

The Carnival of Dredge

By Tim Macauley

The *Triumph* was all anyone had talked about for weeks. It was the exact shot in the arm that Dredge had been hankering for. A sense of purpose. A reason to gather other than war.

It was the twilight hour now—the gloaming—with the horizon bearing just a smidge of indigo and midnight blue on an otherwise black canvas. Far to the northwest, the Melding’s curtain shimmered, rippling the atmosphere like the *aurora australis*. To the east, runner lights blinked on and off from the broken bow of the Arclight, jutting prominently from the sea.

Two men stood in a shadowed alcove at the back of the open coliseum. They wore charcoal-black tunics and matching dungarees with oily leather dusters that hung about their shoulders down to their shins. The absence of their battleframes gave them a much smaller stature than normal. The taller, broader man leaned against the alcove’s wall and scanned the audience below. His neural-net had been tricked out and tweaked with numerous illegal underground mods. The VoightKampff scan that he was performing analyzed the respiration, heart rate and blush response of the revelers. Unfortunately, from his present vantage point behind the crowd, he was unable to scan their eye movement, which seriously impaired his survey.

“I gotta say, 16,000 potential perps all gathered in one place and you find a spot to watch that is *behind* them? *Louco*, brother. *Lou—co!*” Ikinya chided.

“I should put you in touch with my boss. He’s a real *bastardos*, handing me this shit assignment at the last moment, ruining my own *Carnaval*. I was supposed to be down there, trashed on whickywackers and leering at beautiful women.” Cedro bantered back, rather bravely, to the man who was, in fact, his boss.

There was little more Ikinya could do from this perspective. He needed eyes all around. His mind opened the SIN neural interface and he moved the reticle to the bottom-right where his script library resided. His retinas hovered over the desired script and he selected it with a twitch. The script masked Ikinya’s credentials with those of a garbage collector, giving him access to the MunicipalNet. He jumped amongst the video feeds from utility-cams on the underside of the giant support struts around the slag pit. One of the twelve feeds provided the perfect angle of the front of the bleachers and their rowdy revelers. He slid the frame to the left quadrant of his viewport.

The main thoroughfare of Dredge had been transformed into a *Sambadrome*, a crescent-shaped arena where the various samba schools and extraction squads would showcase their cultural identities and dances. Showcase participants had a 300 meter long promenade to use between the bleachers and the slag pit.

“Damn, *irmão*, there he is.” Ikinya squinted with his left eye, zooming in on a small acrylic mezzanine box midway up the bleachers. Inside it, he could see Admiral Nostromo sitting with his retinue and a small gaggle of local dignitaries. Ikinya spliced the feed over to Cedro’s neural-net.

“That’s nice the old man made it to our humble abode. I bet the crowd loves it.” Cedro quipped.

Ikinya let out a *harrumphing* sound. “Oh, he’ll be feted royally tonight, I’ll give you that, but mark my words, *Carnaval* isn’t what brought him here. Word is he’s meeting on the morrow with the

local top brass. Apparently there's been a rise in local piracy of late, smaller stores of crystite gone missing..." Ikinya said with an air of thick incredulity. "Who would do such a thing?" He gave a slow wink.

The short man laughed. "I hope they catch those hoodlums. Why, it would be a travesty if even the scraps of this region's crystite went to anything other than the old fool's war." Cedro sighed. "That man is milking the teat of Dredge dry, all our blood and treasure for what? For a war he cannot win."

Ikinya grunted his agreement, but added nothing more. Best to let a rant run its course sometimes, and besides, this wasn't new ground. They had been over it time and time again. The old man was on some dogged crusade to rid the world of the Melding. *He doesn't even know what that entails*, Ikinya thought. *No one does*.

It was curious that they had the admiral seated behind any kind of barrier at all. The mesh about him could protect him from small arms fire—dispersing any electrical pulse by dampening the vibration of strings at the quantum level. Still, the admiral seemed vulnerable. There were always bigger guns.

Ikinya completed his initial scan of the audience and felt an uneasy sense of dread rise over him. The SIN survey hadn't found anything out of the ordinary. No red flags. In fact, no flags at all, and that was what niggled at his mind. His scan hadn't detected a single member of the Shishido syndicate, their main rival and the other major power contender for the *de facto* rule of Dredge. The Shishidos were run by a sadistic, maleficent shell of a man that went by the handle of Osvaldo. He fancied himself as the Baron of Dredge, extorting tribute from extraction squads and protection money from merchants. Not content with catering to the markets of vice, his syndicate regularly carried out gratuitous acts of violence. They were a force to be reckoned with and their absence spoke volumes. *Something was amiss*.

At precisely 8:20, all the streetlamps of Dredge simultaneously went dark, the night lit only by the glowing embers that rained from the smokestacks, juxtaposed by the glory of a million stars overhead. The crowd went into hysterics, a unified deafening roar. The organizers were smart. They knew how to play a crowd, keeping them in a holding pattern like a rock star waiting for an encore. This fever crescendoed for thirty seconds, until suddenly tens of thousands of neural-nets came online, joining the universal feed for the event. Video highlights of past Carnivals flashed at the revelers while their neural-stems administered shots of endorphins. Ikinya looked sharply right and twitched his eye, sending the official Carnival feed to only his right hemisphere of view. It was worth keeping an eye on the program's official activities, but he was more interested in other matters.

After the highlights recap finished, the *Sambadrome* erupted in a spectacular cornucopia of color and sound. Scraggly neon lights came alive on acrylic paneling above the festival seating. Virtual effects were broadcast to all the revelers' neural-nets, layering dazzling Roman candles and blossoms of vibrantly-colored flora around the entire perimeter of the promenade. Hundreds of tiki torches flamed upward along the safety barrier between the thoroughfare and the slag pit, and then masterfully crossed the pit and leaped up the town's colossal drill—affectionately known as *Big Bertha*. Round and around her circumference they raced, like dominoes drenched in gasoline, until at last the flames reached her crest. Her silhouette looked magnificent, outlined in the night by the faint

orange aura, this man-made mountain, a testament to mankind's resilience and ingenuity, the livelihood of so many and the symbol of Dredge throughout New Eden.

Arches on the north and south side of the crescent seating lit ablaze, helping guide the performers and giving definition to the showcase promenade. Debutantes and rhythmic dancers raced out from the southern flaming arch and covered the floor, toting batons with streamers of plasma in every color of the spectrum trailing behind them, like long tongues of electricity lapping and whipping at the air. They spread across the showcase runway, riling the crowd with choreographed acrobatic moves, their streamers now and then striking the ground with a high-voltage *snap* and a cascading burst of sparks. Behind them, ten enormous *surdos* drums were rolled out. They were twelve feet in diameter—much larger than the taiko drums of New Tokyo, with brontodon skins stretched taut over their rims. Synchronized aerialists bounced onto these drums with modified pogo-sticks, synchronized as to when each would land, creating the ball-rattling deep bass of the samba drive. *Boom-baba-boom-ba, boombaba-boom!* Several additional hundred percussionists flooded onto the floor, hammering snare drums whose sharp *crack* complimented the deeper notes of the enormous barrels. The roar of the crowd remained deafening. The Sambadrome was *alive*.

"Senhoras e Senhores!" A male voice boomed out in Portuguese.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" A second voice, this one female, followed immediately afterward.

"Welcome to the 11th annual modern-era Carnival of Dredge!"

The announcers had to pause after each statement to be heard.

"We would like to extend a most special welcome to our guest of honor, Admiral Nostromo!"

Huge spotlights illuminated the Admiral and his small retinue. The acrylic mezzanine box that Nostromo sat in was buffeted by well-wishers clapping enthusiastically upon it. He waved his hand graciously to the audience, and the squads went nuts. *Well, most of them*, Ikinya noted.

He squinted with his left eye, the contracting muscles zooming closely on the revelers' faces. There were patches here and there of revelers who were not exactly 'reveling' during Nostromo's introduction. In fact, a handful looked on with scorn and contempt. *Now that is curious*, he thought.

The admiral was traditionally held in a reverent light, his role in the Battle of Athens and his saving of Rio de Janeiro during the Arclight's crash remembered as epic moments in humanity's recent struggle. Of late however, there were undercurrents of a darker sort, sentiments which remembered instead that *this* is the man who demolished Fortaleza...*this* is the man who tore the fabric of space-time and—however unintentionally—enabled the Melding to besmirch the earth to begin with. That he was determined to beat it back, while noble in intent, sounded more to Ikinya like putting spilt milk back in the bottle. It just wasn't gonna happen.

A moment later, the national anthem began to play. People sobered as the words to the *Battle Hymn of Dredge* rang out from an audio recording: "Winds buffet us from every sky, but still we face the gale, what an honor to have had so great a task upon our crown!"

Far overhead, in their shadowed alcove behind the bleachers, the two men continued to watch the processions transpiring below.

"It doesn't rhyme, does it?" Cedro asked rhetorically.

"What's that now?" Ikinya said absently, his mind still focused on the admiral.

“Gale and crown. It would sound much better if it were ‘face the gale, and they’ll make of us a tale’, or ‘face the gale, all other feats are paled’. Something of that sort. I’ve always thought that.” Cedro prattled on while he cleaned beneath his fingernails with a switchblade, pausing only to make expansive hand gestures anytime he thought upon a better lyric.

Ikinya had long ago grown accustomed to tuning out the musings of his associate. Aside from those assigned to security, they were perhaps the only two people in all of Dredge who were not engaging in the revelry. He kept his focus intensely on Nostromo’s mezzanine box. *You’ve put me between the Devil and the deep sea, old man*, he thought.

Ikinya shifted his tall, broad frame against the column. He was more barrel-chested than men of the Great Rift Valley were apt to be. His regal ebony skin had a smooth complexion, broken only by the contrast in color of his teeth and eyes. This was his forty-second ride about the sun on this rock called Earth, and he had had about enough. It was time to get to Alpha Prime.

Far below, on the showcase promenade, the tribes paraded one after another, often surrounding a hovering float that served as allegory for their struggle or their story. One hundred metallurgists paraded in their heavy aprons, goggles affixed, while two performers pranced about the rim of a huge industrial ladle, a monstrosity-large bowl borrowed from the foundry. A blinding pillar of golden light shot up from inside, symbolic of molten crystite during the refining process. In reality, the actual process of smelting crystite was far more complicated than traditional metals, requiring an extensive infrastructure and process that only Omnidyne and Enermax could perform. Every time the performers got too close to one another on the rim, the bowl began to tip, causing them to scramble humorously for equilibrium, pantomiming their relief at not having fallen in. The myth held that metallurgists resolved their conflicts via the *Dance of the Ladle*.

No sooner had the metallurgists cleared the floor than a brief klaxon wailed and a rectangular section in the center of the promenade began to shimmy with a light-blue haze and little globules of light—the size and texture of dandelion seeds—began to materialize and float lazily upward from the ground. It created a frisson of excitement with the crowd. The klaxon told all within earshot that an arc-folding was underway, and it had been ingrained in everyone from an early age to ‘stop, take stock and steer clear of the shinies’. Arc-folding was still terribly expensive due to the crystite fuel rods it required, which meant that even extraction squads hardly ever got to witness it, and so it was always a huge highlight of Carnival when the festival would teleport in something of an inorganic nature. As the arc-folding began to materialize, it piqued Ikinya’s curiosity, and for the moment he redirected his scanner at the promenade.

A huge, 50-foot long model of the Arclight baseship materialized. It was carved at 10000:1 scale, whittled entirely out of the ivory of local brontodons. It was breathtakingly exquisite, with little gun-turrets masterfully scrimshawed along the sides of the ship. Bright halogen lights flooded the model majestically, glorifying the artistic achievement. The crowd cheered with delight, though probably more so for the arc-folding event and less so for the art itself. Ikinya returned his attention to Nostromo. The old man was visibly touched by the Arclight tribute. He could see the admiral dabbing his eyes. *Why couldn’t you just have gone away, old man?* Ikinya sighed.

He rested his eyes a moment from the scanner and glanced at the squat man beside him. Cedro had half a pate of hair and skin the hue of espresso-brown, in the common spectrum of indigenous Brazilians. His leather duster looked cracked and frayed from its long life, crinkled with

ringlets about the joints from its years of usage. Standing next to each other, the two men made an odd pair indeed.

“Your coat looks tired.”

Cedro let loose a low laugh. “Not as tired as its owner.”

Ikinya smiled and looked back at the throng of revelers. “It doesn’t sit right with me that not a single Shishido is here,” he remarked.

“No, me neither.”

Ikinya grabbed a police certificate from his digital library and entered the records log for the week. There was crime but nothing that stood out as abnormal. He closed the databank and then loaded a lieutenant’s credentials, accessing the recent shipping manifests for the Accord. Again, he found nothing particularly noteworthy. Four cargo containers had landed, bringing relatively mundane supplies. He very nearly closed the entire chain of inquiry, and then, almost on a whim, he thought of checking the civilian flight log. Every dropship, including even the Accord, had to register with the civilian flight tower. Oddly enough, five Accord dropships had requested civilian clearance to land in the past week, which contrasted with the Accord’s tally of only four. One dropship had conveniently disappeared. *Curious, indeed.*

He was reluctant to jump back on the Accord’s servers. He risked losing the certificate that he had pinched if someone noticed increased activity, but the situation warranted the risk. He found the missing dropship’s registration easily enough. It was confirmed officially as being in stowage on the orbital freighter, *Scarborough*, and reputedly had its hold full of a highly explosive compound—cyclotrimethylene trinitramine. *This does not bode well at all*, Ikinya thought. He quickly navigated across the Accord’s intranet, requesting use of an airborne security drone for a spectroscopic scan of the region. He was approved almost instantly and began waiting impatiently for the results. There was no doubt in his mind that this identification certificate would be toast after this asset request.

Far below, the procession continued on. The next float to appear was a giant head, at least 10 meters wide, intact but for the absence of the top-backside of the skull. It had smooth features reminiscent of an old Incan marble statue, and would have been an off-white color in broad daylight. Sea-green lights about its base illuminated the giant head, giving it an ethereal appearance, its lifeless eyes staring out at the spectators like the god Viracocha, unmoved by the trials of mere mortals. The upper-aft portion of the head had been turned into an open-air balcony, from which revelers danced and gyrated sensually to the samba beat. They appeared to be naked, save for wreaths of ivy on their heads and glittering bronze paint that covered them from head to toe. The masses roared their approval.

As the giant Incan face began to fade from sight, an entire brigade of Accord paraded into the showcase in dress uniforms with symbolic flint rifles resting against their shoulders. Eleven open caskets were in their midst, their occupants having been killed only yesterday in a skirmish along the Melding’s curtain. The crowd huzzahed their fallen comrades, raising their fists and clanking the roundels on their plated shoulderpads in a loud, unified expression of respect and glory. “Strength and honor!” they shouted. A raucous celebration of service and of life began, in the tradition of *Día de los Muertos*—the Day of the Dead. Performers on stilts teetered about as giant Catrina skeletons, wearing skull masks and garments of bright reds and greens and marigold. The announcer’s voice

boomed again, “The Accord’s 51st Brigade is proud to serve the local community. Please join us in a salute to those sisters and brothers who are with us now only in spirit!”

Robotic subsistence bots hovered at the far end of the bleachers and systematically worked their way down their respective rows, distributing shots of a glowing-blue effervescent refreshment and *pan de muerto*—bread of the dead—in the shape of a skull to each celebrant who faced upward with an open mouth. The liquor was a local specialty drink, the *whickeywhacker*, a mix of tequila and blue cloudberries. The crowd was ecstatic, with some revelers leaning over their neighbors in an attempt to nab a second shot as well. Nostromo watched the casket progression with a grim look. He held a long salute, his face conveying his unflinching resolution. *He would fight the Melding around Perdition’s flames if need be*, Ikinya thought. *This bastardo will take every one of us down with him. I’ve half a mind to let Osvaldo do the deed.*

An update from the Accord’s SIN told him the drone’s spectroscopic scan was complete and he downloaded the results. The scan hadn’t found the scuttled dropship but it did find traces of dimethyl-dinitrobutane, a chemical that serves only as an identifier marker to track the explosive compound’s origin. The traces were found in a nearby landfill. He switched to the visible spectrum and magnified the resolution of the optical scans. The trace was found in an empty cosmetic jar, which also had remnants of a unique enzyme, luciferase. *Bizarre*, Ikinya thought. Luciferase was an element of bioluminescent ink, the most local source of which was squid that washed upon the shores of Sunken Harbor. *What did explosives have to do with bioluminescent ink?* He didn’t have to wait long for an answer.

“People of Dredge, give some love to your new Queen of the Drums, the muse Graciana!”

No one was even able to hear the English translation; the crowd was in such frenzy. All the lights went dark again. The tiki torches and the flaming arches suddenly extinguished. Only the glowing embers of the smokestacks and a million stars overhead illuminated the night. And then, from the southern arch of the promenade now bathed in darkness, the spectral image of a goddess appeared, illuminated by a day-glow green aura. She was lathered in bioluminescent ink and it made for the most magnificent entrance.

The crowd was in hysterics. The flames reignited around the promenade and the true beauty of the queen could now be appreciated. To call her a queen seemed to almost diminish or understate the awe she commanded. She was the perfect artistic embodiment of an idea. Straps of leather sandals wound round her bronze calves, reaching nearly to her knees, like some charioteer from days of yore. Her lean, supple thighs glistened beneath the floodlights. The narrowest strand of kelp masked her sex, traveling upward about her waist and fading into a smattering of precious gems which sequined her exquisite belly, golden like a field of wheat set about with lilies. Seashells led the revelers’ eyes from the plains of her midriff northward, to trace about her nubile breasts, stopping only at her fragile neck, which she adorned with a choker of the most splendid gems. Little cuts of crystite dangled from beaded strands around its entire length, forming a continuous wreath about her neck, broken only by a two-inch stone featured prominently in the center. It was iridescent, opal-like, and of very unique origin: it was found only in the excrement of *scarabaeus melding*—the melding-beetle. Although the source was rather off-putting at first to those unfamiliar with it, the gem held great symbolic meaning in addition to its beauty. It represented living off the land and reinforced the belief in rebirth & renewal.

Her cheekbones and face were of the symmetry one expected, but truly the most glorious expression of her beauty was the pure joy that she seemed to radiate. Her eyes reciprocated the unadulterated passion of life that the audience showered upon her. They shown with such intensity, such verve of life, and she carried herself in such a fashion not as to say “I am above you”, but rather, “I am of you”, and the crowd truly loved her for it.

Her headdress was two meters wide, consisting of feathers of the most fantastic kaleidoscope of colors: coal black near the roots, segueing to a deep burgundy, then a vivid furnace red fading into a raging inferno orange, to canary gold on the outer tips. The headdress made a nimbus of feathers and flame about her head, an artistic expression of the divine incarnate, as though her body were the phoenix reborn, rising timidly from the great fire beyond.

It was here, where all of it...all of the entire package, not just of Carnaval but of Dredge itself was encompassed. This muse represented all of their hopes of health and fertility and rebirth expressed in the natural form. She was the organic incarnate of the sea: a limitless ocean of possibilities.

It was in this most perfect moment, where time seemed to suspend and the world seemed so right, that the pieces fell together and Ikinya knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, how Osvaldo intended to kill the admiral. That Graciana was an instrument of Osvaldo's, whether consciously or not, was obvious. But what he couldn't figure out until this very moment was how they planned to breach his mezzanine box. And then he hit upon it. She had no intention of breaching it; the admiral would breach it for her. She was the Trojan horse that need not be rolled into Troy when she could just be left outside; beckoning, calling, seducing the great Trojan to come and investigate. The admiral had always been a leader *of the people, for the people*...he was damn likely to join the Queen of Drums if she invited him to dance. Ikinya pressed his temples, racking his mind for the best course of action. They were going to have to move quickly.

The Queen of the Drums was escorted by sixty women, known as the Handmaidens of the Muse, who symbolically were meant to wait on the Queen's every beck and call. They were adorned with cloaks woven of *aranhas* chitin, which shimmered like gossamer beneath the lights of the dome. Huge ostentatious armbands ran the full length of their forearms, in ostrich plumage of every color imaginable, from periwinkle to heartbreak pink to mango orange. Draped about their bodies were skimpy toga robes, tyrian purple in color, made from a dye laboriously extracted from murex snails in Sunken Harbor. Inch-wide thick strands hung from their heads, like dreadlocks, in a palette of every pastel fathomable. Their costumes evoked the spirit of the sea anemone, paying tribute to the subsistence and the rhythm of the great sea.

Ikinya moved deftly now, lunging from the terraced alcove to the scaffolding of the bleachers, hooking it with both hands. He performed a quick series of *Laché* moves, swinging like a monkey from bar-to-bar, descending three stories in a matter of seconds. He finally reached a height even with an adjacent adobe building and leaped to its rooftop. He knew he hadn't a moment to spare.

The final procession for the night glided into the promenade: the Nymphs of the Muse, one dozen women clad in white, wearing the most peculiar of crowns. Narrow steel rods blossomed outward from their circlets, like satellite dish arrays. This would look displeasing were it not for the small mirrors attached at the end of each antenna. The glass caught and refracted all the light that reached them, surrounding the nymph's face with a nimbus of divinity. It was a magical

transformation, augmented all the more so by the pairs of huge white feathered wings that they wore on their back. These were not angelic wings, but wings of Valkyrie, a tribute to the bio-techs and caregivers who nurse soldiers back to health or on to the next life.

Ikinya vaulted across the open gap between two buildings. When he reached the next gap, he pulled a sweeping wall-drop, bounding back and forth between the two walls in quick succession as he descended another story, finishing with a breakfall roll on the ground level. He sprang to his feet and ran hard again, kong-vaulting a Jersey barrier. He rounded the southern side of the bleachers at full sprint, a mere 30 meters from the moat. The wings of the promenade were packed with performers and spectators. The southern arch was ahead, spanning the divide, and in a moment of clarity, he saw the way forward. He leapt onto a nearby crate and vaulted into the air, his arm reaching for the metal support strut. His fingertips actually brushed the bar...but he came up short, and then suddenly....he was falling and flailing. He fell onto the crowd and very nearly sank to the ground, but a cheer went up and he was suddenly lifted by the revelers and held above their heads. Oblivious to his intentions, they sent him crowd-surfing in the opposite direction of the moat.

“I need some support down here!” He screamed, drowned out by the revelry of the crowd. His neural-stem picked up the vibrations of his skull and relayed the words to Cedro, far overhead.

The three entities on the showcase promenade now fanned out: the Nymphs around the outer backside, the Handmaidens filling the middle, and the Queen herself in the forefront. From the bleachers, they formed the shape of a heart, with the Queen at the very vanguard of its base. The music shifted now, with the rhythm’s tempo ratcheting upward. This signaled the start of the Courting of the Queen, a passionate dance which showcased her dancing skill and in which she—not a male—could choose her mate. She shimmied with unbridled energy, her legs planted firmly apart, her kelp-loincloth swinging wildly to and fro. Her feathered arms shook convulsively and her eyes were flared wide with an almost violent, crazed look. All of this was meant to convey that she was the hunter and had assumed a more traditionally masculine role. The crowd was in hysterics, their cheers crescendoing to a deafening roar.

Her body undulated forward with the rhythm, reaching ever and ever closer to the base of the bleachers. Sentries that had been stationed with shock-batons in the moat between the bleachers and the promenade now exchanged nervous glances with one another, as the Queen prowled dangerously close. The crowd surged with energy. She raised her right hand to shield her eyes, feigning as though she were squinting beneath the lights, searching for that undeserving male. Revelers toppled over one another, unabashed men seeking the Queen’s favor. She repeated the ritual with her left hand, looking as though she considered the nearest of men, and then pantomiming a captious or persnickety look. Finally she raised both hands to the heavens, her gyrating body commanding such attention that the drums seemed to concede their responsibility over the rhythm, the Queen now setting it for all of Dredge. Her hands reached their apex, her costume seemed to fill meters of space, and then all at once she stopped, hands frozen in a wide splayed position. The barrel drums stopped in sync with her and all that filled the air were the undying cries of adulation from the revelers. And then, in keeping with tradition, her voice-mic went live and she cried out, “I choose....Admiral Nostromo!” Both of her arms came down to point forcefully at the admiral in his mezzanine box. The crowd went *ballistic!*

Huge spotlights pivoted to focus on the admiral, so that all the crowd could watch his response. He smiled at first, a mixture of honor and embarrassment, but then realized that the beckoning of the crowd suggested there really wasn't a choice to be made. He stood and raised a hand to the people, who thundered their approval back at him. He signaled for his security detail to open the barrier and no sooner was the doorway open than the revelers had whisked him from his feet, raised him high on their shoulders and passed him overhead, down row upon row until he reached the promenade floor.

The nymphs now performed their traditional role of ferrying the selected male across the moat. This involved them lowering themselves into the trench and quickly forming a human pyramid of sorts. It made for quite a spectacle, this mass of white togas and Valkyrie wings. The admiral stepped gingerly across this human trestle; his Queen waiting for him with outstretched arms.

Ikinya finally extricated himself from the hands of the revelers and had now reached the moat, surrounded by a mass of humanity. The admiral was a mere fifteen meters from the queen. Ikinya would never make it in time.

"I need an intervention, now brother!" He screamed, his neural-stem again reading the vibrations of his speech.

The Queen extended both arms toward the admiral. They were within 10 meters of embracing. Ikinya sensed Graciana wasn't even privy to the assassination plot. Her eyes shone with pure passion for life—they were *not* the eyes of someone ready to check out. There had to be some means of remote detonation. He had an inkling of where the primer might be hidden.

Ikinya fought tirelessly to get through the crowd, but he was making little ground. And then a miracle happened. A voice boomed from the sky. The voice of the gods came in the form that it so often does....in the voice of an announcer.

"Sisters and Brothers! The Queen herself invites all of you to join her and her mate on the promenade!" The crowd went *helter-skelter*. The shock-baton sentries quickly dodged aside and revelers piled into the moat. Far up above, in the announcer's box, Cedro stood beside the announcer, his plasma-cannon resting against the poor man's temple. "Dance for the harvest...." Cedro whispered. "Dance for the harvest...." the announcer repeated into his microphone. "Dance for...harmony!" He added, pleased with his sudden poetic sense. "Dance for harmony!" boomed over the Sambadrome's speakers. "But most of all..." Cedro paused for dramatic effect. "Dance for Dredge!"

This cry rang out from the speakers all around the city and the challenge was picked up by the revelers, who surged across the promenade, in sheer pandemonium, groping and intermingling with the handmaidens and the nymphs and one another alike. The Queen's face turned from one of confidence and mastery of her domain to one of confusion to ultimately one of stark fear. Ikinya managed to ride the wave of humanity over the moat and he reached the celebrated couple with the first legion of revelers. Hands poured over the Queen, snapping feathers off her headdress and grasping her already skimpy attire. Her eyes were the size of saucers, her face conveying her sudden shock at this traumatic turn of events.

Ikinya reached directly for her iridescent beetle pendant and pulled firmly, snapping it from her choker in one fluid motion. He lobbed it nonchalantly over his shoulder into the slag pit and then

shook off his long brown duster. A bizarre mishmash of titanium metal was strapped about his waist and down both thighs. There were numerous blinking lights and valves where wisps of steam leaked out in fits and starts. The mishmash consisted of the four modules of a modified Type-6 Enermax assault battleframe, stripped of its armor-casing and jury-rigged together with only enough power for a single repulsor-blast. It made for one hell of an ugly contraption.

“Oh *foder, foder, foder,*” Cedro repeated, watching this development of events anxiously from far overhead. Once the duster came off, there was only one course this could follow. He had to give Ikinya some cover. “Where are the controls for the grand finale?” he asked, nudging the announcer with his weapon. The man motioned toward a bank of CGI effects, with traditional names such as fireworks, lights, lasers and holograms. Cedro slammed his hand on every single control, bombarding the neutral-nets of all the revelers with a bonanza of explosions and visual stimulants that existed only in the virtual environment.

Ikinya caught the Queen’s eyes and bore into them. “This is gonna hurt!” he screamed, to everyone and no one alike. He went down to a crouch and then used his neutral interface to initiate a fast boot sequence and—for only a moment—the world stood still. A deep concussive blast suddenly radiated outward from Ikinya, a visual white vapor trail rippling ten meters in every direction, followed closely by a shockwave. Hundreds of revelers went down like blades of grass, including both Nostromo and Graciana. If he had dialed it in correctly, the blast shouldn’t be strong enough to kill anyone, just some severe headaches and mild concussions. *And upset stomachs, and vomiting, and vertigo for a week, and temporary loss of hearing, and a metallic taste in the mouth,* he thought nervously, as he drew the unconscious Queen into his arms. The crowd was cheering wildly now, entranced by the barrage of virtual effects. They remained oblivious to the drama unfolding on the promenade below.

“Neural-camo is in play. Move fast, boss.” Cedro’s voice spoke in Ikinya’s ear.

“Thanks, brother.” Ikinya replied, running quickly with the Queen in his arms. He reached the northern arch of the promenade and disappeared into the dark recesses of the streets, wending their way across the town until he reached a nondescript hovel that his syndicate used as a safe house. Once safely inside, he lay her down in a dusty armchair. He lit a sole candle and then broke a smelling salt beneath her nose. She came round with a start.

“You?” She said surprisingly, and then, “You!” She reached out quickly and slapped him in the face.

Ikinya gave a deep chortle. “You get that one, my Queen.” She moved to strike him again though and he effortlessly blocked it. “But not another.”

She was a spitfire, squirming and letting loose the foulest string of swear words that he had ever heard—in no fewer than four languages to boot.

“You certainly look like a Queen, but I have never heard one with such a tongue!” His mocking made her even more livid.

“Look now, let me show you something that your old employer, Osvaldo, did.” Still clasping her right wrist in one hand, he picked up a torn page from the ground and pressed it firmly down her forearm, wiping a small smudge of her body paint onto the paper. She watched him with a look of repulsion and distrust. He walked to the far end of the room and placed the candle on the ground.

“Close your eyes,” he said kindly. She ignored him.

“Ohh, *momma-mia, menina*, close your eyes, please, for your own sake.”

She did so now, reluctantly. He placed the unsoiled portion of the torn page into the taper’s flame and moved back swiftly to the armchair, shielding both of them as the fire spread. When the flames reached the smudge of bioluminescent ink, the explosive compound ignited with a searing white-flash. The entire building shook to its core, as though it took a deep breath— considered collapsing—and then slowly exhaled. The air was riddled with mortar and dust, and a four-foot section of the corner wall was completely vaporized. The cool night wind blew in and starlight spilled onto the floor. Their ears rang something fierce; their clothes covered in clay and sand particles.

Graciana, who less than an hour ago was the epitome of beauty, now had a look of defeat, her hair a net of fine white grains. She sat very still for a long while, her fingers smudging her body paint as she reflected on the events of the past hour. “I cannot believe that *bastardos* did this to me, of all people? He had me steal that *godporra* dropship to begin with! I cannot believe he would destroy this!” she gestured vigorously at her bosom, “to kill some goddamn old man! *Mãe-de-Maria!*” She started off again on another fiery tirade, recycling a long string of expletives that would shame any mother.

“Maybe it’s time you join a different syndicate, no?” Ikinya said, smiling broadly.

“You’re goddamn right I will. Combustible bioluminescent ink my ass! I’m gonna drum up all sorts of wickedly cruel means of taking this *babaca* out! I’m gonna sharpen my knives for three days straight and then set them aside for a spoon and carve that mother *filho da puta* out like a melon! I’m gonna scatter-shot up his *burro!* That’s right, it’s buckwheats for him, *bebê!* I’m gonna make him my *caldela* with—”

Ikinya roared again with mirth, a deep belly laugh that seemed to rise and fall in a singsong pattern, rich with the intonations of his African heritage. He laughed now with his all soul. *Carnaval* was always an adventure.