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SLOW MOTION WARS

Science Fiction Slipstream

by

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One sample story from the collection
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Philip glanced nervously at the girl sitting in the high chair near the middle of the table. He was already beginning to fall in love and the game had yet to start. He touched his dry lips tenderly with the tip of his tongue. The atmosphere on Ziperdee didn't agree with him, despite the confines of his breathing helmet and the relief that it provided. The planet was an anomaly even in this part of the galaxy. When the first settlers had arrived from Quetzalcoatl they had been taken aback by the air composition: predominantly nitrous oxide and helium. Even now, squeaky laughter seemed to reverberate round the walls.

Opposite him his opponent was also licking his lips, but for very different reasons. Philip knew it wasn't some nervous reaction, born from the imminent start of the game or any concerns of losing. The alien could taste victory, and his confidence was clearly visible, especially to the girl who was pressed as far to the right of her chair as she could sit. No doubt this amused the alien – her trepidation would make the meat more succulent. Without a doubt he would be able to taste the fear.

Not for the first time Philip wondered why he'd volunteered for the 3000 Olympics when he discovered they were taking place on Ziperdee. An athletic chap, used to the constant spring-like weather on Quetzalcoatl and descended from some of the finest pioneers who had left Earth since the cold had descended on the planet and snow had formed on the moon's surface, Philip had been expecting to be picked for a traditional sport. The triple jump or hurdles or the 100 metres dash. But the gravitational pull on the winning planet couldn't accommodate traditional Olympic games. Instead the participants were competing at pinball, Smack The Croc, Shove Ha'penny, and Table Football. Air Hockey was about as strenuous as it got, but even that had to

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be adapted by replacing opposing magnets to raise the puck the fraction off the table it required in order to float from one side to the other.

Philip caught the girl's eye again. It was single and blue. The colour the Earth's seas used to be before they became frozen wastes. He had seen pictures on his grandparents Viewfinders at home. She couldn't have been far removed from his ancestors, many of her facial features were startlingly similar. Her hair was cut in a Louise Brooks bob, and her cheeks were rouged like polished cricket balls. Her nostrils flared expansively and her ears were shamelessly erotic. Although her lips were thin and red Philip had an overwhelming desire to kiss them. Her overall appearance transcended any revulsion that physical contact usually reared in him following the abuse received from his Nanny as a boy. She had been something different. She had come from Zurf.

Cornelius, the alien sitting opposite, also came from Zurf. Philip knew that the creature wanted nothing more than to consume the prize that sat quivering on the high chair beside them. Long gone were the base metal medals that were the reward in the olden golden days. Intergalactic laws had decreed the choice of prize had to be nominated by the competitors. Cornelius was playing for a meal. Philip was playing for love.

Through his headset he could hear an announcement being made, and he watched the puck rise fractionally from the tabletop. He picked up his mallet and felt its nub nestle perfectly in his palm. The game was ready to commence! He could feel the hair tingling at the top of his back between his shoulder blades.

This was it. This was the big one. He had already won fifteen matches of five games apiece to get to this stage. He must remain focussed. He must keep his head or he'd lose his heart. Yet, as the countdown was sounded and then repeated loudly by the assembled audience, he found his mind wandering. He couldn't help but think back to the events of the previous night.

"Puny earthling! Think you can stand up to the green might of

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Cornelius from Zurf. Always the aliens from Zurf shall triumph over the bipeds from Earth. Take off your helmet and breathe in the nitrous oxide. It'll make you laugh and sleep.

"All eyes on me! I need not gaseous assistance. Look ye at what my ancestors did to your poxy planet five hundred years ago. Have you heard of the snowball effect? Hah - you have now!"

Now compose yourself, Cornelius, me old mucker. Concentrate on the contest afore ye concentrate on the prize. Show no weakness. But this mallet - it's not right for my talons. Damn the Interstellar Olympic Committee who won't allow modifications. Terran sympathisers! To hell with the IOC. There goes the buzzer.

But I can't take all my eyes off the prize. What a cooker!

"All right, darling? It's only half a swog till lunchtime."

My parents lumbered me with the history and mythology of being named Persephone. With my exceedingly beautiful, though solitary, blue eye they might have settled on Cyclops or a feminine derivative. Still, nomenclature is the least of my worries at present.

What would the IOC do if they knew the truth about last night? If they knew about my rule-breaking tryst with the human competitor Philip? It's not sporting and it's not strictly legal but what have I got to lose? And he seems pretty smitten. He must be to go up against a Zurfer at Air Hockey.

Universal Being, but I'd heard his style of chat-up line before!

"You got any Quetzalcoatl in you? Would you like some?"

Although, in actual fact - as if there's any other sort of fact - he was no better nor worse than any of my other suitors since I got to Ziperdee. And I never came here for the sex; no, in actual fact - oops, there I go again! - I only travelled here at the behest of my sister Athena. She got her Olympic call-up a couple of weeks before I did, snagging a gig as the bait in the 5-ball pool table marathon. A Zurfer had won that, too. He consumed her but the experience was a joy and certainly not the end. My sister's spirit was transformed into ecstatic bubbles expelled in daily doses

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carrying the message "It's heaven in here" in a perfect rendition of Athena's dulcet tones. Talk about *air* hockey. What a way to go...

Talk all you like. Life is electricity. Electro-magnetism is the driving force in this corner of the universe. Forget your chance and your chaos theory, we've been in charge all along.

You still don't know who the puck I am?

Who wins, who loses? - I decide.

Philip braced himself as he lost the toss and the puck floated across the table into the talons of the Zurf. He watched him steady it and then move the equivalent of his elbow back a fraction. Would he try for a direct shot or attempt to bounce it off the side-cushions? Decisions, decisions. And at the back of Philip's mind the deluxe tryst of the previous evening...

Bang! The puck shot straight into Philip's goal. 1-0. Fuck!

He must keep his mind on the task. He can't let the memory of his sweet coupling spoil the day!

Taking the puck out of the dispenser he felt sure for a moment that it moved within his fingers. A hallucination, no doubt. Perhaps some of the air had worked its way into his breathing helmet. He placed it flat on the table and watched it glide under its own volition, then POW! he shot it into the side cushion, watched it run around the back of the Zurf's goal whilst Cornelius frantically tried to capture it, and then return to him before smashing it with one smooth movement and making it 1-1.

Cheers rose around the arena. He was the people's champion no doubt. The underdog! It heartened him to think of his parents back home cheering on the RealLifeLink. It crossed his mind as to whether they'd accept Persephone as his wife if he returned with her as the spoils. Although Intergalactic relationships were now all the rage, his folks were hearty Quetzalcoatlians at heart and cherished their almost untainted adaptation to their atmosphere from their ancestors on Earth. Maybe she could undergo surgery to add an extra couple of eyes?

The Zurfer was having difficulty removing the puck from its

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slot and returning it to the table. His talons were unused to rounded objects. Philip watched with amusement and then disbelief, as the puck seemed to flip up of its own accord. Was it his imagination or was there another life-form on the table?

Smash! Before he realised it Cornelius had let loose with another shot. He caught it well and fired it back, and the action intensified over ten consecutive hits until Philip played a dummy and then slipped the puck efficiently behind the Zurfer's mallet. It stayed short of the hole but in his panic Cornelius drew his arm backwards, effectively scoring a unique own goal.

1-2.

Philip allowed himself a smile, but in the twinkling of Persephone's eye the puck was back on the table and heading his way. He miss-swiped completely and the resounding clunk of the goal echoed around the arena. Cornelius's mouth opened in a wide grin, which transformed itself into a vile anticipatory burp.

"Puny earthling! The scores are level and I'll trash your lucky streak, you see if I don't! You think I don't know about your midnight liaison with what will be my midnight snack? Gor Blimey Missus – whilst you were at it with ye maiden I was conferring with le puck! The game's as good as won, don'tcha know it. Glory be to Zurf! "

Persephone stifled a yawn. Was this really what men did all the time? Acts of manliness repelled her sensibilities. Why couldn't Philip be a poet or something? Would she really have to put up with such displays of machismo if she ended up returning to Quetzalcoatl with him? And really, if he couldn't pick up a girl without having to compete in the Olympics then maybe she should have searched for a mate over the Internet after all.

At least the Zurf had some charisma. And her sister's ecstasy had certainly opened her eye. With any luck he wouldn't be beyond a bit of sex before he consumed her. Maybe she could get the best of both worlds from him alone?

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“Here we are sports fans at the culmination of the 3000 Olympics. If you’ve only just joined us then no doubt you’ll be sad to hear you’ve missed almost all of today’s events, but nevertheless you’re just in time to catch the thrilling climax of the air hockey which this year has pitched a Quetzalcoatlman against a Zurf. The pace is so fast at the moment that it’s nigh impossible to keep my focus on the puck, but with the score at 14-14 and with only one point to play and everything to play for, what I do know for certain is that whoever wins the game will be the winner.”

Philip cursed under his breath. He should never have missed that last point. Once again he had caught sight of Persephone out of the corner of his eye, and realised that he could look straight up her skirt from his low position over the table as she sat atop her high chair. Damn and blast the genetic programming that was evolution!

He pulled the puck out of the slot and scratched his ear with the same hand. Hang on a minute. What was that? The puck was in conversation with the Zurf! They had a side-bet goddamn them, and must have been in radio contact during the game! Angrily he smashed it down on the table and watched with wry amusement as a small transmitter bounced away with the force. This final point would be his and his alone or he was an Ashook...

He played a dummy again with the mallet and then shot the puck direct towards Cornelius’s goal. As though in slow motion the Zurf moved his arm back and then pushed forwards into the shot with all his might. The puck lifted from the table and struck Philip’s breathing apparatus with an audible clunk. The assembled audience held their breath as the mask broke and Philip attempted to do the same.

“You fucker!” he squeakily giggled, pointing directly at Cornelius; before collapsing on the floor and writhing with laughter whilst losing consciousness.

“Wake up.”

Philip felt his shoulders being gently shaken and saw

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Persephone by his bed. She smiled a sympathetic smile.

“What happened?”

“You’ve been out a full day and a half. You should see the size of the bruise on your nose!” She giggled and his heart pounded alongside the vibration in the air.

“And you’re still alive...?”

“The IOC declared the game jointly won. For two-thirds of the year I may reside with you on Quetzacoatl and for the remaining third I must descend to Zurf with Cornelius. Despite appearances the time has been split between you equally, due to the time differential on Zurf.”

“But he cheated...”

“...with an unknown life-form which the IOC won’t even recognise until it’s undergone all the usual Intergalactic checks. As it stands they’ve deemed the game fairly played until they can prove otherwise.”

Philip sat up in bed and reached out for Persephone’s hand.

“It is true then? Are you mine at last?”

The door burst open behind them.

“Aye, she’s yours ‘til the three moons circle Zipperdee at least, then she’s back to my shack lad for a nibble of her scrumptious hide!”

Persephone smiled and a bubble popped in anticipation.