

R'n'R

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Awad, as he left the medic office, was one miserable Al-Malik soldier.

Sure, he has been shown the vids when he joined the armies. "R'n'R Without Ravages and Rotting", "To Each Battle its Armor", "There's a Reason Why They Call it an Ambush, Johnny", he has seen them all. But Awad had thought himself above that. He had wanted adventure. He had wanted thrill. He had wanted exotism.

In a way that could be perceived as as twisted as those little trees the Li Halan are so fond of and that die as soon as you forget to water them for one – one! – day, Awad hadn't really any reason to complain.

His skin, taut where it shouldn't and flabby where it was less expected, was an avant-guardist patchwork of warts, rashes, lesions and excrescences that would have been reminiscent of the sad state of a leprous toad in need of a tetanus shot if it was not for its general coloration. No toad, alive, dead, modified by bored Engineers or else, have ever been of that color. In fact, no living being has ever been of that color. For good reasons.

His hair, his erstwhile pride, has been com-

pletely shaven away. He could have lived with the green fuzz, but the little white flower-things sprouting here and there was just too much to bear. Somehow, the medical officer had told him, it could have been worse. He had seen, many a year back, a Vorox that had been similarly infected. The quick and thorough degenerescence of his pilosity had been the downfall of a once fierce and fearsome warrior, now reduced to win his pittance as a mercenary lawn ornament.

Yes, somehow, he was lucky.

Yet, he knew that for the next six months he would be reminded of the time his unit set fire to that propergol pipeline back on Gwyneth each time he would empty his bladder.

Yet, the mix of antibiotics he has been given came from a Second Republic cache.

Yet, he was wary of the way the parasites hiding in the nether nooks of his body were drinking and dancing and laughing and lying and loving the reeling midnight through.

Awad was miserable. But at least he got his lesson.

That was the absolute last time he was to visit Madame Gilbert's (rather misnamed) House of Pleasures.