

Colin story. Edited by Bob then Taylor-Sept 15-2025

Century Smith Tales

Mama Browns

A tall figure in scorched spacer leathers walked from the silver rocket. The exterior of the needle-nosed ship reflected a ruddy glow as the sun slipped towards the Martian horizon. The figure walked purposefully, ignoring the other rockets until he entered the overhang of the gantry docks that surrounded Grissom's Landing. Out of the glare, he turned and looked back fondly at his ship. *His* ship! Century Smith reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. He took out a silver cigarette case, thumbed the catch, and looked down at the contents.

The light brown wrapping papers and tawny tobacco were one of the reasons these cigarettes were called 'Mama Browns'. Smith smiled as he took one of them out. Of course, the other reason was because they were made by a little old Earth woman that everyone called Mama Brown. Mama Brown grew her tobacco in an exotic collection of ancient Martian pottery on the roof of a four-story building in Nodu Gordii known as Mungo's Reef. Tobacco was expensive so putting a light to one was about the same as burning a ten-dollar bill from the old days, not that anybody used bills anymore.

Smith chuckled, remembering a time when a museum curator tried to buy Mama Brown's collection of growing pots, offering her an exorbitant amount of money. The poor sap was sent packing with his hair singed by Mama Brown's heat pistol. Nobody threatened the sanctity of Mama Brown's agriculture atop the Reef.

The building earned its name from Mungo's Reef-Bar and Grill, the longstanding establishment on the bottom floor. The next floor up were apartments, of a sort, that were rented

out by the hour to some of the local ladies. It took a sound sleeper to rent one of these rooms for the night. That floor could be noisy.

The floor above were real apartments and were well insulated from the raucousness below. That's where Mungo himself had his own private digs, occupying a quarter of the floor. Mungo's pair of Venusian bodyguards had a smaller place that protected the only entrance to Mungo's rooms. Other rooms on this floor could be rented long term by carefully vetted occupants. On the top floor were the offices and living quarters of the Black Star Line.

Black Star was a consortium of independently owned cargo rockets. They had formed a company to help their owners survive against the bigger lines that were always trying to undermine their trade. Shipping could be a cutthroat business, sometimes literally. If things went wrong out in The Black it was hard to prove fault and the independents rarely had enough money to take perpetrators to task.

Mungo's was where Smith was heading... Sooner or later, just not right now. Smith closed the case and taped the cigarette down on its end, then reversed it and taped it down again to firm up the tobacco. He then inserted it into a cigarette holder that had been clipped to the side of the case. Making sure the cigarette was secure; he placed the holder into his mouth. With both hands he lifted the case and flicked the built in lighter, holding the flame to the cigarette and inhaling deeply.

After three months without a cigarette, the light headiness from the smoke felt almost euphoric. "Better than drugs," Smith thought, taking another drag. Not that he indulged in drugs. No decent spacer took them. The Black was too unforgiving for that, and for that matter, so were your crewmates whose lives depended on you. It was a good way to end up outside your ship with your air tanks running out. And that was if your mates were feeling kind.

Smith looked up at the ship, *his* ship; he still found it hard to believe that she was his. At thirty-eight years of age, he was the youngest captain in the Black Star Line. If it hadn't been for his inheriting Captain Raj's share and co-owner Ben Corfresi agreeing to sell his, Smith would likely still be second officer on the *Salambo* rather than her Captain.

She was an old ship, "Hell, she's older than I am," thought Smith. But she had been built well. Originally constructed by Deckard Space Ways before the final war, she was one of four sister ships all named after the queens in a card deck. In her last life, she had been the *Queen of Hearts*. Over the years, the various owners had cared for her meticulously and she'd been upgraded and improved so much so that she was as good as any modern ship, maybe better. It was Captain Raj who had renamed her the *Salambo*.

Smith drew some more smoke into his lungs. "Back then," he thought. Back before lunatics started throwing atomic bombs at each other, poisoning most of the earth. Back before the nascent Martian colonies became the United Federated States of Mars. "Yeah, back then." The words came out of his mouth with the smoke he exhaled. If anyone had been watching and seen the grim look on his face, they would have sworn he had just cursed something or someone.

His calm returned when his eyes refocused on the *Salambo*. He could almost make out the art on her side. A beautiful woman sitting on a crescent moon, her dark hair and diaphanous clothes streaming back as if in a cosmic wind. One arm was outstretched and reaching for a couple of stars. Or were they leaving her hand? It could be either. Smith smiled. Gordii might be home port for the *Salambo* but there was only one home for Smith, and he was looking at it.

Smith felt the last of the tobacco burn away as he dragged in the final breath of smoke. He took the holder out of his mouth then lifted his foot and banged the residue out of the holder

against the heel of his boot. He looked once more at his ship then turned and walked towards the travel tube that would take him into Gordii.