

# Gilda the Cloud Queen of the Swarm the Uncontested Leader of Thirty Billion Scavengers



**Short Story taken from: Volume 1, Mona Lisa on the Moon, Thirty-Two  
Thousand Years in the Making by George B**

In contrast to Mona's preparation, Gilda's consisted of eating fewer desserts. She was so confident of her victory that she didn't even consider a strategy in the unlikely chance she lost. Without question, her arrogance was one of her best qualities. Without such extreme hubris, she would have been just one of the dull queens in the Swarm's history. Gilda craved adulation, fame and eternal renown. She fantasized this competition being immortalized as an epic battle between the greatest queen ever and the upstart alien aided by the treasonous shock troop commander. To guarantee her place as a living legend, not only did Gilda need to crush CapHead and Mona, but she had to make sure they were considered formidable threats.



The queen was feeling rather good presently in the months since the Succession Challenge made by CapHead the Supreme Commander of Tribe II and the human insect Captain Mona Ann Lisa. They had sustained no more mysterious attacks in months, and since she had sent the reptilians away from the swarm, she had been in total control except for Mona's insolence and the traitorous CapHead's act on the cloud-wide communication link eight months ago. She had even replaced the Swarm's red jewel that towered over the center portion of the Royal Barge.

The queen was now four hundred years old and had reigned for at least one hundred years. She was young because cloud queens historically didn't get the chance to rule this soon, owing to the long lifespans of the queens-in-waiting in line ahead of them.

This was not a problem for Gilda; she took things into her own hands and assisted Mother Nature a tad. No one really connected the dots, but four of the more senior candidates died way too young. Gilda just smiled and mourned the untimely death of her noble competition. Fair play was never in Gilda's playbook.

The queen knew they were within days of dumping the reptilians and hoped it would be timed perfectly so the creature Mona and her King Hopeful CapHead would see the act personally.

This Queen had no need of a king and never would have appointed one, but she had a short list just in case. She grudgingly had to admit that CapHead was at the top of the list. This made Mona's challenge even more delicious; Gilda was going to get revenge times two.



To CapHead the diminutive human female Captain Mona Ann Lisa was as formidable an adversary as he had ever encountered. He was not only beginning to respect Mona but was enjoying her as well. He had always despised the present cloud queen, as most of the other supreme tribal leaders did. The queen was unreasonably brutal even among the most ruthless culture in the galaxy.

If things had to change, CapHead could see no other way for it to happen. This was going to be an exciting and bumpy ride into the unknown. His fighting nature was engaged, and he was anxious for the next phase to begin. Bring it on!

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Mona still had a few months before the competition, and she was training hard under CapHead's supervision. CapHead told Mona the queen's name was Gilda and that this knowledge might be used against her at the right moment. The rules of the competition mandated that each contestant be wired with a voice connection that neither could turn off.

He felt the queen would verbally harass Mona constantly, so he would train her to ignore it. He, however, suggested that Mona withhold her verbal counterattacks on Gilda for the right moment, when they could be decisive. The queen's uncontrollable temper was her most glaring weakness.

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The competition would be held in the largest biosphere in the collective. The sphere was presently near the power sphere but would be moving to the outer strata of vessels to take advantage of more and more infrared radiation as they neared the central star of this solar system.

The contained ecosystem was equivalent to about twenty square miles of continuous variable terrain. Her familiarity with it gave Gilda even more confidence of success. CapHead was familiar with the terrain in the biosphere, and with Moonbeam's and Levie's assistance, and with information extracted from Chaos's spying, they recreated much of it in 3-D imaging in the ore holds on Leviathan. Mona was actually going to be much more familiar with the existing terrain and its flora and fauna than the cloud queen herself.

CapHead especially worked with Mona on hiding places, where she could be much more effectively concealed than the much larger cloud queen. Each contestant had to submit schematics of the two weapons they were allowed to bring to the competition. If approved, these weapons could be fabricated and inspected the day of competition by their seconds. CapHead was Mona's designated second.

All other weapons were supplied by the officials based on the specific characteristics of the five trials. Mona sent schematics of her bow and arrows. She also submitted schematics of a boomerang. The cloud queen sent schematics of a large dagger and an extra-large javelin.

The boomerang appeared to be just an L-shaped cutting tool to CapHead, and he asked why she might want it. After Mona demonstrated its use, he smiled from ear to ear. Both teams approved the weapons.

CapHead never said exactly why, but he stressed conditioning above all else to Mona. She was running around the ore holds for hours each day, climbing up and down walls

and ladders, and swimming underwater for long distances. He had her conditioning at high simulated altitudes for long periods of time. If she asked why, he just said the swarm's advance scouts and shock troops were under his leadership for a reason.

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Gilda thought she should do some weapons training since it was now less than thirty days to the competition. She had to pick a second but genuinely trusted no one. She was trying to think whose family she had in prison and could therefore trust would not fail her for fear of death or torture visited on their loved ones. Oh yes! she thought to herself, Supreme Tribal Leader IX. I had his mother thrown in prison for telling that joke about me at that state banquet ten years ago. He should do very well. She called her bodyguards and had them retrieve IX's mother from prison. Next she summoned IX for an audience.

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A three-hundred-page document had been received by Mona and CapHead three days ago detailing the rules and obligations of the succession competition. Jim had been going over it and was about to brief everyone on its provisions and responsibilities.

Just by looking at Jim, one could see he had a headache.

Sue asked, "What in this solar system are all the details about?"

Silver just smiled, knowing that after 115,000 years, she was about to hear something new. Jim rubbed his head and read some provisions:

- Winner takes responsibility for the loser's families (no significant torture or imprisonments allowed.) Confiscation of all property is allowed, however, and removal of all property rights to the third generation is permissible.
- Winner must cremate or bury challenger and second's bodies or consume them at celebratory banquet.
- The loser's tribe will forfeit all seniority in succession for three hundred years or until two cloud queens have been replaced, whichever comes first.
- Losers' names will not be allowed to be spoken for two hundred years, and those with the same names will have them legally changed by the courts.
- For the games to begin, the mother and father of the competitors must be present at the start of competition (or their designated legally sufficient replacement) and held by the game officials so the winner may later have them placed in stocks and ridiculed during the celebratory banquet afterward.

C. E. interjected. "That last provision is a killer. We would never want Ben and Peggy there, even if they could get here in the time remaining. It is impossible."

Jim said, "The line '(or their designated legally sufficient replacement)' means that Mona can substitute a male and female whom the queen will accept as people she would like to belittle and ridicule upon Mona's death and dismemberment. Any volunteers?"

"Count me in," said C. E.

Silver and Sue both volunteered, but Mona eliminated Silver because she would be second in command upon Mona's death. Sue said, "I guess it is you and me, big guy. I always wanted to be a mom."

Mona asked, "Are you two sure about this?"

Sue declared, "Sure. I can't wait to see this biosphere thingy."

C. E. agreed that he would love to see it as well ... up close and personal.

Mona was getting really annoyed by this game she was training for. It was one thing for her and CapHead to risk everything, but the involvement of Sue and C. E. was a complication she had not bargained for. Defeating this cloud queen was going to get all her attention from this point on. She asked CapHead to double their training schedule until the event.

C. E. and Sue had up to this time not really talked that much. Both respected each other's abilities, but they had not really had a personal conversation. C. E. asked, "Sue, just how did you meet Mona anyway?"

Sue replied, "The meeting was simple; the relationship is more complicated, as it developed over the years. Mona was a student of mine. She was the youngest to be in my course on ancient antiquities ever. Really, she was a child prodigy. At first I thought she was like other overly bright kids, but was I wrong. She never got lost and stayed so focused on her studies that she couldn't see the big picture. Her intuition and personal skills were off the charts.

"When she went into space engineering years later, we bumped into each other and became friends. I met her parents before they shipped off to a long-term position at the Moon Research Center, and I guess I became her older sister and the extended earthbound family she never had. How very ironic it is that if it had not been for my relationship with Mona, I would not be here but would be dead and forgotten like the majority of the human species. So no matter what happens, I am on Mona's team, come hell or high water."

C. E. interjected. "From what I have seen in the short time I have been privileged to be around her, I agree completely. My first encounter with Mona was in my position as senior crew chief on the Space Search and Rescue Team administration. As a pilot candidate, she was required to spend weeks flying missions with our teams in near-Earth situations. I can tell you I saw none better. In fact, she was so good that when they launched the WAMS Leviathan, I attended the launch ceremony. That was the first and only launch ceremony I ever attended in person. I just wanted to see that exceptional person take possession of that magnificent creation, the Leviathan. How ironic that I am now presently on the Leviathan. And I agree with you I am proud to serve with you as one of Mona's substitute parents. How about a strong adult drink to celebrate?"

CapHead agreed to increase the training pace but did not want to push Mona too far, as he knew he could destroy her frail human physiology. However, it seemed that no matter what he meted out, she exceeded his expectations. He was beginning to believe they might not become Gilda's midnight snack after all. Whatever happened, he was having a great time working with a being (other than a fellow scavenger) that he didn't despise.

He really didn't understand why Mona had not only spared his life and given back his eyesight but was also trusting him with her very survival. The only thing he could say was that he wanted more than anything he had wanted in a very long time to see a non-scavenger defeat and destroy one of his own.

Mona was in her training mode—the one she had fallen into before for the World Games not so many years prior. She had experienced this frequently when she pushed her body to the limits. It was an almost spiritual zone. It was as if she were floating above her fatigued body, looking down at her struggle with an inner peace and without the pain normally associated with such exertion. If she could get to this zone when she needed it, she felt confident she could survive this challenge.

The training CapHead had devised was pushing her further and further beyond where she was before the World Games. That made sense because the consequence of failure was not disappointment but her own life and likely the lives of her friends and just possibly thirty billion beings as well.

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To confirm their beliefs and assumptions, Mona thought she would have a detailed discussion with CapHead. After Mona's last training session for the day, she asked CapHead if they could talk. CapHead said, "Please, what can I tell you?"

Mona inquired, "The collective is in trouble, is it not?"

CapHead went silent for a moment and said, "The truth is ... yes. It has been in trouble for several centuries. The leadership has been corrupted and held on to control only by being brutal, heartless, and paranoid. Our people lack direction, creativity, and any real purpose to live except for self-gratification and a desire to escape boredom. They need not struggle to survive; we only wait for new things to fall into our lap that other civilizations have created and left. Even when we force the reptilians to terraform the planets left by RR&DD, we don't really need the food. We produce enough ourselves within the swarm. We enjoy the new varieties of food; that is all. We just go by the script left by those before us, and we don't know how to change."

Mona said, "Well, RR&DD is no more, and you will have to change. The next solar system you visit that contains any competent civilization will easily destroy you. You do know we could have ended your threat at least a year ago?"

CapHead asked, "Why didn't you end us?"

Mona thought and then answered. "I guess we thought better of it. The simple answer is that we almost destroyed ourselves without any help from anyone else. We know the result of unrestricted use of force and destruction and didn't want to destroy thirty billion sentient beings unless we had no other choice. We also wanted to stop the torture and

genocide of the reptilian slaves, and we thought their race could possibly help us return our world to its previous life-sustaining condition.”

CapHead asked, “What do you want to do now?”

“Well, CapHead,” Mona replied, “after this mess with the queen is resolved, you will have a choice. The collective can search the galaxy for a solar system presently devoid of a civilization and colonize it; remain as a self-sustaining collection of ostensibly useless beings, looking for a purpose and wandering forever until you or something more powerful ends you; or perhaps you can use your knowledge, technology, and massive population to help other less-advanced races and civilizations progress. Your choice.”

CapHead reflected on his answer and stated, “If I were to lead my people, I would choose a real and better purpose. Their present condition cannot be sustained for much longer. We must rid the collective of the present queen and her form of governance and its corruption in a way that is understood by my people. Mona, I am sure you are the agent of change that can accomplish this miracle. While I have no moral right to ask you, will you go through with the head-to-head competition with Gilda, as is presently scheduled?”

Mona thought to herself, I must be nuts to even consider going through with the competition. “We have already obtained the release of Lars2’s people. The forces at the swarm’s command, while significant, are really just sitting ducks for our ships, our technology, and our level of firepower. Unless they can be useful in some way I am not presently aware of, I just want them to leave. Sue would say that if you hold all the best cards, why draw from the deck looking for anything better? I don’t know, except my intuition tells me not to reject his request. God, I don’t believe I am going to say ... yes. Did I just say ... yes?” Mona groaned.

CapHead bowed to Mona and said, “You are more a queen to my race right now than Gilda has been for one hundred years.”

“Okay, okay!” Mona said. “I get it; let’s not make this too gushy. We need to have our whole planning group jump in on this one. How to change the direction of an entire race?” Mona thought, It would be much easier to kill them all ...

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The officials were members of the collective’s supreme court, who were all selected by the ten tribal leaders and approved by the queen. Gilda had just had her bodyguards personally deliver all the officials a gift basket of body parts from the last state

execution. She thought it was such a nice touch, letting them know she was thinking about their professional well-being.

Gilda was reviewing the schematics of the weapons Mona had submitted to the competition officials, and while familiar with the bow and arrows, she was totally puzzled by the boomerang. She thought, What a curious knife ...

She thought the diminutive insect was not going to be much competition and that she might have to make it look closer so as to improve the drama and make her look better to her public. Oh, what a queen must sacrifice to please her subjects. Now we will just sit and wait. I wonder how a Mona will taste . . . guess it won't be long before I find out.

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