

HALL BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS VETERAN'S DAY 2011

Veteran's Day
By Christopher Donahue

As I near my twilight years, I find it more than merely odd that I prefer to spend my time with creatures not of my kind. Of course, many a Shuvian of my class and means will have some level of Hive Worker as a personal servant. My case is much more extreme in that I actually earned the services of Mmorv through valiant heroism and have chosen to befriend Luke.

"Luke, Old Bone," I said to my human friend as I raised a bulb of finely aged kelp in a not-so-steady tentacle, "this Veteran's Day celebration is a splendid idea. Even if it isn't one of our Shuvian concepts, I'm sure it will catch-on at the other Shuvian colonies and I dare say even a few Hive colonies like, um, like . . ."

"Like an excellent reason to take a day away from work?" Mmorv buzzed helpfully.

"Exactly," I replied. Mmorv always had the knack for finishing; no, let's say polishing, my thoughts for me. After nearly twenty years with me, the Old Bug darned well should have picked up a thing or two.

"Yep," Luke added with a slurred growl, "Shuvians'll jump on any excuse to knock off work for a party."

I swiveled an eye in Mmorv's direction. Had my devoted valet just delivered another subtle dig at my own Shuvian race and our less-than-Hive-levels of enthusiasm for the Endless War? Over the years I've become convinced my servant regularly hides some form of smirk under all of that chitin he calls a face.

"Well," I countered, "I didn't hear any whining near the dock when you announced this 'Veteran's Day' as a planet-wide holiday, Luke. Your people were just as ready for a day of sloth and free-flowing intoxicants as were my own."

Luke popped the bottle he had been drinking from out of his head-encasing breathing bubble. Of course, a thin trickle of his vile brew leaked into the sea before the bottle sealed itself. My stylish grotto always had a taint for several tides after Luke's visits, another testament to my willingness to endure hardship for a friend.

"Seems to me," Luke said, "my folk have a few more combat veterans than all

of y'all's and a lot more boys who never got back to become retired vets." Luke saw the red lines rippling across my skin, before he added his usual modifier of, "Present company excluded."

I couldn't stay angry with Luke. We'd saved each other's lives too many times for that. Well, mostly he'd saved mine, but ours was a long and mutually beneficial relationship.

Almost of its own accord, the red traces on my skin faded, to be replaced by the faint blue of alarm. Reluctantly, I shifted my grip around the most comfortable knob in my grotto and turned to face the entrance.

In swept my Brooder, Pan-Hellur, in all of its considerable bulk. Being properly raised, largely by said Pan, I jetted from my ledge to greet it.

"A fair and fresh tide to you today, cherished Brooder," I said with an ease I did not feel. Behind me, Luke growled something which might have sounded polite to another human.

"Good Tide to you as well, Brood-son," Pan-Hellur replied as it appropriated my grotto's most comfortable knob. The Pan's tasting stalks withdrew firmly into its sides at the first contact with traces of Luke's vile cereal-based drink.

"And a Fresh Tide to you as well, Administrator Ryan," it added to Luke. "I take it you will accompany my brood-son to the celebration this sunset. Perhaps your speech will emphasize those admirable martial feats performed by young Quarem which he seems unable to mention on his own. There will be three females of reliable character and from well-placed families in attendance."

Pan-Hellur's red-edged ripples of gray were quite the contrast to my own barely suppressed bright blue flush of alarm.

Only as mono-maniacal a creature as my own beloved brooder would consider taking a novel, but revered (by humans, at least) holiday and use it to make your humble narrator the target of mate-minded females.

"Perhaps, Pan-Hellur, you would care for some pickled anemone," Mmorv buzzed.

"Thank you, Mmorv, your offerings are always exquisite, but I must make several more stops before this 'Veteran's Day' celebration. Do try to make young Quarem presentable. All of these suitably feminine candidates have met him, so we must do everything possible to reverse their current opinions and cast him as an acceptable mate." Pan-Hellur swiveled an eye my way again, before adding, "Well,

we should attempt to make him seem the raw material amenable for molding into a good mate. Do you have some way to render him incapable of speaking for the evening? No, that won't do either if he is to give some sort of speech.”

With an exasperated huff, my beloved brooder jetted from my grotto.

“Women, eh,” Luke growled after Pan-Hellur left.

I should take a short aside here for those unfamiliar with humans. Unlike all other Alliance races, humans have no brooder gender and tend to lump both the female and brooder genders together as both the functions of carrying eggs from fertilization through the hatching and nursing of their young are performed by human females.

For those few still reading my narrative, I must point out that this unsavory combination seems to work for them after a fashion. Even among the more urbane Shuvians, this facet of human development is simply and politely ignored.

I have been around Luke long enough to understand that both the female urge to incite males to exceed themselves and the brooder urge to see males mated and forging long-term legacies are also combined in human female drives. His comment regarding Pan-Hellur made a sort of sense from a stunted, human perspective.

“Yes, well,” I responded to Luke’s comment, “my own cherished Pan carries the need to see a carefree male fully encumbered with responsibilities to new levels.”

“If I may, sir,” Mmorv replaced my thoroughly crushed kelp-bulb with a fresh one. “Perhaps Pan-Hellur should be forgiven its fervor. Shuvian war heroes are statistically rare, given the Shuvian percentage of the total Alliance population. I am certain the Hives would welcome the idea of those heroes parenting more potential warriors and lifting some of the direct war-fighting burden from our Hives.”

“Oh, ink-clouds,” I snapped. I turned to my dear friend Luke for support in Mmorv’s new attempt at casting doubt on my species’ collective resolve. I chose the wrong person. Luke’s struggling refugee colony sent more volunteers into the war than the rest of my planet combined. Many more, and absolutely blood-thirsty to boot.

“I can’t be bothered with mere politics at a time like this,” I said before squeezing a fresh jet of finely aged kelp juice across my tongue. “The Endless War and saving the galaxy from the Spawn is just fine, in the abstract. What Pan-Hellur plans for me is a permanent linkage with a suitable female. And by suitable, it means a dull as mud-water scientist or a completely stodgy sprig of a respectable Old House

which will cement some esoteric industrial or agricultural merger betwixt my family and theirs. The latter being frightfully exciting for financial officers and terminally blah for me.”

Breathing-bubble shrouded human face and black chitin Hiver face each displayed a distinct lack of sympathy for my plight.

“While there is some question as to which females Pan-Hellur has lined up in ambush, I have no doubts regarding the brooder. Pan-Hellur has already told me it has an understanding with Pan-Gorath.”

Luke’s uncomprehending stare was to be expected. However, Mmorv knew the middle and upper strata of local society as well as he knew his own lineage. He allowed his chitin to conceal what should be a look of horror for the future of his master.

Ignoring the treacherous Mmorv, I told Luke, “Pan-Gorath is infamous as a, you would call it War Hawk, even among brooders. True, brooders as a gender are too few to risk in combat, but this one considers itself the Pan-of-Heroes. While an admittedly-catchy title, it has been known to insist brood-fathers train their offspring to become warriors and then lead by example.”

“If I may, sir,” Mmorv helpfully replaced my ex-sanguinated kelp bulb and then began sliding my finest spider-silk sleeves up my tentacles. The color of the formal sleeves went well against my neutral shade and the daringly short length actually emphasized my two battled-truncated limbs.

While Mmorv went about tying the sleeves into place, he buzzed, “Perhaps you should consider Pan-Hellur’s efforts on your behalf as a long-term benefit. Amongst my own people, a mated male-female pair must find a brooder and prove themselves worthy of said brooder even accepting their eggs. I could only hope for the boon of a prearranged brooder myself.”

“Yes, well,” I said as I pulled and twisted the sleeves into comfortable positions. In the abstract, I sympathized with Mmorv. I understood him to be somewhat exceptional among Hive workers by being of the Eta-class. He once explained Hive ranking to me and I think an Eta-class ranks middling-well somewhere along a scale ranging from One to Orange, or some such. For all of his Eta-ness and the reflected glory of having myself as a master, his chances of finding a suitably-assiduous mate and then a brooder were a bit dodge-y at best.

“This all strikes me as being off-topic. I’ve risked life and soul as well as

actually losing blood and limb-endings for the Alliance. It seems that a fellow who has given so much should be spared mandatory marriage followed by an inspired chorus urging him to lead his progeny out to repeat the fatal silliness of mortal combat.”

Mmorv twisted my second-best silver tentacle tips onto my un-damaged tentacles and said, “Perhaps a strong example by you will cause other potential Shuvian heroes to follow in your wake. A few more solid examples such as you, sir, might lead my Queen to forego the practice of referring to the entire Shuvian race as a pod of feckless cowards. She would undoubtedly continue her practice of bestowing the services of high-level workers such as myself to serve any heroic Shuvian survivors.”

“Fah,” I answered. “Psht,” I added, in emphasis, “We should all be feckless cowards. If I had more sense and a bit less feck, I’d still have ten complete tentacles.”

There was no reasoning with Mmorv. From experience, I knew any appeal to common sense over the esoteric allure of ravaging violence would be lost on Luke. But, the Shuvian soul has the innate understanding that there are ways to deal with a situation besides bashing it out, cranial cartilage to cranial cartilage with the enemy.

“My friends,” I said as I spread my tentacles across both soft human shoulder and hard Hiver carapace, “this is not the time to argue old, um, arguments, this is the time to pool our collective and multifaceted genius to help me avoid Pan-Hellur’s clever snare. By displaying my martial prowess in this public celebration of appreciation for Veterans, it has made me dashed-near irresistible to females lusting after the status of honored companion and eventually, revered war-widow.”

“You could just not-show,” Luke said.

One may always count upon a human to not anticipate the down-side to a rash or ill-considered act. Despite their rather impressive record for impulsive action being successful, it was just not the Shuvian way.

“A bold choice,” Mmorv buzzed, “but, Pan-Hellur would surely expect this and prime one of my master’s friends from the Beached Whale Club to speak in his stead. Properly coached, a well-born scion may inadvertently make Master Quarem seem a martial paragon, even beyond his actual and doubtless heroic reality. While this would draw a patriotically-minded female to his side, I believe this is not Master Quarem’s desire.”

“Precisely, Mmorv, I can’t have Pan-Hellur using one the Whales as its toady. No telling what sort of military genius I may seem by the time one of my well-meaning chums has served as my beloved brooder’s lackey.”

I pondered my dilemma for a moment before I (or perhaps the excellent aged-kelp) announced, “It is well-nigh time for me to jet to the surface.”

This sort of take-charge persona seemed to catch both my Hiver servant and my human friend by surprise.

“I propose to grapple Fate with my own tentacles rather than be ensnared in Pan-Hellur’s machinations. I will go to the Veteran’s Day bash and boldly recount my adventures. I’ll regale the enraptured audience with my tale of daring. I’ll tell of the unexpected Spawn sensor strand detecting my scoutship while out on a patrol near the moons of Cruces Three. I’ll spare no iota of the mind-numbing boredom leading to that misfortune nor of the blinding terror of being discovered. I’ll rouse them with an intimate description of how in a spasm of panic I happened to fire my ship’s thrusters in time to avoid annihilation as shoals of Spawn defensive buds exploded around me. Females will shiver as I explain how I forced my way through searing pain and clouds of my own blood to guide my ship back to the nearest Alliance outpost and report a stream of unanticipated Spawn resource pods ready for capture.”

My tentacle tips felt numb. While I recall several instances of making poor decisions at that level of intoxication, I knew the sensation this time to be from sheer excitement.

“After my rousing speech, I will have veritable shoals of females at my beck and call. I’ll choose one suitable to my tastes and marry her. This will deliver me from the terror of my mother or brooder choosing for me.” I gave Mmorv a wink before adding, “You’ll certainly find any female I choose will be a sight more fun than some well-placed old barnacle like Pan-Hellur would pick.”

Mmorv expelled a cloud of tiny bubbles and scrambled to the air pocket at the top of my grotto. Normally, he drew a breath and could function under the surface for half a day or more before needing to take air again.

His reaction to my splendid plan came as a bit of a surprise. I proposed to plunge into the abyss of marital bliss, as everyone but your humble narrator seemed to wish. I had the wit to choose the sort of fun and healthy female whose genes should mix well with my own heroic genetics and produce just the kind of attractive

and devil-may-care offspring the Alliance demanded from my people.

“Please excuse this disruption, sir,” Mmorv buzzed as he floated back-down and his breathing slits drew and exhaled several deep breaths.

I broached the surface just ahead of Luke. As the human’s breathing bubble collapsed, he said, “I’ve never seen you shock the air out of ol’ Mmorv before, Quarem. You nearly made me spill my beer to boot.”

“Yes, well, the art of selectively applied action is second nature to me,” I said. “If my plan caught Mmorv unaware, I should be able to thread my way through Pan-Hellur’s trap and turn things to my advantage.”

“If I may, sir,” Mmorv buzzed, “a slight modification to your plan might inspire Pan-Hellur’s martially matrimonial candidates in the direction of other potential mates.”

“I’m all ear-pods, Old Bug.”

“If memory serves, Master Quarem, you have described your scout ship as being quite Spartan.” At my nod, Mmorv continued, “I would imagine many of your friends at the Beached Whale club are in better financial situations than you were when Pan-Hellur first volunteered your services to the Alliance fleet. Any such young gentlemen would be in a position to outfit their Alliance-provided ships in relative comfort and with many safety features you lacked at the time of your heroic efforts.”

Mmorv had hit upon a sore point for me. Living on family funds and a meager allowance, I could scarcely afford to improve my scoutship beyond a dashing coat of paint and a rather impressive library of entertainment cubes. Upper thermo-cline scions like Squeegle or Squeegle the Younger would be able to fit their ships with the hottest engines, stealth sheathing or any number of gadgets to improve their chances of survival.

“Indeed, sir, while regaling us with your tale of heroism, you might mention in passing how a well-financed Shuvian warrior could greatly improve both his comfort and chances of survival. Bored young members of the Beached Whale Club, whom Pan-Hellur will ensure are in attendance, will see how impressed the young females are with your tales of martial prowess and will hear how they might emulate you in relative safety and comfort.”

“You know, Quarem,” Luke growled, “your six-foot roach makes damned good sense.”

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Once again, Mmorv offered a good idea. Your humble narrator delivered a flawless performance which left the entire female portion of the Shuvian audience in a swoon. With a little prompting from Mmorv, I embellished upon the newest safety features available to a well-to-do Shuvian scoutship pilot volunteer. In no time, even the dimmest Beached Whale member could see how he could make himself seem a hero while facing only a modest personal risk.

I suppose the celebration was a success for all involved. I ended the evening unattached.

Nearly a quarter of the Beached Whales volunteered for scoutship duty. These young heroes-to-be were toasted with clutches of kelp bulbs and mounds of puffer-fish crystals. Females viewed these still-intact warriors with much more enthusiasm than they did a more seasoned and scarred veteran like myself.

Luke spoke at length upon Mmorv's genius, although I am the one who whipped the audience into a patriotic frenzy. I soon found myself with only Luke and Mmorv at my side. All of the females, both stodgy and stylish only had eyes for the new crop of volunteers. While I had no desire for a life mate, I did not care to be treated like something rotting in a tide pool.

Pan-Hellur had seen through my, well Mmorv's, clever strategy and swam away before I had even finished my speech. In contrast, Pan-Gorath was in ecstasy. It had several seasons' worth of heroic offspring contracted by the end of the evening.

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