

STAR TREK BANSHEE SQUADRON

GROMIT MUST DIE!



RICHARD ADALBERT MERK

Call of the Wild!

When the *Rocinanté* lands on a small colony planet, Gromit gives West the slip, but when the Klingon authorities find out there's a tribble in their midst, all heck breaks loose!

STAR TREK: *Banshee Squadron*
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Bottle In Front o' Me

"BANG!"

West's audience of rough dockworkers jumped.

"It was curtains for poor Gromit."

West paused in his tale and smiled to himself. It was long past midnight on a Friday, and the hardworking laborers inhabiting the Salty Spittoon bar had spent the last eight hours and half their weekly credits trying to wash away the reality of their lives with liberal quantities of Romulan ale, Tarkelian beer, and inebriated brawling. But in spite of their well-marinated and tenderized condition, he was still able to get a reaction from them. I should'a been a traveling minstrel, he mused wistfully. His own thinking wasn't too clear at the moment.

West had had a few drinks himself, more than just his usual afternoon margarita. At the moment, a toxic black brew the bartender called an 'Open Grave' sat foaming in a

thick container on the bar at his elbow, and West had jumped in with both feet.

A few days ago, Gromit, in a premium display of tribblish tactlessness, had bluntly accused West of being a pathetic drunk. 'You started drinking when you realized Max Vasser wasn't coming back,' the testy tribble had said, 'and you haven't stopped since. You miss her -- God only knows why -- but you can't admit to yourself that you love her. More importantly, you couldn't tell her that you loved her, and now she's gone and it's too late. You blame yourself, but instead of doing something about it you walk around in a drunken stupor all day and spend all night in sleazy dives.'

West had vehemently denied every cliché accusation of course, claiming his frequent recent visits to the local bars and hangouts were simply to reestablish business contacts, and the drinks were merely social lubricants to smooth the business negotiations. And as for Max, well, who needed her anyway?!? She had always been poking her nose into his private business and bossing him around. 'Good riddance!' he had claimed.

There was nothing worse than being looked down on and lectured by a self-righteous tribble.

Or had that all been a dream...? Tribbles couldn't talk, could they? West tried half-heartedly to remember, but the lumbering Lurian on the stool next to him jostled him out of his alcoholic melancholy and demanded his attention.

"So what happened, West?" the Lurian rumbled.

"Huh? Oh yeah, the story," replied West. "But lemme start at the beginning. Poor Gromit." He took a hit from the Open Grave to center his thoughts before continuing. "This

was a few months ago back when... well, when I still had my partner aboard the ship. The day had started so innocently. Who would ever have thought things would turn out like they did...

"Now Max, repeat after me," I said emphatically, enunciating each word precisely. "I - Will - Not - Let - Gromit - Out - Of - This - Cabin."

Max stood next to Gromit's little enclosure in the Rocinanté's small but cozy cabin with arms folded stubbornly across her chest. "You want me to stay here and baby-sit your stupid tribble while you go gallivanting around town?!?"

"I will not be gallivanting," I said. "I will be negotiating our fees with the dockmaster and then coming right back. Besides, you remember what happened the time he got out on Gault?"

"For the hundredth time, that was not my fault! How was I supposed to know he'd get into that farmer's grain storage bins? It's not like he ate that much. He just got a little excited."

Gromit chirped in agreement.

"So did the farmer's wife when she found out, and I didn't notice either of you carrying her inside the house."

"She weighed 300 pounds, and besides, all she did was faint." But finally Max gave up and recited, "'I will not let Gromit out of this cabin.' Happy?"

Gromit grumbled very unhappily from inside his enclosure.

"Thanks, Max," I said. Then turning to Gromit, I said in a sterner voice, "And as for you, don't you be giving Max any trouble. Understand?"

Gromit burped.

"Don't take that tone with me, mister. If you comported yourself with more maturity, I could let you out of here once in a while."

Gromit twittered angrily, but I cut him off with a chopping gesture. "We'll discuss this when I get back."

The Rocinanté had touched down at the small spaceport on the far-flung Kol'chak Colony, (said West,) a small Klingon settlement in the open sectors outside Federation space. I made sure Gromit was locked in his cage -- did I mention it was a Klingon planet? Then off I went to visit with the planetary governor -- did I mention it was a small colony? -- to see if I could scare up some new business.

The meeting went great and I was on my way back with a shiny new contract in my fist. The way back to the landing field led through a residential part of town. I noticed a little Klingon girl tacking up a flyer on a tree. After she ran off I went to look. It was a homemade poster advertising a reward for a lost pet. Then it hit me. There were flyers on a lot of the trees in the neighborhood. I checked a few -- they were all for different animals. Seems there was a missing pet epidemic in town!

I didn't really think much of it at the time, and just walked on, eager to get back to the Rocinanté. In the distance, I heard a growing racket, like a thousand animals barking, meowing, growling, howling and harrumphing, and it was coming closer. I stopped beside a brick wall to wait and see what was going on.

Imagine my surprise when I rounded a corner and saw Gromit go tearing past me! I had to jump back not to get run over! He was riding on the back of a Klingon targ like a tiny jockey! Can you believe it?!?

(A few of West's listeners in the bar shook their head in the negative, but he studiously ignored them and pressed on with his tale.)

Next, a stampede of other animals came tearing around the corner after Gromit. Dogs, cats, targs, voles, ferrets, weasels, wuzzles, goombas... I mean, what was next? A cattle drive?!?

To my growing stupefaction, Max came barreling around the corner yelling, "Grrooomiiiiittt! Wwaaaaaiittt!! She disappeared around the next corner along with the rest of the stampede.

I was about to take off in pursuit, but the sound of more footfalls stopped me. This time a Klingon wearing some sort of tattered official uniform came around the corner. His face was red from the exertion, his clothes were dirty and torn, he was covered in tiny pawprints, and he was clutching a large, long-handled net. He ran by me and vanished around a far corner in hot pursuit of anything he could catch.

I saw an alley that looked like a shortcut and took it.

Jumping out from between two buildings, I stood fearlessly in the middle of the street in front of the approaching stampede.

The targ carrying Gromit came to a screeching halt in front of me and Gromit went flying head over heels through

the air. He thumped into my chest and plopped onto the pavement before my feet.

"Hello, Gromit," I said.

Gromit chirped an angry and annoyed reply.

Just then Max came running up, surrounded by dozens of yammering and jumping wuzzles and goombas. "Beat it, you mangy beasts!" she hollered as she fought her way through them to where Gromit lay. "Oh--! Hi there, West. Uh... I can explain."

She was about to bend down and pick up the errant tribble when the red-faced Klingon huffed up. With a bellow of primal animal rage, he swung his big net over his head as though it were the Sword of Kahless itself and brought it down over Gromit.

"Mevyap!" he cried. "Enemy of the Empire! I have you now!"

I was a little worried, partly about the Klingon, but mostly about Gromit, because even for him this was reckless behavior. I was sure I could patch things up though.

"Is all this really necessary, officer?" I said. "He's just a harmless little tribble."

I wouldn't have thought it was possible, but the Klingon's face grew even redder. "That thing is an enemy of the Empire!" he bellowed. "And I see now that it is the thing responsible for the disappearance of so many neighborhood animals!"

I looked around at the dozens of cats, dogs, and goombas still yammering around our feet, and then remembered all the 'lost pet' flyers I had seen.

"Wait a minute! We're not responsible for your missing dogs -- we just got here an hour ago!"

The Klingon wasn't budging, so I played my last card.

"All right, you. What's it gonna take? Two strips of latinum?"

"No," growled the Klingon.

"Fine, three strips."

"No. Not two, not three, not ten-thousand!" The Klingon tied off the net, sealing Gromit inside. The tribble could be heard rustling around inside and squeaking pathetically. "This Ha'DlBah will be sent to the processing center and destroyed. If you want to protest, take it up with the judge." Then, without further ado, he turned and walked away, battle trophy in hand.

"West, it's not my fault," said Max. "I only had my back turned for a second--"

"I know," I said. "I don't blame you. That damn tribble has given me the slip a million times. But he really picked the wrong planet this time."

"What are we going to do?"

I thought about it, and said, "I wonder how much latinum buying a judge would cost us..."

Max rolled her eyes. "Gromit's dead."

Frontal Lobotomy

"*BANG!*" shouted West.

His audience of rough dockworkers jumped. He smiled. That was twice he'd gotten them now. He continued his story...

Bang! went the judge's enormous iron gavel as he brought it down with thunderous force on the stone benchtop sealing Gromit's fate. "Motion to stay the execution of the tribble denied!" grated the old Klingon judge. "Next case!"

I couldn't believe it! Even Max, who claimed to loathe the tribble, looked almost distraught.

I went to see where they were holding Gromit. It was a warehouse-type building near the courthouse. Inside,

Gromit was sulking a few feet in front of me in the center of a big cage meant for a much larger animal, ignoring me. "Is there anything I can get you?" I asked.

No acknowledgment.

"A snack maybe?"

No reply.

"A jelly donut?"

Gromit turned around to face away from me.

A feeling of dread was growing in my gut that this whole mess was my own fault. I had to find out the truth about something.

"Gromit, there's something I have to ask you." Even though the tribble looked like he still wasn't listening, I pressed on. "I was thinking of the time we met back on Rigel II... and uh... I know I never really asked..." How to ask Gromit this now? Finally I just blurted it out. "You did *want* to come along with me back then, didn't you? I just took it for granted. I know we never discussed it, but.... I would hate to think that you came along and stayed with me all of this time just out of some kind of misplaced sense of duty when you'd rather have stayed wild and free in that Rigelian cabaret club...."

Gromit shuffled around a bit, but made no answer.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" I paused while Gromit continued shuffling uncomfortably. "Yeah, I didn't think you would."

Just then the door to the cell clanged and rattled as the guard unlocked it from the outside. "Leave, human," snarled the surly Klingon.

I turned to leave, but Gromit lunged toward the door in a desperate last attempt to escape. I jerked my hand away

from the wildly agitated tribble and cradled my wrist in my other hand.

The door clanged shut sealing the angrily croaking Gromit inside and the guard stomped off, but I just stood there, confused. Were Klingons right? Were tribbles a threat to the galaxy? Was Gromit a menace? I took my hand away from my wrist, and the hand came away red with blood from the fresh bite mark on my wrist.

I went back to the *Rocinanté*. When I got there, Max was nowhere to be found. About half an hour later, I heard the alarms go off somewhere in town. Somehow I knew it was from the warehouse where the animals were being kept.

Well, there was no way I was going to let a bunch of Klingons kill my best friend. If he was reverting to his wild state again, I would be the one to put him down. I owed him that much at least. I got my old TR-116 out from under my bunk and ran off in search of him.

I went northeast out of town because that was where the wilderness was the thickest, figuring that if Gromit wanted to return to the wild that was where he would go.

After a few miles I came across the backside of a camouflaged Quonset hut. The back door was open, so I peeked inside, and saw row after row of shelves and low tables with animal cages on them. Before I could check it out though, I heard voices from around the other side of the building, so I went that way.

I was just in time to see the front door burst open and a stampede of small yelping animals come tumbling out, and at their lead was Gromit riding on the back of a galloping targ! Max was also there -- obviously she had been the one

who sprung Gromit from the pound -- as well as the red-faced Klingon dogcatcher.

There was a fire in the grizzled warrior's eyes as he raised his disruptor and pointed it at the fleeing tribble. Max shouted something at him in his own language, but he just roared back at Max "Out of the way, female!" and took aim.

"Wait!" I shouted and ran up beside the Klingon and Max. "Put down your gun! That tribble is mine, and if anyone has to shoot him it's gonna be me."

The Klingon lowered his disruptor, not quite sure what was going on.

"West, you can't," said Max.

"I have to," I said, and flipped the targeting monocle over my eye. I raised the big rifle to my shoulder and swung it around to point at Gromit, who was still racing away from the scene on the back of the targ. It was a duty I had to perform, much as I hated it. I knew what wild out-of-control tribbles could do to a planet's ecology.

The image of Gromit centered in my crosshairs, but something at the back of my mind was bugging me -- something wasn't right with this picture. What were all these domestic animals doing here? ...In the middle of a forest? ...In a secret camouflaged warehouse?

I remembered all the 'Lost Pet' flyers I had seen in town, and put two and two together. They must be stolen! I knew Max and Gromit had nothing to do with it, so that just left...

I swung my rifle around toward the Klingon dogcatcher just in time to see the old warrior pointing his own sidearm at me. I squeezed the trigger and shot the disruptor right out of his hand. He bellowed with rage and frustration, pulled a

mek'leth out of his belt, and came at me with murder in his eyes.

Max strode forward and clobbered the Klingon with a mighty boot to the head. He dropped like a sack of neutronium.

"So you see," explained West to his audience, "Gromit wasn't trying to run away and revert to the wild, he was just trying to save all those kidnapped animals the crooked dogcatcher and judge were stealing.

The Lurian sitting next to West at the bar just stared blankly at West for a few long seconds. Finally, he just said, "You don't expect us to buy that, West, do you?"

Behind him, an overweight Bolian said, "Why would a bunch of Klingons want to steal dogs and voles?"

"Are you kidding?" replied West incredulously. "Do you have any idea what vole snouts go for on the G'kra black market?" He did his best to appear shocked and dismayed that no one knew that.

A snaggle-toothed Yridian on West's other side said, "Sounds like that woman of yours saved your sorry butt."

There was a general murmur of agreement to that. As his disgruntled audience slowly dispersed back into the smoky depths of the Salty Spittoon bar, West finished off the last of his Open Grave and thought about Max.

