

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT!

Stika was the second of the last king's large brood—nine daughters and three sons. Researchers had little trouble determining that the heirs to the dynasty—which, by divine grace, had held power in Jupiter's Southern Hemisphere since the dawn of history—were male. Although existing documents offered no explicit record, it was indirectly inferred that some women might have worn the crown, though opinions on this matter varied and no consensus had been reached. Key positions in essential sectors (defense, finance, healthcare, the judiciary, administration, etc.) and various economic fields (agriculture, livestock, fishing, mining, transport, industry, leisure) were held exclusively by direct descendants of the monarchy—a group that, over the centuries, had grown increasingly numerous. This fact, in turn, led to an ever-expanding bureaucracy that, in recent times, had become truly unbearable even for the rulers themselves.

The rest of society consisted of "pets"—the name generally given to the working class and, specifically, to slaves. Men and women alike performed the hardest labor and, when the time came, were required to take up arms in defense of the Crown and their lord's lands. Women handled domestic chores and cared for the offspring during their first seven years; after that, the children joined the adults in their work. Upon turning twelve, girls who were beautiful went to serve in the royal household; otherwise—the more common scenario—they had four years to find a mate. Those who failed to do so were confined to the Order of Servants of the Divinity.

Every year, with the onset of the cold, the ceremony of homage took place. The "pets" would sing hymns of gratitude and fealty to the monarch, subsequently pledging individually to remain faithful, to obey orders with docility, and to satisfy the authority's desires.

This society, founded on the divine origin of the Monarchy, lost its hegemonic position during the twentieth century of Jovian history due to a bloody conflict that raged across the region for over fifty years. Initially, royal troops—with the acquiescence of high-ranking religious officials and the backing of wealthy Northern nations (which feared the disruption of raw material supplies vital to their industrial growth, as well as the potential spread of revolution into their own territories)—managed to check the insurgents' momentum.

During a long, dark polar night—for it was never warm on Jupiter; the climate was cold or bitterly cold, though admittedly somewhat milder in the south—Stika resolved to summon her courage and act in accordance with her heart: she would side with the "pets," those anonymous Jovians who had lost even the right to exist, if indeed they had ever possessed it. They led her into the forest, wary of her motives for fleeing and suspecting she might be a spy. The princess dispelled their fears by advising the troops on the best strategies to confront an army far larger and better equipped than their own. On many occasions, she fought on the front lines alongside the bravest among them.

As time went on, the insurgents managed to seize strategic areas that significantly improved their position and prospects in the conflict. Over the last decade, the tide of the struggle turned decisively, and rebel troops seized power. Following the "cleansing"—the term used in the media and in the victorious army's proclamations—of prisoners and survivors loyal to the deposed regime, their personal property and

assets were transferred to individuals distinguished by their support for the new regime across the nation's territories. Sweeping reforms were implemented. The first article of the Constitution of the Egalitarian and Democratic Republic of South Jupiter stipulated that every Jovian—by virtue of their identity and regardless of color, ethnicity, origin, or status—was to be treated as a full citizen, both politically and socially. Subsequent articles established the rights to assembly, freedom of expression, and the election of representatives to the National Assembly and Regional Committees; the right to work for fair compensation sufficient to cover basic needs such as housing, clothing, sustenance, and leisure; and the right to quality education and universal healthcare.

A monument honoring the fallen was erected in Revolution Square—formerly Royal Square. It did not take long for Northern propaganda to label the Southern revolutionary movement as populist and terrorist. Furthermore, the fledgling State deemed it in its best interest to erect a massive wall to protect itself against a potential Northern invasion.

Throughout the 21st century, the reach of republican institutions spread like a spiderweb, extending into every corner of every town and city. Positions of power fell repeatedly to the same individuals or families. The president eventually amassed quasi-absolute, lifelong power. Article One—which enshrined the people's political and social rights—was repealed. The State was renamed the Southern People's Republic.

Faced with this unfolding situation, Stika—now a respected figure in the new society—stayed true to her values and took to the hills alongside those who, having suffered the consequences of the deteriorating conditions firsthand and overcoming the fear and threats leveled against them, decided to join her and take up arms.

In the other hemisphere, major corporations came to wield more power than sovereign states, a shift driven by the short-sightedness of political parties and their leaders, who cared only about their specific terms in office. If a government dared to confront one of these companies, the firm would simply relocate. This meant not only the loss of the meager tax revenues previously agreed upon but also a significant spike in unemployment. Often, to avoid rising jobless figures—which inevitably cost votes—the government of the day would yield to blackmail, granting subsidies to corporations to keep factories within their borders or even to establish new ones. Workers' wages—though the workers themselves generally rejected that label, preferring to identify as "middle class"—were steadily declining. Temporary jobs (capped at six months) proliferated exponentially, with some contracts covering only a few hours of work per week. By the end of the century, the hundred wealthiest individuals commanded more income than all twenty-five states combined, while the poor exceeded the dreaded threshold of forty percent of the total population.

Meanwhile, the guerrillas managed to sustain their underground struggle for nine months, until precision aircraft—imported from a Northern state that had violated the Coalition of States' agreement not to sell arms to the revolutionary regime—wiped them out. Their commander's body was reconstructed and displayed in the Plaza de la Revolución, and three days of national mourning were declared. A vast number of people filed past the coffin to bid her a final farewell. All media outlets and major social networks emphasized that Stika had been kidnapped and murdered by a terrorist group which, in retaliation, had been

completely annihilated in the rocky mountains near the capital. After the heroine's burial, the president promised to erect an obelisk in her honor.

A spacecraft happened to record these words carved into a rock: "The Jovian being lives only in the present, devoid of memory. Nature responds to aggression slowly, unhurriedly, taking its time." This message never came to light on Earth; it was classified as a top state secret.

Now, Jupiter is merely a small, uninhabited, and inhospitable corner of the universe.

"Stories without a Mufflers" (2006 -)

Jesús Claver Giménez