

## 2b – Meeting Sister Braga

Sister Braga paced the oppressively dark, comfortably stuffy halls of her mission in silent, solitary contemplation. She was dedicated to her duty, to bring faith to these people, if they could be called people; to bring religion, to bring education to these savages. An almost completely thankless task, a seemingly pointless, useless task. The recipients of her effort seemed totally incapable of appreciating what was being done for them, even going so far as resenting her help. She would persevere, she would fulfil her duty to the best of her ability. They may be out in the middle of nowhere, there may be nobody to see them bar the ubiquitous Natives, but that was no reason to allow decorum to slide.

The walls glowed faintly; an observer would guess rightly that in daylight they were a blinding pure white. The sort of white that hurts your eyes if you are foolish enough to stare at it for too long. There would not be a speck of dirt on the walls, no sand on the floor, no scuffs, nothing to demonstrate that the building was used. An army of hands kept her halls spotless. Her robes, her habit was too thick, too stiff, too warm for this ridiculously hot place, yet to not be dressed in the full dress of her Order was unthinkable.

She would never suffer a lowering of the standards of any of the women under her command, and she was always far harder on herself than she was on them. Far better to pray, again, and then again that the weather in this godforsaken place where she had found herself would get better, get cooler, or wetter. Her role, her duty was to suffer through discomfort if needs be; her job was to be disciplined, to teach discipline, to bring the Word to the ungodly, so suffer she must. There was no escaping the certainty that she did not belong in this place, it was too hot and too dry and the food – the quickest way to earn her ire, the easiest way to unleash her famous temper was to mention the food.

Certainly, there were local plants and animals that the savages seemed to relish, but surely she could not be expected to actually eat them. Attempts were being made to grow crops from home but they were hampered by the lack of rain and lack of farming expertise. So many people kept arriving: troopers, shopkeepers and merchants, missionaries and thieves. What they needed was just one decent farmer. The food, don't get her started about the food.

Stopping suddenly as if startled, she listened. She could hear the susurrus of voices – no intelligible words, just the faintest of tiny noises like the scurrying of the infernal mice that infested this unliveable hellhole no matter what measures they took to eliminate them. Wrapped in the comfort of her accustomed silence she followed the faint, bare trace of sound, finally tracking it down to the correct door. Talking after lights out, and in that jabber as well – that nonsense the Natives use instead of language. Will the little monsters never learn? She opened the door and slipped through it, the hems of her neat pressed habit cracking like a whip with the speed; she moved so fast she was almost invisible. Two children were kneeling beside their beds whispering prayers to whatever primitive god, or gods, they worshipped. Surely they were newcomers to the mission school if they knew no better. They would soon know, that much was certain. She dragged the little animals by their too thick, too curly hair, chastising them in a constant hissing monotone, ignoring their screamed, unintelligible complaints. They had fallen before she had dragged them through the kitchen courtyard, past the new plantings she had been eyeing earlier that day in anticipation of their future fruit.

The dead weight of the children was no hindrance to Braga in her fury, they left two uneven runnels in the gravel and dust. At the far side of the dusty red-brown courtyard, past the straggling green, yellow, brown weeds that needed pulling by the too-lazy Natives, was a neat line of three sheds. Two of them she opened, the bolts sliding with a snick like a drawing blade, and the windowless doors were yanked ajar. The screech of the doors opening was even louder than the wailing of the children as they were each in turn dumped unceremoniously in a box. They kept wailing after the doors were locked, screaming more of their jabber. She suspected that they were new to the mission but surely someone had told them enough to fear the 'boob' as the Natives called it. Some other little monster would have terrified them with the story. Sister Braga had never bothered to learn the noises the Natives made instead of speaking; she could not see the point of learning a language so close to extinction. She berated them in hers, totally unconcerned whether or not they could understand her.