

# **The Stuff Pens Are Made Of**

## ***GSCS Nightingale : Elwick's Head***

Betelgeuse had finally gone nova, something astronomers had been predicting since at least the early 21st Century. For astronomers of Elwick's day it was a sensational event. And thanks to their precise predictions—due to the fact they were finally able to study the star up close—not a single life was lost in the cataclysmic event. But for lovers of Greek Mythology, the nova had the effect of giving the 'Great Hunter' a nasty shoulder wound.

Elwick had read that no one had physically seen the nova from a ship or inhabited planet yet; any living being within a light year's distance of the initial shockwave would have surely been killed, and anyone now entering that radius would still be in grave danger of incredible cosmic radiation from the continued emissions of the nova. Due to bubble jets of gamma rays shooting from the poles, several additional light years 'north' and 'south' of the star were also off-limits to anyone who wished to go on living. But the billions of the Milky Way Galaxy's inhabitants had been able to witness the explosion in other ways, thanks to an army of satellites orbiting at various distances from the doomed sun.

Moses surmised less than a hundred people who lived through the previous war knew the link between Betelgeuse and his special writing utensil. There were not many of these trinkets still floating around; in fact Elwick figured it was very probably a major security violation to possess one. But he was not too worried

about such things. Not anymore. Plus he had good reason to keep it. For Moses, the pen represented several things, many of which he had a hard time putting into words.

Dale had told Elwick the mining colony that processed the very non-worthless mineral from which the pen's housing was constructed would be abandoned long in advance; the time of detonation had been predicted to within a week after so many decades of close study. But in the short time it was there, the colony was successful in mining thousands of tons of a malleable mineral with unheard of electromagnetic properties. Scientists working on the project named it Vomarium out of awe, while the military named it Fool's Titanium in a massive deception operation. It proved the Republic's sole saving grace during the Second Asia America War.

Vomarium paved the way for a polymer termed Skunk Musk—named for its hideous smell—which enabled the RNA's spy aircraft, seacraft and spacecraft to remain hidden from all forms of electromagnetic radiation on most wavelengths. This in effect took ships constructed or coated with the polymer off not only China's but everyone's radar. In fact, the only way the RNA's own ships knew where each other were during battle was either visual or via transponders, which could just as easily give away a ship's position as easily as a spotlight in the dark. No worries; the scientists and engineers came up with other ways of inter-ship communication and status updates without compromising individual ship and fleet positions. Moses had no idea what they were, and didn't care. He only knew they worked.

The stinky polymer enabled the new Americans to finally turn the tide of the war, winning battle after battle and taking out half of Lord Wu's key strategic military installations. It eventually forced a truce in a war that would have surely seen the end of the then-youngest country on the planet. The peace treaty not only allowed the Republic of North America to keep its fledgling sovereignty, it allowed Moses and everyone he knew to hold onto life a while longer; without Vomarium, the renegade warlord would very likely have won the war for China in a few more years.

It was no wonder Kelly Graydon thought what she did about Vomarium. The smear campaign had worked well. The substance was a closely guarded secret

from the moment it was discovered to the present day. The idea being if no one saw any worth in it, no one would want it. It passed from Betelgeuse to various RNA strongholds across the galaxy and even Earth itself in beat-up civilian transports without either the enemy nor the bulk of the Republic's own citizens ever discovering its tremendous importance. The valuable mineral was shipped to military and civilian shipyards from factories on the planet of its accidental discovery right under everyone's collective nose, in the guise of ordinary household items. Trinkets, souvenirs, office products. Which were then melted down and shaped to order. Mostly in the shape of panels to adhere to the sides of battleships.

Dale had elaborated that when the truce was called earlier than predicted, several shiploads of these unused items remained in warehouses marked with a fictitious company logo—not uncoincidentally, a cute little cartoon skunk—on several uninhabited moons of several solar systems, the locations of which only the highest officials in government were privy to. The skunk logo had an historical background only military historians of the day knew, and was likely used not simply to tie in the smelly properties of the wonder material, but also as a bold—Dale thought dangerous—hint to any enemy smart enough to figure it out. Elwick had learned sometime during his two years working in Naval Intelligence that 'Skunkworks' was the nickname of an old United States government program that tested advanced secret aircraft, such as the first supersonic spy and fighter jets to fly the "friendly" skies of Earth. At the time he had no idea of the tie-in to anything in his own day.

"History has a way of repeating itself," Elwick had once heard his father say. *How right he had been.*

He now kept one of these "worthless" leftover office products, in this case a pen, as a reminder of the victory the Republic had won, of the day Vomarium saved his life, not to take any day for granted. A reminder of the tragedy of what and whom they had lost. *So many lives. So many friends.* Why he was spared, only God knew.

Moses finished his business, washed up, and headed for the bridge.