

\*The Greatest Painting of All Time\*

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What you have to understand (said Little Mike) is that not every work of art is an original. I've made more money copying the masters for private collectors, or for museums that didn't want the public to know that the originals were stolen or decayed, than I've ever made for my own creative work, brilliant as it clearly is.

You know, it's really quite strange when you come to think of it. I've made millions of credits from my copies of The Three Graces and The Persistence of Memory and a trio of \_Saturday Evening Post\_ covers, but with the one exception that I'm going to tell you about the most I've ever gotten for anything I signed my name to was the 5,000 credits that Tomahawk paid me for the painting of Sally Six Eyes that's hanging over the bar. (In retrospect, I should have charged him a thousand credits per eye.)

That's always been a dilemma for the supremely talented: the world -- or, in my case, the galaxy -- just isn't ready for us. We're ahead of our time. Look at poor Van Gogh: the man died without ever selling a painting. Or Marcus Pincus, for that matter.

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"Marcus who?" asked Three-Gun Max.

"Pincus."

"Never head of him."

"See what I mean?" Little Mike shot back.

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Still (Little Mike continued), I never believed in starving in a garret, so I took on any assignment that paid my bills and built a reputation, even if it wasn't quite the reputation I'd have wished for a man with my unquestioned talent. I even took that job of painting half a dozen animals for the Peponi post office.

And then one day I got the most interesting commission of my career. It seemed that the Governor of Solomon, a diamond-mining world in the heart of the Monarchy -- sorry; make that the Commonwealth -- had seen my work and decided that I was just the man he wanted to design a new set of currency for his world.

He flew me to Solomon at government expense, sat me down, and laid out the assignment for me: they wanted new banknotes in denominations of one, ten, fifty, one hundred, and five hundred credits. Five engravings, with some thematic connection between them, for a fee of half a million credits.

As you can well imagine, I was thrilled. I mean, here I was, finally getting a chance to do original work rather than copy some overrated dabbler like Renoir or Degas. Then he gave me the bad news: I couldn't include my signature on the notes. Yeah, I know it's not done, but they never went out and hired a true artiste before. Still, argue as I might, I couldn't talk him into relenting on that one point -- though I did get him to double my fee before I finally ran out of words.

He offered to supply me with holos of all of Solomon's greatest politicians and military figures, past and present, but I had \_carte blanche\_ in regard to subject matter ... and I saw a way to take my revenge. Although he was married and the father of five daughters, the governor kept a gorgeous blonde mistress on New Rhodesia. It wasn't exactly the best-kept secret on Solomon, which is how I found out about it,

but everyone -- including his wife -- pretended not to know anything about it.

I had a year in which to deliver the five engravings, and the first thing I did was rent a ship and fly out to New Rhodesia. I hunted up his mistress, and found that she was getting sick and tired of being kept hidden like a dirty secret. He kept promising to leave his family and make her the First Lady (or First Whatever) of Solomon, but it was obvious that it was all just talk. He had no intention of changing an arrangement he found so congenial.

She wanted to embarrass him, and she also craved the notoriety, so I proposed my plan to her that evening over drinks -- Alphard brandy, as I recall -- and it met with her immediate and enthusiastic approval.

Over the next ten months, I made five exquisite, life-sized paintings of her, which would later be reduced to banknote size and transformed into engravings.

In the first, which was to become the one-credit note, she was dressed in the traditional uniform worn by both sexes of the Solomon military.

For the ten-credit note, I painted her in basically the same outfit, but without the helmet and armor.

She was wearing less in each of the next two notes, and for the five-hundred-credit note she was totally nude, but with her hands and hair modestly covering the more intriguing bits and pieces of her, not unlike *The Birth of Venus*.

Then, in the two months remaining to me, I created my masterwork, clearly the greatest painting of all time. Same subject, of course, still nude, but proudly displaying everything she'd hidden on the five-hundred-credit note.

How I worked on those flesh tones -- and how I succeeded! You'd swear you could reach out and touch that delicate pink skin. You'd bet your last credit that she was looking only at you, that her eyes actually followed you as you walked around the room. You knew that she was actually breathing, and that her breasts were fluttering gently with each breath. Her lips were so moist you felt that if you placed your finger against them it would come away damp.

Usually when you create a masterpiece you want to finish it and frame and hang it. But on this one, I left rectangular areas in each of the four corners -- and when I was sure I was done, when it was impossible to improve the painting any further, I spent the last day filling in those four boxes with the number 10,000,000.

The next day we held a huge reception to launch the new banknotes. One by one I displayed the five paintings. They applauded the first wildly, the next mildly, and then there was a growing uneasiness as I unveiled the last three. I thought the governor was about to have a stroke.

When the ceremony was almost over, I had a couple of assistants display my ultimate masterpiece. I could hear the assembled dignitaries voice a collective gasp, and I announced that this was the ten-million-credit note, and that this was the only one and there would never be another, and since it was a collector's item I'd sell it to the highest bidder. I explained that it was unfair to exclude the planetary population at large from the bidding, so I had allowed the local holo stations to broadcast the painting all across the planet for five minutes before the auction began.

Someone bid five million credits, someone else upped it to seven million, and then the governor finally found his voice. "Arrest that man and kill the holo!" he yelled, and I was dragged off to durance vile, where I languished for the next two days.

I was released in the middle of the night and told to leave Solomon and never come back. I asked the guard to thank the governor for his generosity, and he explained that generosity had nothing to do with it. The painting had sold for seventeen million credits, the governor's hand-picked judge awarded him five million in damages for the emotional distress I had caused him, and he had then fixed my bail at twelve million credits.

So that's the story. I don't even know if the painting still exists. They're still using my banknotes -- not on Solomon, where the governor outlawed them, but on New Rhodesia, where my model had married the richest man on the planet and then inherited all his wealth when he unexpectedly choked to death on a mutated cherry pit a month later. But it seems a crime that the rarest and greatest banknote of all will never be seen again.

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"I'd give a purty to see that painting," said Catastrophe Baker. "Or even the model, for that matter. Especially if she's the richest woman on New Rhodesia."

"She was something, all right," agreed Little Mike. "If art mirrors life, then you have to start with something like her to wind up with something like my painting."

"Got a question for you," said Max, who always seemed to have a question for everyone who told a story.

"Sure."

"What's your real name?"

"I thought I told you: Michelangelo Gauguin Rembrandt van Gogh Rockwell Picasso."

"I mean your birth name," said Max.

Little Mike paused for a long minute. "Montgomery Quiggle," he said at last, looking decidedly uncomfortable.

"So like the rest of us, you came out to the Inner Frontier and took a name that suited you?"

"You have some objection to that?"

"Nope, but like I said, I got a question. I understand naming yourself after all them famous painters, but why Little Mike? Why not just Mike?"

"Because I'm little, and I'm not ashamed of it."

"No reason to be," agreed Max. "Course, it ain't nothing to brag about either."

"Oh, I wouldn't be too sure of that," said Big Red, who'd been an all-star in a number of the usual sports, but made his real reputation as maybe the greatest murderball player of all time. His body was covered top to bottom with scars, which he wore proudly.

"Yeah?" said Max. "And what do you know about it?"

"Enough."

"You're a pretty big man yourself," observed Max, looking at Big Red's tall, muscular frame, "and I know you used to be a pro jockstrapper. So suppose you tell me: now that race horses are extinct, what

athlete would rather be small than big?"

"Right now, today?" replied Big Red. "The greatest of them all."

"And who is that?"

"You probably never heard of him."

"Then how great can he be?" insisted Max.

"Trust me, he was the best I ever saw. Hell, he was the best \_anyone\_ ever saw." Big Red sighed and shook his head sadly. "The brightest flames burn the briefest time."

"His career was cut short by injury, huh?"

"His career was cut short all right, but not by injury," said Big Red. He shifted in his chair, trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable. (It's well-known that murderballers wear their old injuries like medals, and refuse all pain blocks and prostheses.)

"So are you gonna tell us about him or not?"

"Of course I am. I might be the very last person who remembers him, and if I stop telling his story, then it'll be like he never existed."