

# *MISS COSMOS*

By

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## 1. *mise en scene*

or,

### **A Rose By Any Other Name is Still Not a Stegosaurus**

"Is the tank ready for the Calypsan yet?" howled the overwrought reptilian stage manager over the general din of a dance number in rehearsal. "Neg," cried a voice from backstage. "We're still pressurizing the methane tank. Five hundred atmospheres now."

"Well, when the hell is she coming down?" screamed Xork. (By the Gods, he thought--fourteen claws, seventy-five hundred teeth. And three billion creatures actually considered it beautiful.)

"We're going to try to transport it--ah, her--from orbit in a few hours," yelled the back the faceless (where *is* he vocalizing from, wondered Xork) staged hand. "Her food supply seems to be running out. . ." the voice was momentarily blocked by a surge in the dance music, ".... wants to eat the crew."

"Oh," was all Xork could utter, his auburn dorsal fins quivering. The dance number, a rendition of an old-style Earthian Broadway musical, ended at the moment, with the polyped terpsichoreans extending approximately half of their appendages skyward and leaving the remainder rooted to the floor. Somehow, thought Xork, "Old Man River" lacked its original impact when amoeboid mammals strutted about a broth of steaming sulfuric acid and complained in high nasal gurgles of lifting bales and toting barges--neither of which, smiled the stage manager, would last ten minutes in that noxious tributary.

Leaning from fatigue on a gallium arsenide pillar in the Judges' box, Xork watched as the blobs' dance coach whined, "There are only THREE days until the final competition. Ten years since the last Contest and you still move like vertebrates. ." Xork nearly chuckled at this nervous ranting until he noticed one apparently resentful chorine slither forward, gently nudging her surprised mentor into the nearby acidic "river." Xork gasped as the steam towered up, like a waterspout in reverse.

Luckily, a clone of the newly deceased coach was available, and the rehearsal continued.

Xork blinked his large stegosaurid eyes, and managed a philosophic smile. Despite the enormity of having to provide for over two thousand aliens, all arriving at once from widely varying environments, despite having to hermetically seal the stage for the blobular revival of *Showboat*,

despite the nearly continuous attempts by some of the more liberal contestants to seduce him and everything else that moved (one entrant, Xork discovered, required sexual intercourse every twelve minutes just to survive--he'd gotten her a robot, finally), despite the altogether sobering realization that the beauties of the universe were --- well, beauty, as it turned out, was indeed in the visual cortex of the beholder -- despite all that, and much more, Xork's job, as he knew, was comparatively easy.

Trivial, in fact.

For there still remained the task of judging these two thousand monstrosities.

And on *that* rested the fate of the universe itself.

## **2. Enter the Hero, Courageously Interrogating Flora**

Situated some distance from Xork's stage stood a gargantuan greenhouse-like structure. In it, surrounded on all sides by vegetation, the distinguished Earthman reclined on a plush velvet chair. His gray derby and blue tunic, indicating ambassadorial status, were all that punctuated the otherwise uniform green. He had been there well over an hour attempting to sway the vote of one of the Contest Judiciaries.

"Yes, Your Excellency; your planet has traditionally maintained a prudent nonalignment, a neutrality if you will. Thus you are at complete liberty to select the superior candidate, which, owing to your race's legendary wisdom, I have no doubt you will see to be Earth's," continued the Earthian Ambassador to the High Council of the Cosmos, William J. "Wild Bill" Kowalski. I can't believe I'm talking to *moss*, thought Wild Bill.

"Holy phosphate, what a smooth-tongued BORE," bellowed the moss after a moment. And then these words appeared in Kowalski's mind: "But surely you must understand, Earthian Ambassador Kowalski. As you know, our planet Qoryx maintains close trading ties with the comet Blane; in point of fact, they supply well over half our potash and carbohydrate requirements."

Good God, thought Kowalski. The moss thinks talking and talks thinking. . . or something like that.

"And, as again you know," proceeded Alo, the Right Honorable Qoryxian Ambassador- at-Large, "Blane honors an ancient mutual defense pact with Lysia." Kowalski visibly winced at this mention of Earth's chief rival. "And Lysia," added the moss, "has entered a most--how shall I say it?--viable candidate in this year's contest."

Alo paused, then boomed, "Now let's hear what this retarded ungulate has come to propose."

Wild Bill, somewhat unsettled by the vegetation's idiosyncratic mode of communication, nevertheless managed to compose himself. He slouched ever so subtly in his velvet chair, and cocked his derby. He smiled, and started to look the moss in the eye, and then thought better of it. How in the hell do you look twelve acres of moss in the eye? he wondered. "It is of potash, and carbohydrates, and defense, that the Government of Earth would like to discuss with the Senate of Qoryx," he spoke.

"Holy acids! The son-of-a-bitch!" ejaculated the verdant Qoryxian. Then, telepathically, "Do you mean trade?"

"We on Earth believe it is time to improve every aspect of our relationship with Qoryx," Kowalski answered smugly, seeing that the hook had been taken.

### **3. Concerning Our Gracious Host, and his Lovely, if Dark, Home**

Spacecraft of every conceivable form were materializing in orbit about the tiny planetoid, which itself floated free in interstellar space, somewhere between the Andromeda and Cygnus galaxies. The Miss Cosmos extravaganza was the social event of the season. The planetoid's ruler, an ebullient humanoid of ultimately Bengalese descent named Kameel Pachysandra II welcomed all with open arms, glorying in the prospect of the prestige and not inconsiderable profit the pageant would direct his way.

Each decade (reckoned in Earthian solar revolutions) the contest was held, and the various intergalactic polities vied for the honor of hosting it. Since the preceding pageant had been conducted on a planet sporting sixteen suns, it was deemed appropriate to sponsor the current show on a darker astronomical body. For this, Pachysandra's planetoid, being seventy-eight million light years from the nearest star, was well suited. His only rival, a furry insect commanding a like asteroid in the Magellanic Clouds, had died suddenly -- and to everyone but Kameel Pachysandra II--quite unexpectedly; the asteroid was now plunged in mourning.

Pachysandra had, the very next day following the insect's untimely demise, gravely and solemnly accepted the charge of the Miss Cosmos organizers and had agreed to sponsor this most sublime of spectacles.

As the most primitive of Earthian unicellular organisms, whose sole function in their brief microscopic existence was to consume each other and reproduce, became, after eons of natural selection, Man, who does far more, so too from a simple, even silly show, the Miss Cosmos pageant had evolved into the most important political event of the year. For in one landmark contest, it was voted--by the High Council of the Cosmos itself--that Miss Cosmos should upon her accession become the Grand Moderator of that august body.

Following this somewhat irregular decision--there having been no change in parliamentary procedure in tens of thousands of years previously--there had been some untoward allegations of a peculiar mix of hallucinogens in the host planet's atmosphere; these scurrilous innuendoes however had been quickly quashed.

Initially a figurehead position, the office of Grand Moderator became under one domineering beauty, Zorpt of Methina, the repository of great power: for this hydroid coelenterate, rather than performing the by then traditional tasks of accepting keys to planets and the like, had attended every Council meeting. She insisted upon, and through sheer strength of personality, received the right to administrate Council gatherings: she allowed Council members to speak, and could bar them from so doing; she decided when, and if, votes came to the floor, and so forth.

Thus in recent years the pageant was attended not only by the most desirable creatures of every planet enjoying intelligent life, but also by the rich, the powerful, and the influential of these worlds.

#### **4. The Devilish Enemy Seduces the Weak of Spirit**

The Ambassador Plenipotentiary of Lysia, a short, albino humanoid with protruding eyeballs and long, thin fingers stood at the entrance to the Great Hall in the newly constructed Contest Palace. He was among the last to arrive there for the Welcome Ball, the first of countless dances, feasts, orgies, and other such social gatherings to be held in the next few days. His bulging eyes searched the festive crowd for the Shrow, a Contest Judiciary, who, his many sources believed, could likely be influenced.

Entering the banquet hall, the Lysian was immediately descended upon by a dozen or so self-important planetary Caesars. As the Lysian Empire had waxed mighty of late, Lysia's Ambassador Chon, therefore, was a personage to know and be known by. The albino patiently greeted each potentate in turn, and, calling upon his prodigious memory, asked after each ruler's wife, husband, or mate. All the while he searched for the Shrow.

"Ah," the Lysian muttered through thin lips. Spying his objective some meters to his left, he started toward the indecisive Solomon.

The Shrow, being a Contest Judiciary and thus no minor celebrity himself, was surrounded by intergalactic sycophants, all of whom, basking in the proximity of power, were predictably boorish. Thus compelled to small talk, the Shrow was at this moment discoursing upon ancient culinary habits. "And do you know, my friends," he said as he lapped his lactate cocktail, "do you know that even on Earth, whose queens have ruled well over half our High Councils, do you know that there, before all but the higher primates were made extinct by pollution and radiation, primitive Earthmen consumed a noble beast then termed a Cow, whose form resembled mine in nearly every way?" Various of his audience gasped appropriately.

"Utterly disgraceful," unwittingly punned a nearby bespectacled gray gorilla.

"Destruction seems to come naturally to Earthers," said Chon loudly, drawing all eyes upon himself.

"Welcome, brother Lysian," intoned the bovine Shrow, recognizing his interlocutor.

"Your conversation does me honor," formally replied the Ambassador. "I am called Chon."

"And I, Aylmr," responded the Shrow. "I presume you refer to the Kendale affair."

Kendale had been the site of one of Earth's least noble and most spectacularly unsuccessful intrigues. A moon of a planet under Lysian protection, Kendale was mined for certain raw materials vital to the production of Lysian cosmetics and perfumes, used by all sexes. Earth had petitioned Lysia, through Chon, in fact, for a research station on Lysia. This station's ostensible purpose was to investigate peculiarities of that moon's gravitic structure; and this function it performed. It had also been involved--unknown to the High Council and the Lysians--in antimatter

research, forbidden by quite a number of treaties as posing a threat to the time-space continuum--the fabric of the universe. This activity was of course a closely guarded Earthian secret, and would have remained so, were it not for a slight, but woeful, miscalculation on the part of an Earthian scientist which resulted in a massive leak of antimatter. Kendale, in a rather dramatic cataclysm, vanished.

It was never clear what Earth's motives were in establishing the secret operation; indeed, it was not until after much hemming and hawing, coverups, deceptions, and outright lies that the Earthians finally admitted responsibility. The whole business had soured many from Earth -- notably the Lysians, whose moon was gone, and who, as a result of the loss of the perfumes, now stank on a planetary scale. It was the consensus that Earth's formerly premier position among planets was now in some jeopardy.

"Perhaps Earth's leadership has lasted too long," ventured Chon. He and his colleagues of the Lysian Imperial Clan felt that, by arousing sympathy as the aggrieved party in all of this, they could seize the present opportunity and place their own queen on the High Council.

Aylmr paused; his bulbuous eyes narrowed to slits. "Perhaps it has," he answered thoughtfully. "Perhaps it has."

## **6. Beauty is Truth, and Truth, Power**

The contestants were now arriving in the ballroom. For them, the Welcome Ball represented the first Contest event, the first time they would be under the scrutiny of the Judicia ries of the Cosmos. Most, especially those from the Lesser Planets, were blissfully unaware of the frenzied diplomatic maneuvers taking place behind the scenes. Others, like the Earthian representative, a Scandinavian blonde, and Miss Lycia, a hairless albino like Chon, were less naive. They had been provided lists of the judges, the likes, dislikes, habits--sexual and otherwise--and so forth.

Miss Earth was among the first in, as was the Lysian entrant. Following them fluttered the Flontan, a biped reptilian pterodactid sporting a silk and brocade gown. Various contestants representing the Lesser Planets followed, including the Calypsan, of whose temper and appetite Xork had earlier worried. Seeing it--her--the stage manager, who was chatting with Pachysandra, breathed a sigh of relief--then shuddered, spotting the Starship Captain's hat floating in the pressurized chamber.

From all over the universe they came, each the product of billions of years of independent evolutions. Each contestant came blessed with that special egotism which comes from being the object of an entire race's admiration and desire. So different were they in form, and yet so alike in consciousness, spending all their mental efforts on modifying and maintaining their physiques. Nearly every contestant found herself repelled by her competitors. And all, to a one, were ignorant of this small irony.

## **7. How Diplomacy Works**

All in all, thought Wild Bill, who was also attending the Welcome Ball, this had been among the most difficult contests he had seen to. He had just finished lobbying the Andromedan

Judiciary, who as it turned out, in a murderous rage nearly finished Kowalski. The Andromedan, it seemed, being an arachnid of the most firmly held opinions, became pugnacious when challenged, even when done so in the most diplomatic manner. And Chon had beaten Kowalski to the Andromedan Judiciary.

Yet Earth's enormous economic resources and illegal but necessarily tolerated military service might still cow other Judiciaries (like the Shrow, mused Wild Bill). As always, these two arms of Earth's might which had ensured its preeminence in the past would probably guarantee its continued leadership. Even when Earth's candidate lost--and this was always by design--Wild Bill, and his predecessors had always managed to have a close ally's contestant--Miss Mars in one case, an Alphan Centaur in another--elected.

On the other hand, the Lysian's was the most serious challenge Earth had face to date. It was on a psychological level that Chon and his ilk most skillfully competed: Earth is decadent (Kendale); deceitful (Kendale); corrupted by its long dominion (Kendale, of course)--so the party line went. By contrast, Lysia is young, pure: it supports the Council. It keeps the faith, thought Wild Bill sardonically.

Just then the Earthman noticed the Minoan Judiciary entering the Ballroom. Calling to mind the various needs and insufficiencies of that Judiciary's home planet (granite? no, carbon, thought Kowalski) he hurried off in the Minoan's direction hoping to arrive before Chon.

## **8. Living the Good Life**

The three days leading up to the final competition passed quickly. The celestial beauties were here for a photo session; there for a fashion show; and then off to a gala hosted by this-that-or-the-other dignitary. Kowalski had a reception one night; Chon reciprocated the following evening.

Various incidents colored the proceedings. The Shrow was raped by an ambitious anteatery-like contestant; another entrant having an unusually high body temperature momentarily forgot this fact during the swimsuit competition and evaporated the pool; a Judiciary from an alkaline planet felt half his face melt away when a sulfuric -acid-lipped lass planted a kiss on him. Throughout the entire period, Kowalski and Chon lobbied, cajoled, bribed, and extorted, tirelessly and mercilessly.

And finally, at the end of it all, an hour before the main event was to begin in the Great Hall, Kowalski suddenly felt confidence: a penetrating, sure feeling that he, as he had so many times before, would be successful in placing Miss Earth on the throne. That feeling, as he dressed for the spectacle, that almost prescient sense, comforted him.

Chon, the Lysian Ambassador, was also preparing himself.

And, oddly, he felt the same confidence in Miss Lysia.

## **9. The Climax Approaches**

From his seat next to Pachysandra in the VIP section, on the first of seventy-two balconies, Kowalski had an excellent view, not only of the stage, but also of the capacious hall in which the

final formalities were taking place. Leaning over to his left, he could see Chon, who appeared calm and relaxed. This bothered the Earthian.

"It would seem all is transpiring as you anticipated," said Pachysandra to his neighbor.

"Indeed," confirmed Kowalski. "It is most satisfying. And when," he asked with a practiced air of insouciance, "are the finalists to be announced?"

"After this dance," smoothly answered his host. "The judges must choose--such a difficult task, no?--ten finalists from the one hundred semifinalists."

Kowalski acknowledged this, curtly nodding his head. Pachysandra continued, "I hope Earth will remember this site of its latest triumph--or should I say, of *your* triumph."

*Opportunistic bastard*, thought Wild Bill. He'd be huddled up against Chon if he thought the Lysian had any chance at all. Still, Pachysandra's confidence buoyed his own. He looked directly at the planetoid's master. "Of our, and my gratitude you may rest assured," he said, and Pachysandra smiled beatifically.

The amoeboids' rendition of "Old Man River" concluded. Apparently there had been a slow leak in Xork's hermetic seal of the stage: Kowalski noticed two members of the orchestra, clarinet players near the stage, keeling over. Nevertheless, the emcee returned to the stage to continue. The emcee, a genetic construct created especially for the occasion, smiled artificially and announced in a loud voice, "The Judiciaries of the Cosmos have completed their penultimate duty. The ten finalists have been selected."

Alone on the stage, under a single spotlight, he continued, "As I call their names the ten finalists will walk out on the stage behind me." He paused for effect. "And here are the names you've been waiting for. Miss Earth! . . .Miss Lycia! . . ." and he droned on. Kowalski had entertained a faint hope that perhaps Chon's contestant might not even get this far; yet he could not be surprised. He looked over at his rival. The Lysian, glaring back, at least nodded courteously. He did not, however, smile, which in a perverse way pleased the Earthian Ambassador.

"And the last of our ten finalists--Miss Throm! Let's have a big hand for our finalists, ladies and gentlemen!" gushed the cyborg. The fact that Miss Stygia's name had been omitted from the list of finalists was not lost upon that planet's sizeable contingent in the audience. Screaming obscenities, the unhappy Stygians stood, levelled beam rifles at the Judiciaries' box, and fired. The box, however, was enclosed by a force field and no one was hurt; this eventuality had been expected, poor sports being regrettably common in the universe.

Exhibitions of artistic talent were to follow. Each finalist was allotted three minutes for her performance; with breaks for applause, judging, and changes of scenery and environments, the winner would be announced in less than an hour. Kowalski, in his box next to Pachysandra, lit a cigarette. What a way to run a universe, he thought.

The Thromboid, being the last finalist selected, was the first to appear. A transparent eel-like creature, not unlike the Earthian lamprey, she slithered on her belly to the microphone.

"We would now like to address this distinguished body on the matter of Proposal 6B now before the High Council," she thundered in a *basso profundo*. Oh God, groaned Kowalski inwardly, a *political*, and on the first finalist.

Each Contest some finalists attempted to prove their worthiness as Miss Cosmos (and, more importantly, as Grand Moderator of the High Council) by delivering (usually mindless) political orations. Mostly these speeches dealt with some topic of current interest, as did the Thromboid's, and they were always ill-informed, opinionated, and boring.

Nothing was as sure a ticket to failure, reflected Kowalski.

Mercifully, the Thromboid finished ahead of her time. Six other finalists passed without note. Then the cybord-emcee introduced the Calypsan.

*Calypso!* Kowalski started forward in his seat. He hadn't heard anything past Earth and Lysia when the finalists had been announced earlier, so intent had he been on his own more limited competition. How in the hell--then--this ought to be interesting, he thought in turns.

The Calypsan's pressurized carriage was wheeled in. The Earthian gasped, and shuddered. Truly a hideous creature, the Calypsan to most of the audience seemed the ultimate carnivore; claws and teeth and other indescribably ugly masticatory organs protruded everywhere from barnacle-encrusted skin. No wonder Calypso was considered the worst hardship post for Earthian diplomats, mused its senior Ambassador.

The lights dimmed. In the darkness, Wild Bill found his mind wandering away from the stage, away from the competition, away from this black, isolated planetoid, and back to Earth, back to Nebraska where he had been raised, and back most of all to Barbara, whose hair flamed red in the sun, whose deep hazel eyes sparkled mischievously with her frequent playful laughter. Wild Bill--William, then--knew her only one summer, one halcyon summer before she moved away to the city. He had never forgotten her, and the times they had: the dances, the picnics by the sleepy river, the old-time music the both loved, and the sex that seemed to last forever.

The lights came back up. Blinking, Kowalski looked up. All over the Great Hall there was the sound of heavy breathing, sniffling sinus cavities, and generally accelerated metabolisms. Pachysandra was weeping, "Maala, I love you!" My God, realized Wild Bill, *that was her act!* Apparently the Calypsan had somehow stimulated the most sentimental memories in each spectator; as they individually became aware of this, the audience as a whole erupted into applause. Kowalski joined in--quite an act, he thought.

Then he noticed the interior of the Calypsan's carriage. There were two naked skeletons floating about inside that had not been there before the performance--unwary stage hands, evidently. The Calypsan's fabled appetite had apparently not been sated. Wild Bill simply sat back and shook his head. It was all he could do; especially when, moments later, as the Calypsan was being removed from the stage, he realized that not only had he never known anyone named Barbara, but that he had never even been to Nebraska.

The talents of Miss Earth and Miss Lysia were showcased next, and were predictably tedious. The former played a piano sonata, the latter a solo on some equally formal Lysian

instrument. Each received a titanic ovation, due largely to the vast numbers of paid cheerleaders in the audience.

And then the final moment, for which Kowalski and Chon had both striven was at hand. The cyborg on stage accepted the traditional envelope and walked to the center of the stage. Kowalski and Chon glanced at each other tensely. The moment of truth, melodramatically thought Wild Bill.

The third and fourth runners-up, as expected, were from minor planets. Kowalski leaned forward in his chair as the emcee announced the second runner-up: "Miss Lycia!" Pachysandra slapped him on the back as he would a new father. Kowalski yelped a victory cheer, and with his host gulped a victory toast. So sure was he of triumph that he hardly heard the cyborg say, "And the first runner up is . . . Miss Earth! The winner, our next Miss Cosmos, is Miss Calypso!"

### **10. And Now, A Light Denouement *pour votre plaisir***

Earthian intelligence would later inform Kowalski, and the equally shocked Lysians, Earth's new allies, that the Judiciaries of the Cosmos had been split right down the middle between Earth and Lysia as their choice for queen. After several ballots, the Shrow whimsically suggested that one or two of the Judiciaries cast their votes for the Calypsan in order to break the tie. What transpired afterwards could not have been predicted in a work of fiction; with each succeeding vote thereafter, an equal number of Judiciaries from each side defected to the Calypsan. The result remained deadlocked until suddenly, astonishingly, the Calypsan became Miss Cosmos.

But Kowalski, his head reeling with the shock, would not yet know these facts for some time. One thing, however, was sure in his mind as he watched the winner devour the emcee--Wild Bill Kowalski would not be Earth's Ambassador to the High Council of the Cosmos *this* year.

***The End***