyard, the biggest animal Sidi had ever seen. A luxurious howdah was fitted to his incredibly broad back.

“This is Bassotto. My hunting baluchitherium,” Giovanni said. “Trained him myself.”

“That’s right, boss,” Bassotto said, an overpowering rumble.

“Put your head down, you big hump,” Giovanni said.

The baluchitherium lowered his massive, shovel-shaped head to the ground.

“You don’t expect me to climb that,” Janya whispered to Sidi.

Sidi said, “Come on. I’ll help you.”

Steps and handgrips cunningly grafted onto the monster’s thick, scaly neck made the ascent surprisingly easy. With everyone aboard, the baluchitherium raised his head. Giovanni whistled sharply. Mental leashes undone, velociraptors leapt from their cages. They raced to the baluchitherium. Titanium steel muzzles bound the savage reptiles’ jaws.



“They’re the best for smelling and flushing out game,” Giovanni said. “Drives ‘em nuts they can’t eat it, but that’s too bad. Right, boys?”

“Yeah, yeah,” the velociraptors rasped through steel bars. “Prey good, food good, yeah, yeah.”

They set off into the jungle. A short distance behind, two microcephs followed, huge, smooth, bulge-muscled cyborgs with tiny, featureless heads, one bright yellow, the other purple. In a short time, they were in forest primeval, triple canopy jungle, endless, raw nature without hint of civilization.

“Biggest near side pleazurepod,” Giovanni said. “Ever see this much green space?”

“The Hibernizone is considerably larger,” Sidi said.

Giovanni grunted. “Only Autocrators see the Hibernizone.”

“Maha Autocrator, His Maj O’Doone, the Himself, Lord of the Hibernizone, invited me for interview. The Himself counts me as personal rel/fren. I have on many occasions public and private also met the Autocrator Singh D’Souza, Lord of the Indoo Zone.”

“Autocrators may rule the Ring,” Giovanni said, “but they don’t have power like mine. Even the Autocrators have to obey laws, follow rules. Here, I make the rules.”

Giovanni appeared angry. Sidi tactfully shut up.

The howdah had a full bar. Sidi had another toadjuce cocktail, as did the Marzzs and Phayd. Even Janya broke down and had a drink. Yet toadjuce gave no pick up. The dark jungle was too big and creepy for Sidi’s taste. An Indoo Zone native, he missed humanity’s constant crush, being surrounded by his own kind.

There was a constant scuffle below as small animals fled the velociraptors and Bassotto’s monstrous hooves. Savage shrieks and strange cries rang out from near and far. Velociraptors darted in and out from the path, constantly on the hunt for prey. Periodically, Bassotto would pause to raise his long neck and scan the treetops. Giovanni had a rail rifle in his lap, a toadjuck cocktail in one hand. He set the drink

down, picked the rifle up, and sighted down the durium barrel.

“You can bring down anything with this. Sidi, you want one?”

Sidi laughed and said, “It’s a stereotype Indoo Zoners are non-violent, but I’ll live up to it. No thanks, Dominus.”

“How about you, little man?” Giovanni said to Phayd. “Can you handle it?”

Phayd said, “Better not. I just shoot game holos.”

Giovanni chuckled. “I didn’t think so.”

“Trust me, Dominus, he can’t handle anything,” Xiao said.

Giovanni laughed even harder.

A velociraptor bolted into the forest. The others followed. Wild, fearful screams rent the air.

“That sounds like people,” Janya said.

“The velos flushed some hominims,” Giovanni said. “Nothing to brag about, but they’re prey. Push closer, Bassotto.”

The baluchitherium cleared jungle with his bulk. A velociraptor ran up, whirled, and dropped into a three-point crouch, front claw pointed at a thick stand of hardwood trees.

“Everyone nice and quiet,” Giovanni murmured.

He put the rail rifle to his shoulder and aimed. Guests’ eyecams linked with his. Synthesiums activated. Sidi looked down the riflescope, deep into the stand of trees. Like the savage velociraptors who flushed the quarry, he smelled cornered prey’s sharp sweat stink of fear and desperation. The red scope zeroed in on a face, low-browed, misshapen, but still distinctly human, a glimpse of fear-stricken eyes.

Obliterated in a spray of red mist.

Previously stock still, Bassotto turned his mallet shaped head.

“Nice shot, boss,” he said and snatched some leaves off a nearby tree.

A velociraptor scuttled up, a limp, slender, down clad female hominim in its foreclaws. Her shattered head swayed.

“Prey, fresh kill, boss, take, me hungry, take,” the frantic dinosaur said.

Giovanni snapped his fingers. The yellow microceph took the body from the velociraptor, climbed Bassotto’s downstretched neck, stored the dead hominim in the howdah’s refrigerated case, and returned to its post.

“Time to relax at the villa,” Giovanni said. “What do you say, Janya?”

“That sounds wonderful, Dominus,” Janya said. “The howdah’s comfortable, but my hair’s a mess in this humid heat. Don’t you think we should go back, Sidi?”

“Yes, it must be dinner time,” Sidi said.

Bassotto slowly backed out. The velociraptors scurried ahead.

“Shhheeeeaggghhhhaaiiiiee!”

Everyone’s head snapped toward the unholy shriek. Atop a tree a muscular male hominim openly shook his fist and screamed.

“The alpha’s angry,” Giovanni said.

Rather than shoot, he set the rifle down, cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, “Come to dinner tonight. See what’s served.”

“Sic the raptors on him, boss,” Bassotto rumbled.

“We got what we need. Just go home,” Giovanni said.

They returned in silence except for the Marzzs who celebrated Giovanni’s kill until they were insensible. Sidi thought about a drink, but caught a filthy look from Janya and decided no. Obviously furious, she glared the whole way back. Bassotto shambled into the courtyard. The microcephs drew the massive granite gates shut.

Sidi was glad to descend and reach solid ground, but still dreaded the tongue-lashing from Janya to come. The villa was the height of sybaritic luxury, grand halls with

sweeping, curved pink marble staircases and Lunar gold walls. Cooling fountains sprayed fine wines and scented water while servbots offered chilled mango sharbays and hot Kaff. Janya pulled Sidi into a side room.

“How dare you take me to this nightmare?” she whispered. “He’s horrible. Is this your idea of a nice vacation, Sidi?”

“Did I know he’s crazy?” Sidi whispered back. “I thought he was going to shoot something big like a T. Rex or a mammoth. Not that.”

“Hey, you guys having sex in there or what?” Giovanni said. “Come out. Time for dinner.”

Janya punched Sidi and left the room. Sidi followed her, rubbing his arm. The dining hall’s walls soared to a domed glass ceiling. They sat at a mahogany table, Giovanni at the head, higher than everyone else in a teakwood chair, Janya and Sidi to his right, Phayd and Xiao opposite. The Marzzs were absent, already well out of it.

“Antipasto,” Giovanni said.

Servbots scurried forward. Waldos set down small plates heaped with delicacies, monstrous prawns, caper stuffed anchovies, meaty olives, sweet green and purple grapes, all on beds of broadleaf lettuce on gold filigreed china. Hungry, Sidi tucked in. To his relief, Janya followed suit. Food might soothe her. Other servbots poured white wine into silver chased crystal goblets, chilled and dry, deliciously refreshing. Sidi felt better.

“Like it?” Giovanni said, quite the genial host now. “Now the primo.”

More food was brought in, steaming polenta cakes, plum risotto, and small bowls of minestrone. Sidi was thoroughly enjoying the meal. Even Janya seemed more relaxed.

“Now the main event, the secondo,” Giovanni said. “The evening highlight.”

A heavy-duty servbot trundled out. A large domed silver salver lay atop the serve surface. The servbot stopped before the table. A waldo plucked the dome off with a theatrical flourish. Surrounded by dill sprigs and radishes, lay the cooked remains of a female Australopithecus, beheaded, skinned, and coated in aspic.

“Ain’t that pretty,” Giovanni said. “Sidi, ribs or thigh meat?”

Sidi was about to protest strict vegetarianism until he recalled prawns and anchovies wolfed down just before. Fortunately, Giovanni turned to Phayd.

“What about you, scrawny? Want some long pig?”

Phayd fiddled with his collar and drank heavily from his goblet.

“Well, thanks, Dominus, but I got a delicate stomach, can’t eat too rich-”

“Too good to eat my food, is that it?” Giovanni said.

“No, it’s just that-” Phayd said.

“I should shove bush meat down your throat and then do your woman in front of you,” Giovanni said.

“That sounds like fun,” Xiao said

Giovanni roared. He slapped a thigh, drank deep from his goblet, only to violently spew. Drops caught Sidi in the face and repulsed him also. Piss, rancid too.

“Who did that?” Giovanni roared.

“I did actually,” Phayd said.

Sidi was amazed. Phayd had grown tall and broad shouldered. A squeaking, hesitant voice was deep and confident, weak, homely features replaced by an Olympian brow, dark locks, and an aquiline contour. The bizcloak had become a maha cred opaque suit.

Giovanni’s right fist lashed out in a direct blow for Phayd’s chin only to halt mid-thrust.

“You still don’t understand?” Phayd said.

Giovanni's hand looped round and smashed into his own mouth, a sledgehammer blow. He rocked back and clutched at his jaw, blood streaming.

"Microcephs," Giovanni ordered.

Multi-hued microcephs hustled into the hall to protect their master.

"Xiao," Phayd said.

The tall Indolese leaped from her chair. Toplike, she whirled around the great hall. Flying fists and feet punched microcephs, each dead in the solar plexus. Crumpled, shattered, they fell. She landed in her chair transformed, petite, Aziaese, hair black like Janya, trim form enclosed in a red shamsheen ao dai. Frozen, open mouthed, Giovanni stared at his ruined cyborgs.

"Having come under false pretenses, I should properly introduce myself," Phayd said. "Autocrator Teddon Wydboy, Lord of the Wide Open Zone. My loyal minion Lady Hsiang Hao."

Despite the last few moments' stress, Sidi's mind went wild. Wydboy, Da Playa Autocrator, incognito on a Lunar pleasurepod, with him the only journo around. What a scoop.

"Giovanni Luciano Bizzer 3000," Wydboy continued. "The 'Dominus.' An invented title. The nerve. Upstart. Autocrators are the only aristocrats in Sol. Can you autocrate, make anything from nothing? What do you say, Giovanni? Speak."

Giovanni's unfrozen mouth frantically worked.

"Lord Teddon, I meant no offense. My neighbors got fancy titles, like the Prince of the Aitken Basin. I'm just keeping up with the Lunars."

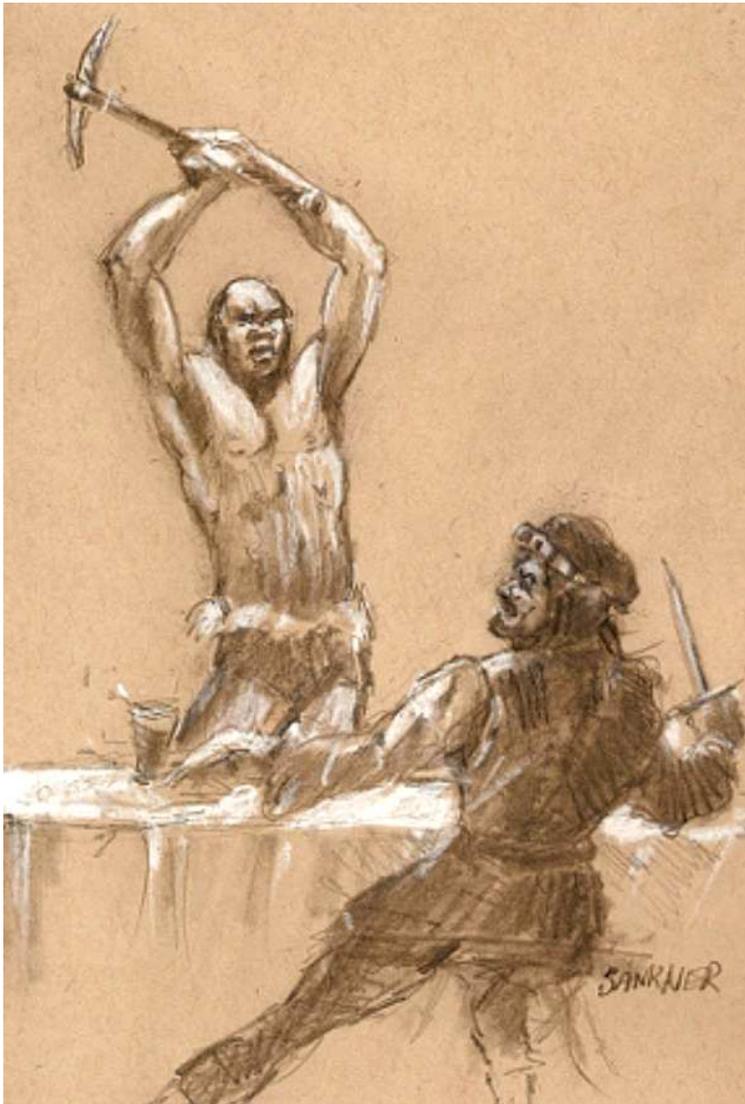
Wydboy sneered.

"Lunar pocket lords. As if you held real title to your pleasurepods. Luna, Terra, the Ring, and Marzz, Sol belongs to the Autocrators."

"But why punish me?" Giovanni said.

“You forget your station,” Wydboy said. “You ape your betters. You’re a cannibal. Monster.”

“The secondo, Lord Teddon?” Giovanni said. “I eat bush meat every week.”



“Let’s see what your forgotten guest thinks.”

A male *Australopithecus robustus* materialized. Short but stocky, he floated frozen a few centimeters off the floor, teeth bared in a threat face, rock in one hand, stout club in another.

“Remember the alpha you taunted?” Wydboy said. “Here he is in a bad mood.” “No, Lord Teddon, please no,” Giovanni said.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Wydboy said. “It’ll be fair.”

Giovanni was freed, but the alpha was too. He leaped over the table. Giovanni grabbed a sharp knife to stab him. The hominin was too fast. His club caught Giovanni square on the left temple. The big man slumped into his chair. The alpha brought the sharpened flint down onto Giovanni’s head

repeatedly. In seconds, the arrogant pocket lord was reduced to a lifeless, gory wreck.

The alpha raised bloodied weapons high.

“Krrreeeagggghh,” he shrieked and disappeared.

“Janya, Sidi,” Wydboy said. “I apologize. You both must have found this quite upsetting. Neither of you are children, however. What happened is an object lesson about who really owns Luna. I expect you to publish that in the *Holo Times*, Sidi.”

“Yes, Lord,” Sidi said. “But how do we get back?”

“The *Gaitania*’s ready. You should arrive in time for a special edition.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Janya said. “But what about the Marzzs?”

“They’re the new owners,” Wydboy said. “Justice has proven lucrative as well. Leave that bit out, Sidi.”

“Yes, Lord,” Sidi said.

“Very good. You’re clever even for a journo and useful. Check your Net cred on your return. You’ll find a sizable transfer. Yours too, Janya. I give you my best.”

Lord Teddon and Lady Hsiang Hao dematerialized. Sidi and Janya were left alone with Giovanni’s battered body.

“He autocrated back to the Ring,” Janya said. “Why not take us too?”

“No explaining Autocrators,” Sidi said. “Follow his advice and let’s go.”

Sidi and Janya fled Ca’Paradiso. They left the old owner murdered at his dinner table, the new owners passed out drunk.

“This is the last time I go anywhere with you, Sidi,” Janya said.

“I don’t blame you,” Sidi replied.

ROBERT SANKNER – BIOGRAPHY



I was born in 1951, raised in New Jersey, and now live in Hamilton, Ohio. I graduated Newark State College in 1973 with a B.A. degree in Fine Arts. I entered the Army in 1975 and retired as Lieutenant Colonel from the US Army Reserve. I have been throughout the continental US as well as Hawaii, Germany, Panama and Afghanistan.

I started entering art shows at the age of 16 and continued throughout my life. I won awards in Army-wide art competitions.

In 1992 I was selected to be a member of the Army Art Team sent to Panama to document Army activities in that country and produced over a hundred pieces of art. This work is now part of the US Army Center of Military History Art Collection.

I collect pulp magazines and books as well as doing the occasional piece of artwork.