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Editorial

Before I started working on this issue of If - E - Zine™, I went back and took a long look at the first two. Something came to me as I read over the stories and editorials, namely that I had made two mistakes within the first issue. The first matter was corrected in the second issue (I speak of the Black Cauldron mistake). The second was: While I jabbered on through the first editorial, I mentioned several people and things that have been great influences upon my art. Amongst those listed, I omitted something that holds a great deal of influence specifically over this e-zine. In fact, it served as the initial inspiration for this mag. I speak of the classic animated film *Heavy Metal*.

Up until about July of 2003, I had seen enough of *Heavy Metal* to have watched it many times over. But I had never before sat and watched the film from beginning to end. I had always seen bits, pieces and thirds of the movie. Last summer, however, on a night when I had little to do and there wasn't much on television that I hadn't seen before or that I was generally not interested in, I noticed that *Heavy Metal* was about to begin on one of the many movie channels. Soon my evening was filled with popcorn, soda and a cool flick.

At some point during the film, the seed of If - E - Zine™ was germinating. I remember thinking, "Wouldn't it be cool if I did a serial story and presented it on the web? I'd be providing myself with a forum by which to practice my arts (drawing, painting and writing) while keeping in touch with my fans (few as they are)." Within the next day or two I was working on the first issue. This should only serve to prove that inspiration can come from anywhere, at any time. And if you haven't checked out the original *Heavy Metal* yet, do so. It's pretty adult, but with an interesting concept backed by some cool animation and nostalgic, if not quirky, tune-age.

But that was nine months ago and this isn't issue 1, it's issue 3. And what an issue! In this issue I've provided you with a healthy short story in "The Sarge" about a futuristic soldier at war on a swampy world. While on patrol, his squad finds a lost mute girl. Will the Sarge be able to get her to safety? Or will his squad face a terrible fate that most people only know as a legendary horror?

I am also bringing to you in this issue for the first time anywhere a character that I created nearly a year ago. I speak of the title character of the second short story I offer you in "The Last Stand of King Zalam." I had a hell of a lot of fun writing this one. It took on a life of it's own from the start and soon I was being carried away by my own creation!

Just a quick note: I had mentioned a couple of times elsewhere on the site leading up to this issue that I would be providing you good folks with an all new, original "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure"-style piece of interactive fiction. Well, the production of "Cladishmoore Falls" (the title of said interactive fiction) has been tremendous and time-consuming. So I opted to stick with the two short stories mentioned above and just get this issue out to you. I will continue to work on "Cladishmoore Falls", hopefully doing justice by it with the intention of delivering it to you in a future issue of If - E - Zine™. Keep an eye out for it!

This brings me to another matter at hand. Some of you may know by now that I have spent more than half my life playing role-playing games. My interest in them

exceeds, at times, being a hobby. No, I don't wear a pocket protector nor spout theories of medieval combat, but I do have a precious little bag of magical dice! :P

Well, I've been thinking as of late that I should publish a small -- and completely FREE!!! -- RPG here on my site for you all of you to enjoy. Perhaps you have seen the little trailer for the RPG elsewhere on this site. I'm throwing this idea out to you good folks to gauge your reactions. This will help me to decide whether or not I should pursue the idea. I have many other projects under way and need to manage my time to utmost efficiency. The game would be simple, but entirely unique and just for you, my fans and friends that visit me here on the site.

In any case, please enjoy this issue. Feel free to email me should you have any comments, questions, or suggestions.

Enjoy,

Charles



"The Last Stand of King Zalam"
by Charles Shaver

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King Zalam drew his three bladed sword. With the flip of a switch built into the hilt the blades began to hum and sing, vibrating ferociously.

"You'll never take me alive!" cried the king defiantly. Norikahn's invading forces stormed into Zalam's elaborate domed throne room decorated from ceiling to floor in pure white marble and affixed here and there with ivory embellishments. Norikahn's army of two-tone purplish robotic humanoids, known as mechano-men, swarmed around the immense king.

Zalam's gray skin rippled with nervous muscles bulging and flexing underneath. He stood at the ready before his massive white marble throne, cushioned with violet stuffed velvet, ready with his weapon. More of Norikahn's men filled the ranks of the enemy. Most were mechano-men, but a scant few were derderoids, kalamans and creedelsians, and a few were humans. All were mercenaries. That's how Norikahn worked: the disposable machines filled the ranks of his front lines and were treated as not much more than the cannon fodder they were designed to be. Meanwhile, real folk, all hired mercenaries, filled the ranks of his leadership. It all made for an awful looking rag-tag band of an army. One thing could not be denied: its numbers were immense, more immense than Zalam had guessed, and he knew they must have overrun the castle with sheer numbers.

Zalam himself was a derderoid. Few of his kind were spread across the galaxy, but not many were needed. When derderoids mated, which was usually only once in a lifetime, the mothers would birth litters numbering between fourteen and twenty-six. At full adulthood, a derderoid stood ten feet tall and four feet wide at the first and main pair of shoulders. Derderoids had four arms. Two elongated, main arms that stretched to the ground almost like a simian's. The two smaller arms, located just under the first pair, were much smaller, thinner atavistic limbs left over from a more savage time. For the most part they appeared to be totally useless. They weren't, of course. Not entirely. Especially to a warrior. Upon closer inspection one would find that the smaller hands were equipped with sharp claws that extended from the knuckle. They were perfect for tearing apart anything – or anyone – within close proximity. Their torso and legs were extremely gaunt and wiry. The legs, reminiscent of an insect's legs, were thinly muscular and ended in something like hooves. They often acted like springs to achieve great leaps.

King Zalam was surrounded. A fight to the finish was imminent. Yet, the forces of Norikahn did not advance upon him. Instead, they seemed to content themselves with circling him and training their weapons upon him, but nothing more.

"If you are here for my throne, then come! Come! Bring all your strength! All your men! Come and fight for a warrior's demise! I will build a mountain with your corpses before I die!" Zalam taunted.

Several of the robots charged forward. King Zalam was surprised to see that they had put away their laser rifles in exchange for metal clubs.

“So you intend to beat me to death?” Zalam managed as he began a swooping swing of his sword. He put all his force through his right arm, his strong arm, to provide an impact of power while pulling up on the bottom of the hilt with his left in an act of leverage that would allow him to cut through the mechano-men.

The three blades sliced through one robot, then through a second as he finished his swing. Two more robots came at him from either side, also brandishing metal clubs. King Zalam shifted his shoulders, his left hand leaving the sword, bringing the butt of the hilt to smash in the head of the attacker on his right who promptly fell in a heap a metallic trash. The robot attacker on his left was too quick for Zalam to react with his sword, so with his free hand he grabbed the machine in a grappling hold. Zalam’s left arm slipped up under one of the attacker’s arms. His hand came to grasp the back of the metallic head. Zalam’s tiny arms went to work. They tore away steel plate after steel plate and handful of wire after handful of wire. The robotic thing sputtered as if it were somehow managing real death throes.

Seeing new attackers approaching, he let go of the fading robot before him. Zalam once again grabbed the hilt of his sword with both hands and heaved a mighty swing that arced out towards his new attackers. Again Zalam’s amazing sword cut through one mechano-man and then another, carving them into several slices.

Norikahn’s army seemed to pause as the last two attackers fell to the floor with an echoing crash. His chest heaving a little, King Zalam shouted, “Have you nothing more for me?”

From one of the humans in the back of the ranks arose a cry of attack. The entire army responded by pressing in on Zalam in one huge surge. It was all Zalam could do just to keep his arms free and capable of swinging his beloved sword. He slashed right and downward through another robot, allowing the momentum of the sword to carry upward and back around in a graceful circular motion to cut down two more standing side-by-side. Several robots caught his arms and made great attempts to hold the King in place.

That’s when Zalam saw another derderoid, one slightly taller than he; make an incredible leap from the far end of the throne room in his direction. Despite this new attacker’s position behind all the rest of the army, he easily cleared their heads with his leaping attack. The derderoid gave the traditional war cry of his people “Grohtak-altohkaaa!” and his swinging ball-and-chain came crashing down on to King Zalam’s head.

* * * * *

A combination of hands and water slapping his face brought Zalam back to the waking world. He opened his deeply stygian eyes and found himself in what he immediately recognized as a cell in his own castle’s dungeon. Before him, in all his decorated glory, stood his enemy and one-time friend Norikahn. He was dressed in a purple military uniform, the double-breasted jacket lined with two rows of black buttons. Black knee-high boots, black gloves and a black cloak clasped at the neck with a multi-pointed star made of pure silver completed his look. Just outside the cell’s door stood the derderoid that had delivered the blow to Zalam. Just to Norikahn’s left stood a pudgy, squat human. The human was dressed in nothing but a strap of black leather that covered

his crotch, black gloves and black boots similar to those Norikahn wore. From his waist hung a long leather whip. His left nostril had been split open and healed at some point in a gape much like a serpent's tongue. His hair was thinning, spiked and was dyed a light orange color.

"A good display of force today on your part," Norikahn complimented Zalam upon seeing his conscious state. "You destroyed nine of my robots before Nord he took you down with his articulated mace. If it were not for him, I think you would have taken twice, mayhaps thrice that before we would have detained you."

At this, Zalam looked at the derderoid who had bested him, if only by circumstances. "Why would you attack a brother?" Zalam's question shot at Nord like an arrow. No answer came beyond an unemotional stare.

"Because he desires to be on the side of a new era for Protuculus." Norikahn answered. "This is, after all, the cradle of all derderoid-kind. He, of all people, has a vested interest in the matters of the state that occur here." Norikahn paused and looked almost longingly at Zalam before he spoke again.

When he spoke again, it was to the ugly human standing at his side. "Krontus, have I told you of how our dear friend Zalam and I first met?" Norikahn did not wait for an answer, but instead continued without any sense of a pause and turned his attention to Zalam. "Krontus was not so fortunate as you and I were, my dear Zalam. He was not born here on Protuculus. He was birthed on Earth. Even dear Nord back there was birthed in space on a freighter." Norikahn turned back to Krontus. "It was long ago. Thirty years, mayhaps?" His eyebrows rose to punctuate his question. Zalam refused to answer, so Norikahn continued once again as if he did not mean for an answer to come. "Under the reign of Zalam's uncle humans were barely tolerable, and then only as slaves. We were forced to live as nomadic tribes on the outskirts of all major cities. I, however, was fortunate. I was borne to a serving maid to Queen Alidia, Zalam's aunt. As soon as I was old enough I was taught to carry a serving platter for the then King Qik-tahr. Zalam and I grew up together. Our play was tolerated and our friendship blossomed. But that is the foolishness of childhood innocence... or ignorance.

"The king never had a male child and when Zalam came of age the king refused to abdicate the throne to him as customs required, hoping that one day he would still have a son. So Zalam raised an army and overthrew his own uncle. It was a bloody battle. After fifteen days holed up in this palace, King Qik-tahr rushed Zalam's army, chasing them into the streets, killing everyone who got in the way. My mother died in that battle."

Norikahn paused with thought, and then continued. "But luring the King out into the streets was Zalam's plan. King Qik-tahr's men became fractured as they chased down different targets while Zalam awaited the King with a strong and rested force. Zalam gained the victory he sought. He immediately freed all humans. A kind gesture, if not an act of public relations brilliancy to gain the peoples' hearts. It worked, but Zalam refused to allow humans to have a voice with their new freedom. As such, they were still treated as second-class citizens of the kingdom. Hence we are here today.

"Protuculus needs a new rule. A new era. Humans need to have a voice."

Zalam could hold his tongue no longer. "But it is OUR homeworld! You humans attempted an invasion and your failure at that has left you sore ever since. That is why my uncle treated you as slaves. It is no justified reason to enslave a race, but intruders should have no voice in the affairs of the native peoples."

“Yes, yes. I have heard all your excuses before. The truth is, I was born here and I am a native Protuculian as much as you.”

“Barely a comparison,” Zalam spat.

“But a comparison none-the-less.” Norikahn retorted.

“And what would you do as king? Enslave the derderoids under a thin veil of justice?” Zalam cried.

Norikahn allowed a moments' pause. “Oh, I'm sorry. I have been so rude.” He continued without any further thought to Zalam's remarks. “Zalam, you and my bodyguard, Nord, have already been introduced.” Norikahn waved a graceful hand toward the menacing derderoid, then swept the same hand to the nearly naked pudgy human standing nearby. “And this... this is Krontus. My personal...” Norikahn paused in thought before he continued with a rather menacing grin. “Krontus is my personal information gatherer.” The tips of Krontus's mouth seemed to curl unnaturally. “You two will become most acquainted in a few days time.”

Again Norikahn paused, considering Zalam.

“Krontus, do your best. My dear old friend deserves nothing less.” Norikahn turned with a flare of his cloak and left the cell. Nord followed close behind.

Krontus pulled the leather whip from his waist, letting it unravel to the floor. His arm started working, moving surprisingly gracefully with the whip. He cracked it several times in the face of Zalam without touching him, making the former king flinch with each strike. Krontus moved in closer, arcing his shoulders wider, and the incredible sonic boom of the tiny tip bit into the rough skin of the derderoid.

To the surprise of Krontus, Zalam merely squinted and tensed but gave no cry of pain. The whip cracked again... and again and again. Each time it bit deeper into Zalam's flesh and each time Zalam refused to utter any sound of pain. A dozen lashes later, Zalam could stand it no longer. Sweat poured from his head and chest. Blood streamed from a multitude of lashes from his chest and stomach. And with one intense crack of the whip across the base of his neck, Zalam finally groaned in pain. Before the darkness of unconsciousness enveloped him, Zalam uttered a solemn oath to his tormentor.

“Tell Norikahn... I will k-kill him before I allow... before I allow myself to die.” Zalam's head drooped in a feint.

* * * * *

“Master. Master.” Fistfuls of water and a few gentle hand slaps finally brought Zalam to.

Zalam opened a feeble eyelid to look upon the face of Krontus. The man had spent the last several days, three or four Zalam had thought, simply beating and whipping and pulling and tearing at Zalam in every which direction. Through it all Zalam's krohtahk, or warrior spirit, kept him defiant of his tormentor. Though by this point Zalam's acts were just that, pre-conditioned acts taught to him during the rites of passage that derderoid traditionalists went through. His heart, however, left him a day or so ago in a bout of weariness and pain.

As Zalam once again looked upon the face of the ugly Krontus, his conditioning kicked in and commanded him like a line of code commanding one of Norikahn's mechano-men. “Back for more, are we?”

Krontus looked at him confusedly. “Oh, my visage. I am sorry, my master.”

Zalam became confused, his eyes drooping heavily with the thought that Krontus was baiting him for more psychological torture on this day than the physical tortures he had been inflicting thus far. His body prepared itself automatically to a relaxed state, ready for any whips or beating that the day would bring. Zalam realized that he was dangling from the cell’s back wall from nothing more than four wrist shackles.

“How is that, master?” The voice, Zalam thought, sounded ever familiar. “Master, it is I. And I have come for you.”

Zalam struggled against his training to open an eye. Before him, in the exact spot where Krontus once stood, was now a friendlier face.

“Calibos!” A sense of sobriety overcame Zalam as his eyes widened to take into full view the friend that stood before him. “But, but how?”

Calibos immediately began unfastening the chains that held Zalam fast to the cool stonewall of his cell.

“News of the invasion reached the Temple but two days ago. It was two days ride from there to here.” Calibos explained. He was a younger man, a human man, of his mid-twenties. His face was pale but full and his head was covered with sleek black hair. He wore a simple but heavy brown hooded robe. “When I heard my liege had been overrun, I had to come and see for myself. Through some investigation, and minor trickery, I was able to find out you were alive and of your whereabouts.”

“So I see that Temple of yours has been teaching you new things,” Zalam said in response to Calibos’ earlier illusionary guise.

“A simple trick. But effective if done at the right time,” Calibos seemed to blush a bit in pride.

Zalam’s hands were now free and he was rubbing his swollen wrists. He ignored the lacerations upon his chest, back, stomach and legs. “So where is the real Krontus?”

“The warder of these cells?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

Calibos hesitated. “He is dead.” Zalam peered at his human friend, wondering. As if reading his mind, Calibos explained, “He is the first man I’ve ever killed.” Zalam suddenly understood. Being blooded for the first time was always a dramatic, even at times a traumatic, experience in ones’ life. This was especially so for humans who have no such warrior training to prepare them for the moment.

Zalam changed the subject somewhat, “Why did you come here?”

Calibos stared at Zalam. “Why, for you, of course. We’ve been friends since childhood... and don’t you remember? When you took the throne I was there to swear my oath of allegiance to you. As long as you live, I am your servant.”

Zalam was moved inside. “And apparently my friend.” Zalam extended his hand in thanks. Calibos took it and said, “Of course.”

“Let’s go get my sword.” Zalam broke the spell of friendship when he spoke.

“What? Why? Should we not fly from this castle as quickly as possible?”

“No. I intend to kill Norikahn for once and for all,” Zalam gave Calibos a hard look, and then moved out of the cell. Zalam made his way by the many cells of the dungeon and up a long stone stairway.

“The castle is full of his men. To take him... it would be impossible.” Calibos pleaded. “Let us just flee.”

“No,” Zalam said. “I have a score to settle with Norikahn. And a throne to regain. He intends mistreatment of my people.” Zalam stopped at the top of the stairs and opened the wooden door there just a crack to peer out. “He is most likely basking in the glow of my throne room.”

“Sire, I still think that we should-“

“Quiet!” Zalam whispered the command with force. Calibos heard the footsteps of someone passing just beyond the door.

“Come on!” Zalam said, again in a forced whisper. He bolted through the door, his legs propelling him ever quicker with every step. Calibos leaned out the door and looked into the massive round entrance hall to find it empty with the exception of the lone mechano-man guard Zalam was running up on from behind.

Zalam caught the guard from behind, wrapping one of his massive arms around the chest of the mechano-man. His other massive arm reached for and grabbed the laser blaster away from the guard. All the while his two tiny arms sunk their talons deep into the guard’s torso, ripping away plating and wires in a flurry.

Calibos rushed up behind the two struggling figures, keeping a watchful eye on the gloriously white marble room.

“Let’s hope these robots have no way of communicating with each other remotely, or else we’ll be overrun very soon,” Zalam told Calibos as he let the now torn-to-shreds guard fall to the floor. Without much thought, Calibos grabbed the metallic pile and pulled it toward the door from whence he and Zalam had just come from. “We must hide this body,” Calibos said. Zalam helped him, still clutching the laser rifle. They placed it behind the door and Calibos closed it, while Zalam took his turn to keep a watchful eye on the room. Zalam held the bulky laser rifle in his hands with quite a bit of ease and comfort.

“We head for the throne room now,” Zalam said as he walked across the hall towards a massive set of gold plated double-doors. “He’ll most likely have guards just inside the doors. And perhaps several more further inside the room.”

“Wait, Zalam,” Calibos tugged at the arm of his friend. “Some tact might be in order.”

“Some of your magiks? I had already thought of that. Why not make some explosion or something to take out the guards all at once?” Zalam suggested.

“Because I can’t.” Calibos answered. “Most of what I know is illusionary. A moment, please. Keep an eye out.” Zalam and Calibos backed up to the wall near the doors. Zalam eyed the whole room and its many doors with intensity while Calibos whispered a few words of a dead language from thousands of years ago. A strange transformation began on Calibos. Zalam could not help but stare as his friend changed into the guise of a robot guard like the one that Zalam had just torn to pieces.

“Give me the gun and the image is complete,” Calibos said in a mechanical voice. Zalam had to admit, if he had not witnessed the transformation himself, the visage was so good that he most likely would have ripped his friend to shreds as well.

“Now, for you,” Calibos set the gun against the marble wall. Again he spoke in archaic tongues, this time in his new mechanical voice and with a wave of his hands towards Zalam. Immediately, Zalam saw the change. He was becoming invisible!

“I can’t see myself!” Zalam half-cried.

“And you won’t for some time. But you won’t need to.” Calibos grabbed the gun again. “I’ll run in and cause a distraction. You sneak in behind me through the open doors and attack Norikahn when you have the chance.”

“My friend,” came Zalam’s disembodied voice. “You are a genius.”

Calibos busted into the massive throne room where once Zalam stood fighting the invading horde of mechano-men and mercenaries. Now there were only five guards. Two were at the door as Zalam had guessed, another stood sentry to the left of the long royal velvet rug that led to the throne, and one on either side of the throne where Norikahn sat. All were mechano-men, but the guard on the right of Norikahn was the intimidating Nord. Leaning against the throne between Norikahn and Nord, Calibos recognized Zalam’s traditional derderoid triple bladed sword.

Before Norikahn stood a human dressed in elegant robes. Calibos decided that he must be some sort of ambassador meeting with Norikahn for the first time. He also noticed that behind and above the throne a massive hole had been cut and chipped away from the domed ceiling. He wondered what this hole could serve as for Norikahn. All of them turned in shock as Calibos entered the room in a rush.

“To arms!” Screeched Calibos’ voice. “Intruders! Intruders are about in the courtyard!”

Norikahn stood, alerted. “Nord, check it out. You two by the door, join them.” Nord leapt into action and the guards at the door followed. Not knowing what else to do, Calibos stepped aside thinking that Zalam might need his assistance.

“Come,” he heard Nord command. Fearing he might jeopardize the task at hand, Calibos reluctantly followed the derderoid guard.

“Master Onkiot,” Norikahn addressed his visitor, “There is a chamber here to our left. Perhaps we should retreat there until all is settled.”

Zalam snuck deep into the throne room. He found that Norikahn, the guard, nor the new man called Onkiot standing before the throne took any notice of him. Zalam was pleased.

He quickly found his way to the side of the throne, picking up his beloved sword. Onkiot jumped with fright. Norikahn turned and saw the sword rising from its resting place unnaturally.

“Sorcery!” cried Onkiot. Zalam switched on the vibrating blades with an audible “snap!” and took a swing. The agile Norikahn made an incredible leap from where he stood before the throne, drawing the gun at his waist and avoiding the three swinging blades all at once. The guard moved forward almost hesitantly, as if unsure of what was happening.

“Attack! Attack the sword, you damned fool machines!” Norikahn commanded. As the mechano-men guards raised the barrel of their blasters, Zalam swung his sword wide and in an upward direction. The blades bit into the steel of the blaster of the guard standing near the throne and through it’s left hand. Both hand and gun were completely sliced in half, falling to the ground.

As the mechano-man tried to take aim at him once again, Zalam leapt down the length of the velvet carpet to land almost atop the remaining guard. His triplet of blades sliced the things into four pieces from head to crotch.

Norikahn took his own shot. A loud crack resounded throughout the chamber, echoing from the archaic weapon that fired bullets and to which Norikahn had always had

a preference. Zalam, who was already jumping back down the carpet to stand on his former throne and finish off the guard standing there in an almost stunned manner, avoided the shot easily. Zalam brought the three blades down onto the robot, slicing through his head and out through his right shoulder. The upper third of the robot then slid away from the rest of the body and fell to the clean white marble floor.

Zalam took quick notice that Onkiot had receded into the background, mumbling incoherently much in the same manner as Calibos had to make him invisible. “Dammit, another sorcerer!” Zalam cursed quietly as his hand, wrapped around the hilt of his sword, came into full view of his eyes.

“Zalam!” Norikahn cried.

“Norikahn! I’ll have your head!” Zalam yelled back. He crouched deep into the throne, releasing his legs like springs and flying forward toward Norikahn. He screamed the traditional war cry of his people as he flew through the air. “Grohtak-altohkaaa!”

Norikahn’s archaic gun cracked loudly again. Zalam’s body teetered a bit in mid-air. Norikahn had to jump out of the way of Zalam’s flying body to avoid being hit. Zalam’s body hit the floor with a thud and slid to the wall, hitting his head.

Norikahn stood a moment, panting with excitement. “Onkiot,” Norikahn finally said. “Come, to my jet platform!” The two humans ran behind the throne where a large, flat platform was hidden. On the fore of the platform was a sort of pedestal. Upon it was a panel of controls. The two men jumped onto the jet platform. With a few flips of some switches and a couple turns of knobs, the platform lifted off the floor with the two men atop and flew out the massive hole in the dome.

Zalam was just picking himself off the floor when Nord returned, carrying a mechano-man like a piece of luggage in one hand and his weapon in the other. Zalam tightened his grip on his sword while Nord looked around and saw the receding image of his liege flying away on the platform with Onkiot. He then turned his eyes toward Zalam.

“Zalam! It’s me!” The mechano-man struggled with his voice, kicking his legs with no effect. Zalam at once realized that somehow Nord had discovered the ruse and had taken Calibos prisoner.

“You and your friend will die,” Nord said. His one free large hand started whirling the ball-and-chain. Nord turned the ball in awkwardly, almost toward himself, and with a wide arc brought it careening in a downward motion. Zalam pushed forward with his legs and shoulders, thrusting out his sword and catching the chain between two of the blades. The ball stopped just above Calibos’ head.

“Not yet,” Zalam said. “I have an oath to deliver unto your lord.” He brought his sword up, cutting into the chest of Nord. It wasn’t a deep cut, but it was good enough to cause him to lose sight of what he was doing. Nord dropped Calibos to the floor and reeled backward. The chain that was between Zalam’s blades slipped free. Immediately the two derderoids took offensive positions facing each other.

Each derderoid took one immense stride towards each other, locking their dark eyes on each other. Nord brought his ball-and-chain down at Zalam’s head. Zalam, shifting his weight and twisting his shoulders, released the sword with his left hand and thrust it forward with his right. Nord’s weapon missed Zalam’s head, but slammed down hard onto the left side of his pelvis. An audible crack filled the chamber and Zalam cried in pain as his own weapon sunk deep into Nord’s gut, the tips of the blades extending out of back. Nord accompanied Zalam with his own cry of pain.

Zalam shifted again, trying to keep his weight on his right foot. He saw Nord recovering from the pain and bringing his arm and weapon back up into a heavy swing. Zalam grabbed the hilt of his sword, which was still sticking out of Nord, and twisted it with all his might. The blades almost squealed with the tension. Seeing the heavy ball coming back down toward him, Zalam repositioned his hands on the hilt and yanked hard, pulling the three blades out of the side of Nord's gut.

Blood sprayed across the clean velvet carpet and white marble floor of the throne room. Nord's weapon fell short of hitting Zalam. His intestines plugged the hole in his side that Zalam had made, fighting with itself to push its way to freedom. Nord fell to his knees.

Zalam straightened, panting and eyeing his enemy. Remembering Nord's earlier war cry when they first met in the throne room, he knew that he had been given the derderoid warrior rite of passage. So, in respect and in response to that, he quoted the Rite of Death to Nord. "May you die in glory."

Nord looked up and gave a quick nod, which seemed to only bring him more pain as his face grimaced.

"I know not who you are, but--"

"I am Nord," Nord interrupted. "Bastard son of Qik-tahr."

Zalam stammered. He did not know what to say.

"Rule well," Nord whispered. His body slumped forward with one final heaving breath. Nord was dead. For a long while Zalam just stood, his body's weight resting on his right leg, staring at the body of the cousin he never knew and the rightful heir to the throne.

"Sire," Calibos' voice brought Zalam back to reality. He turned to look at his faithful friend who had dropped his robotic visage and now stood at his side. "This castle is still overrun with Norikahn's men."

"We will fight our way out," Zalam said.

"We can't. At least, not if we intend to survive. Norikahn's men, both artificial and real, will not give up their new power so easily. Norikahn is sure to return. Perhaps he is already elsewhere in the castle plotting out demise."

"Then we will die a warrior's death," Zalam grunted.

Calibos sighed. "If that is what you wish, master, then I will die with you here on this day. But we humans have a saying, a certain aspect from our own philosophy of war. 'Sometimes it is better to run and live to fight another day than to fight and die today.'"

Zalam was almost amazed by his friend's wisdom. His time at the temple had surely had an affect on him. "What do you suggest?"

"I have strength, I think, for one last spell. Either I can heal your wound so we may fight, or I can cast a spell that will cause one of us to levitate. While levitating, we can simply walk out of the very hole in the dome that Norikahn used himself as an escape route. All you do is walk on air."

"Me?"

"Well, yes. As I said I barely have the strength to cast the spell. I doubt I'll stay conscious after casting it. You'll have to carry me. If you can with your wound."

"Pain is nothing to me. What will happen when the spell wears off? Will we fall to our deaths?" Zalam questioned.

"No, it wears off slowly and we'll slowly be placed back onto the ground."

“I see,” Zalam was new to magic in his presence, and a bit suspicious. But, he decided, he could trust his friend. He thought a moment, and then said, “Let us fight another day.”

Again Calibos uttered a few long-forgotten words and with a wave of the hand he passed out into Zalam’s arms. Zalam immediately began to float off the bloodstained white marble floor. Zalam struggled to pick up his friend and limped through the hole in the dome. He continued to scan the castle, hoping he would not be seen walking slowly and with great effort in the air. There were no guards along the walls. Zalam guessed that Norikahn had returned and was gathering them for an assault on the throne room. Or at least, that’s what he was hoping. With his friend in his arms, his sword switched off and in his hand, Zalam turned his back on his throne and walked away through the air.



"The Sarge"

by Charles Shaver

The Sergeant opened fire. Low “pop-pop-pops” resounded and then died as he pulled and then released the trigger. He didn’t want to risk the low-light beam from his Pulse-Laser Rifle, or PLR. Such beams would easily be magnified by the thick, swampy waters he currently sat in. Fortunately, his ML-2 rifle was equipped with both the PLR and a rather archaic, traditional assault rifle. Darkness filled his entire field of vision. It actually made some things simpler for him. The enemy had heat dampeners on their Combat Suits, much like his own, which hid them from his visor’s thermal vision equipped in the suit’s helmet. The night vision that the helmet also sported helped a bit, but Dakkaran, the planet he was currently stationed on, had no satellites to reflect any light back into the night. There was also a thick fog rolling in, creeping and crawling its way through the swamp. The Sarge, as his men called him, was forced to concentrate, to keep a keen eye out for gun flashes. If he saw one, he’d fire right at it, hoping against hope to hit an enemy soldier. The unfortunate thing about this firefight was that they were so obviously out-numbered. The Sarge sweated deep within his Combat Suit despite its cooling system.

The Sarge sat behind a tree, trying to use it for all its worth as cover. But in the dead of night and with an assault rifle blasting away, the enemy was sure to see him eventually. He’d have to move, and soon, to some other position before the enemy zeroed-in on him.

He quickly went on the bounce, heading for a tree ten meters away. Again, he had to compromise his usual activity. Instead of using the Jump Jets in the Combat Suit, or J.J.s as they were often called, he simply ran for new cover. In a firefight, ten meters always seemed like you were trying to make the leap over Hunnover’s Gap back on his homeworld of Polinius IV. Growing up, he had seen many people try to make that very jump over the Gap. He’d also seen most of them fall nearly a kilometer straight down to their deaths in the attempt. Occasionally, someone would almost make it and wind up as a smear on the far wall of the canyon just below the Gap’s lip. The proverbial bug on the windshield of nature.

But the Sarge couldn’t let this be an almost kind of day. He had to make it, under cover of the night and on foot, or he’d be dead for sure. And the swampy waters of Dakkaran weren’t exactly the kind of place he wanted to die. He gathered himself then made that leap of faith. Darting back and forth to break the pattern of his route in case someone was trying to draw a bead on him, he bolted for his new but temporary home. Enemy gunfire sprayed all around. He was sure they’d seen him. But he made it. He was surprised to see Corporal Kirby already in position behind the thick tree.

“Kirby, didn’t see you here,” the Sarge said into his Com Unit, also built into the helmet, as he crouched near the second-in-command.

“I was getting’ kinda lonely over here anyway, Sarge.” Kirby gave a smile that went unnoticed behind his dark visor.

“You using your recoilless?” The Sarge asked.

“Yeah,” Kirby answered, followed by a small “plink” coming from his rifle. Kirby had a recoilless rifle, an old-fashioned lead delivery system similar to The Sarge’s assault rifle, but it made little noise and no flash. There’d be no way the enemy would find him in the cloak of night. Kirby had it sweet.

“Well, we’re gonna have to move it soon.” The Sarge said.

“Fine with me. I was getting tired of this party.” Kirby always had a joke. Not always good, but a joke anyway. It made him friendly and likeable. It helped draw the squad closer together. The squad was comprised of five men: The Sarge, Kirby, Arkin, Diego and Hohiromata. The Sarge and Kirby had been together the longest in the squad.

The Sarge eyed the darkness for the nearest flash. He caught it and fired his own rifle right at it. A scream echoed, mixing between the gunfire, and The Sarge knew he had just killed another man, or at least hit him. The feelings of regret and sorrow didn’t come anymore after killing another man like it did when he was first picked by the National Volunteer’s Committee for Active Duty. That had been almost a year ago, he thought.

While most other men talked and thought of sex, The Sarge had learned not to think much anymore at all. Except maybe about keeping his men alive... what officers called ‘tactics.’ Maybe he didn’t think much anymore because he saw little difference in the two warring sides. One was just there to fight the other. They were too interconnected to be thought of as separate things.

Not everyone thought of sex, though. That’s not a fair generalization. Arkin from Garra XII, their squad’s heavy-weapons expert, spent all his free time building little models. Mostly civilian hovercraft. He had a thing for them. It had been his hobby before he was volunteered, so he carried it on now the best he could. It made him a quiet man, but that was never a bad thing. And when he was asked to live up to his training he wasn’t firing a PLR and killing one or two men at a time. Instead he was firing his Multiple Repeating Rocket Delivery Kit, or MRRDK (often pronounced ‘Marduke’), and killing dozens upon dozens of people in a matter of seconds. The Sarge figured that that would weigh heavy on anyone and make him a little quieter than most.

Then there was Hank and Diego. Hank’s real name was Hohiromata, but that was tough to say in the heat of a firefight over a Com Unit. So somewhere along the way he had either adopted or was made to adopt the nickname ‘Hank’. He was the squad’s communications specialist. He could make a Cyberdeck hum and write crypto on the spot to send important data back to Base that only their side could understand. Paulo Diego had been with the squad the longest. Just a few days longer than The Sarge and Kirby had. Diego was the only other corporal besides Kirby, largely because he went through extra training to be a medical man. Everyone else were Grunts.

The Sarge had been assigned to this squad after the old sergeant had died in a siege here on Dakkaran. He had been blown to pieces by a mortar while he and a few dozen other squads tried to take a hill. They had found most of the former sergeant’s body, but not all.

Recon is where you get to see the most death, except maybe unless you were an assassin squad.

Bullets sprayed across the tree just above their heads.

“Holy shit! They’ve moved to our flank!” Kirby yelled in surprise. The Sarge took a quick look around the tree to where the enemy had been just a second before. He

still saw flashes of gunfire coming from that direction.

“No, they haven’t. They’re still out in front. They’ve got back-up. We’re outnumbered. Maybe three to one. Where’s Hank?” The Sarge knew Hank was the only other one with a recoilless.

“At that tree behind us,” Kirby said. “He was giving me some cover.”

“Hank! Come in,” The Sarge spoke into his Com Unit.

“Here Sarge,” a voice crackled.

“I’m sending Kirby your way. Diego and Arkin should be parallel to our enemy out front. You’ll start firing perpendicular to them. Arkin, you there?”

“Here, Sergeant,” Arkin’s voice was nervous.

“They’ve got back-up on our left flank. I’m coming to fill your hole in the line. That should give us a nice L-formation. I want you to drop yourself in the center behind all of us, then open up with your Marduke.”

“Gotcha, Sarge,” Arkin responded.

The Sarge looked at Kirby, and with a nod they were off to their respective positions. Arkin was at the far end of the line. It would be a tough bounce, but one he was sure he could make. One he had to make. This whole firefight started when The Sarge’s squad came across one of the enemy’s recon squads, but twice the size of their own. They were deep in the swamps, so for another squad to have shown up to reinforce the enemy they, too, had to have been on recon nearby. It was just something that happened in war. The Sarge hoped only to get a nice, cool shower out of this day... and then he went on the bounce.

He went on the bounce just after Kirby took off to join Hank. Again he ran on foot, zig-zagging back and forth a few times before he found Arkin taking cover behind a boulder. Arkin was holding a suppressive fire with his PLR Auto. A PLR Auto, unlike a PLR that could only fire three laser pulses every time the trigger was pulled, could keep up a constant fire for about a minute before it needed fifteen seconds to cool. But if a soldier knew what he was doing, like Arkin did, you could drag it out and keep a semi-constant stream of fire with just short moments to allow the gun to cool. It was a bigger, heavier gun, mostly due to the extra cooling units it needed. It was risky to use it in these swamps right now. The only thing The Sarge and his men had going for them was the hope that the enemy was having just as much trouble seeing them as they were seeing the enemy. That’s why he ordered no PLRs to be used. But with the way Arkin kept up a constant suppressive fire, the enemy would never have a chance to take a shot at him no matter how clearly visible he was making himself.

“Arkin, go!” The Sarge said as he dropped behind the boulder. He sat in the knee-deep water. “I set Hank and Kirby to the east. Light ‘em up!”

“Right, Sarge.” Arkin shouldered his PLR Auto onto his left shoulder. Arkin’s Combat Suit was much like The Sarge’s and all the other grunts in the army, but thicker in the back and heavier. One had to be big and strong to operate it without fault. Instead of two J.J.s like The Sarge had, Arkin only had one. The movement and speed of the suit was comparable, but it didn’t steer quite as easily. The room it saved was made for long stems flowing gracefully from his back like the bones of a wing without feathers. Along the edge pointing forward were small holes with multiple mini-missiles. This was Arkin’s Marduke.

The Sarge lifted himself into Arkin’s position and started firing as Arkin went on

the bounce on foot. Several seconds went by, maybe ten or fifteen, before the enemy realized that the suppressive fire was gone and opened up with their own laser rifles. Shards of the boulder broke away above The Sarge. “Good,” The Sarge thought. “That’ll make ‘em clearly visible.”

A few more seconds passed before the “whoosh” sound of the Marduke started up. With each “whoosh”, another mini-missile was launched. The Sarge ducked his head behind the boulder, knowing all his men would be doing the same wherever they were. Explosions erupted all around, seven in all. That was a bit of overkill, The Sarge thought, but at least they’d be sure. The Sarge sat and listened. No return fire came. No shouting. Nothing. Arkin had done his job, and done it well.

* * * * *

“Sixteen in all,” Kirby reported. “Looks like the recon we ran into was out for an extended period. There were eleven of them and all were carrying enough rations for more than a week, twice the norm.”

“They had also set up camp just before we got here,” Arkin added. “With equipment tied to the trees and such. I think they mighta set up for the night when we wandered across them. Probably a sentry spotted us and they waited until we were passing before they opened fire.”

“Their back-up was a basic recon squad of five. Everything just like you had suspected.” Kirby finished briefing The Sarge on their survey of the area.

“We haven’t seen that big a recon squad around here before,” The Sarge said thoughtfully. The swampy waters flowed carelessly around their knees.

“Couldn’t they have been just out on extra-long patrol?” Arkin asked. The Sarge shrugged, “The enemy’s just on the other side of this part of the swamp. That’s several tens of kilometers, but not enough for such a patrol.”

“They could be scouting the swamp, preparing for a massive assault across and towards us,” Kirby chimed in. “They tried that a month back and there was an increase of recon patrols from them just before the assault.”

“Yeah, I had thought of that,” The Sarge said.

“So what do you think?” Arkin asked.

“I’m not sure what to think. Maybe Kirby has a point. Maybe they’re just a bit tired of us staying at this stalemate over a stinkin’ swamp. Maybe they’ve decided to change things up a bit. Maybe...” The Sarge trailed off in thought for a moment. “Maybe they’re searching for something.”

“Like what?” Kirby asked.

Diego, who was on nearby and acting as a lookout, spoke up. “There was a civil war on this world about six years ago, Sarge. Our guys have been doing pretty good to stop their supply ships. Maybe they caught wind of an old weapons cache hidden somewhere in the swamp.”

Again The Sarge just shrugged. The men just stood in silence.

“Let’s head back to Base, give our report and get some sack time,” he finally said.

* * * * *

The whole squad had stripped to their shorts and undershirts and was lounging in the parlor of a dusty old, abandoned home. Kirby was laying in an over-stuffed and torn chair decorated in some burgundy colored spiral designs and was suing a plastic crate for an ottoman. Diego and Hank sat in plastic folding chairs at one end of a long plastic table. Arkin sat at the other end of the table working on a model. The Sarge had sprawled out on a vast couch nearby.

“They sneak in and geek a guy before anyone can take notice,” Hank said. He wasn’t necessarily any younger than the rest of the squad, but he looked it.

“Just shut up and deal,” Diego said, tossing Hank a deck of loose cards and taking a drag off a musty brown cigarette.

“They’re like ghosts. I swear!” Hank exclaimed.

“What in the hell is he babbling about?” Kirby lifted an eye to ask Diego this question.

“Ah, he’s goin’ on about them Death Dealers again,” Diego said. He and Kirby then exchanged a roll of the eyes.

“Hey, the army needs to get its hands dirty, too. You can’t win a war with all good, clean fighting.” Hank said. “So, they’ve got the Death Dealers. They’re highly trained intel guys and...”

“And what?” Diego asked as he took another drag off his cigarette.

“And assassins! They even say they’re working on psychic combat! Hell, one of their squads only needs three men to our five!” Hank had always been one to go in for the occult. Ghosts, goblins, psychic powers, and things like that interested him. He read a lot on it in his downtime if he wasn’t playing cards with Diego. The Sarge didn’t usually mind so much because his stories entertained the men. It took their minds off the war. And maybe it was a way for Hank to deal with all the death he experienced on a near daily basis. But, sometimes it seemed to stir the pot a bit too much. Sometimes his talk got him or the other guys on edge. And then it just annoyed The Sarge.

“Can you imagine?” Hank said. “Only three men to our five? And they say that they descend from some sort of lineage from Earth. A secret network of clans and assassins. And they have these skulls from large beasts for helmets, so when they’re on top of you and killing you, that’s the last thing you see!”

The Sarge heard Hank getting worked up. “All just the myths of war,” The Sarge said without opening an eye. The room grew quiet. He didn’t mind if the men talked, he just didn’t want them talking themselves into a frenzy. He waited to hear the chatter start up again, hopefully on another subject.

“I could use some sleep,” Diego said to The Sarge’s relief.

“If you want some sleep, then why the hell don’t you two stop with the cards for once and lay down?” Kirby said, annoyed.

“Ah, go to sleep. Dream about your wife and my kids,” Diego cracked a grin. Kirby opened one eye just enough to be able to reach out and smack Diego in the back of the head with an open hand. Diego turned with an angry look on his face, but his menace turned into a smile when he saw Kirby’s smile. Kirby rolled on his side, putting his back to Diego and Hank.

“What’ll it be?” Hank asked.

“I don’t care. Just deal.” Diego said.

“Basic five card, then.” Hank started to deal the cards. “I wish I could get some sleep. My mind’s running wild again.”

“What’s on your mind? Besides the usual conspiracies,” Diego took another drag off his cigarette.

Hank hesitated. “Not too much of anything.”

“Yeah, I get that way sometimes,” Diego picked up his hand. “If I knew I’d be better after only a few hours of sleep I’d be sleeping, too. But too little sleep only makes me grumpy and distracted. Sarge wouldn’t like that when we go on the bounce.”

“Yeah. Why the hell we gotta go back out to check up on the enemy? Where the hell are the other squads?” Hank complained.

Again, The Sarge, who was just about asleep, caught the irritation in Hank’s voice and wanted to calm it. “On the bounce, like we’ll be in a few hours. Get some rest,” The Sarge said without moving a muscle. Soon after he fell asleep.

Diego put out the last of his cigarette and laid three cards down on the table. Hank pulled three cards off the top of the deck and tossed them to Diego. “Dealer takes two,” he said. Diego studied his cards as Hank replaced his own two.

“I think I just beat your winning streak. Aces and ladies,” Diego said as he laid out his hand to show two pair.

“Yeah, you got me,” Hank said as he laid out his hand consisting of the two black aces, two black eights and a five of diamonds. Diego said as he gathered the hand for the next deal, “Hey, you got a Dead Man’s Hand.”

“A what?”

“Dead Man’s Hand. Black aces and eights.” Diego repeated.

“What the hell is that?”

“A Dead Man’s Hand?” Diego asked as he stopped fiddling with the cards just long enough to produce and light another cigarette. “Just some old wive’s tale. Dunno where it comes from, but black aces and eights are called a Dead Man’s Hand.” Diego was shuffling the cards again.

“Oh,” Hank almost groaned. “I don’t like that. I don’t like that at all. Imagine drawing something called ‘Dead Man’s Hand’ before we go on the bounce,” Hank said nervously.

Diego noticed that Hank’s hand went to his neck. He fumbled with his dog tags, then produced a small kami idol tied around his neck. “Awww, come on,” Diego tried to calm Hank, “it’s just a name. Don’t be so superstitious.”

Hank’s fingers rubbed over the jade idol.

“Seven card this time,” Diego said as he dealt. Hank kept his fingers on the idol until he picked up his next hand.

* * * * *

The smell of moss and mildew was usually an overpowering kind of stench. But after serving several months in the damp swamps of Dakkaran, The Sarge and his men were used to it. Everything they had smelled musty by now: their clothes, their Combat Suits, their weapons. Everything. Even their skin.

The Army’s main task here on Dakkaran was to take control of the planet. The problem was that Dakkaran wasn’t the most important part of the Front. Hell, they were

barely even a part of the Front, just some long out-stretched region of the galaxy. So both sides got few supplies and were all but left and forgotten on this boggy, rainy world.

But The Sarge took to heart that his men were all good soldiers. All of his men had been specifically chosen to fight on this world when the war was brought here long ago. Kirby had been a logger on Lucien before he was volunteered. Hank and Arkin had both seen combat on Elios IX, which was pretty much one big, spherical jungle. Diego, the only man who had made the Army his career long ago, had trained as a swamp tracker and hunter back on Earth. The Sarge had just been deemed to have a good record. He was cool under battle; he kept his mind clear and on the task at hand. He could also be a friend when needed. He had all the best qualities a non-com needed. And he never asked for the most important thing any leader of men needed. He never asked for respect. He simply got it. He got it through trust and by bringing his men home alive time and time again.

A light fog filled the whole swamp, bedewing their Combat Suits. Kirby was on point, with everyone else following in a five-meter spread, more or less single file. Arkin was behind Kirby, with Hank and Diego right behind them. The Sarge brought up the rear, his weapon ready and his eyes peering all around. He soon noticed that Diego was slowing his pace, as was Hank. He waited for someone to give a hand or voice signal for an All-Stop. It didn't come. Hank finally stopped, peering out into the swamps to the west. The Sarge looked about, then back at his men to look for the All-Stop hand signal. Again it didn't come. He slowed his own pace as he watched Diego approach Hank. Finally, Diego's voice came over the Com Unit to give an All-Stop voice command. Everyone crouched into the swampy water. Everyone except Hank and Diego, both who were staring to the west. The Sarge watched the two. He saw Hank's hand reach for his chest. Hank gently laid his hand on his left breast. The Sarge knew that Hank was, in his own way, reaching for the idol he kept under his Combat Suit. The Sarge heard Diego tell Hank to get down, but no response came.

The Sarge made a slow, crouched approach toward the two. He kept his eyes sharp and looking for any movement, any anomaly. "What's up, Diego?"

"Dunno," Diego whispered over the Com Unit. "Something's got Hank spooked."

"What?" The Sarge kept looking around. Diego scanned the area, too.

"Dunno."

"Everyone keep low and keep an eye out," The Sarge said. He crept forward to be closer to the still standing Hank. Hank's helmeted head remained pointing west toward a line of trees. "What's up, Hank?" The Sarge asked. Hank didn't answer. He just stared out into the murky swamp. Then The Sarge reissued his questioned.

"D-Don't know," Hank answered. "Maybe nothin'. But I could have sworn I saw movement. A slight shift in the tree line."

"Human or animal?"

"I don't know. I-it..." Hank's voice trailed off over the Com Unit.

"What is it?" The Sarge's voice was more forceful.

"It... was like the whole tree line moved. Like it shifted."

Everyone kept quiet having heard this, not knowing what to think of their buddy's statement.

"Could it have been a human? The enemy, maybe?" The Sarge asked.

“Maybe. But...” Hank shook his head. “No, it was just as if the... I don’t know how to explain it. Just a sort of... movement.”

The Sarge was worried. Hank never got spooked. Generally his eyes were keen and The Sarge had come to trust him. But this didn’t seem to make sense.

“The wind?” The Sarge knew immediately that his question was a stupid one. But Hank paused for a moment, rubbing – no, caressing the left breastplate of his Combat Suit where his Shinto idol was surely hanging from around his neck. “Can’t be anything else, I guess.” Hank turned to look at The Sarge for the first time. “It was nothing.” He reassured with a nod.

The Sarge gave a hand signal and the squad began their slow bounce again, but more cautious this time. Diego switched to the private channel that each man could use to talk only to The Sarge.

“What’s the matter with Hank?” he asked.

“Not sure,” The Sarge said, also after switching to the private channel.

“That card game before we left,” Diego said, “You think he took that Dead Man’s Hand as an omen?”

“You guys need to cut that habit, or it’ll be the death of us all.” The Sarge said.

* * * * *

The squad had been tramping through the swamp for several hours, having made only a few stops. Diego had been put on point by now. He crept forward, his head low and his eyes intense and looking. The waters of the swamp ululated above his knees. His first priority was to watch for the enemy. His second was to watch the depths of the swamp. There were points where the ground below would suddenly drop off to three, four or sometimes even up to ten meters deep. His third and final priority was to watch for critters. While most of the wildlife had learned to avoid humans, some animals, and things more closely resembling monsters, had no fear of humans. They would occasionally prey on humans for a meal just as quickly as they would prey on any of their fellow swamp dwellers. A fresh human could make a sizable meal for most of the creatures here. Being on point was never an easy task.

Presently, Diego held up his hand in the gesture for All-Stop. The whole squad dropped to their knees, bringing the water up to their chests. The water reeked even through their Combat Suits.

“Sarge... movement,” said Diego. The Sarge soon made his way up the line of soldiers to Diego.

That’s when Hank saw the movement. He peered harder, closer and more intensely into the swamp. A small bit of movement had gone from one tree to another. Hank noticed that Diego pointed quickly, quietly towards the trees. Hank was relieved to know that he wasn’t the only one to have seen something this time. His eyes were darting between the duties of searching the swamp and watching The Sarge and Diego.

The Sarge flashed a hand signal to move out and around the thing, ordering everyone to flank it and, perhaps, to surround it. Hank checked his PLR to make sure that it was switched on and powered up, though he knew it was already. He adjusted his helmet, got off his one knee and moved forward.

The ground suddenly fell away from underneath his feet! Hank screamed into the Com Unit as he was pulled into the murky swamp water. Something had a hold of his left foot. It was strong and biting through his Combat Suit... and even his skin. The oppressive drumming hum of water slapping against his helmet, the realization that the thing now engulfed his entire lower leg, and the yells of his squad-mates in his ears threw Hank into a panic. He tried to remember his training: stay calm and keep hold of your rifle. Hank clenched first one fist then another, finding that his rifle had gone missing. Panic completely overtook him at this point. He started thrashing wildly, trying to put as much water beneath him as possible and to lift himself up to the surface. But that searing, biting pain of whatever it was grasping his leg tormented him too much to concentrate. He was making no headway. Thoughts of drowning swam through his head, however impossible that was as long as he was inside his Combat Suit.

That's when Hank found extra bubbles boiling forth in the water around him. He couldn't make sure what had made him notice it. Maybe his training, maybe his luck, maybe the will of the gods. Whatever it was, he was thankful for it because that small note of detail brought him back to reality. His squad-mates were firing their PLRs into the water at whatever had a hold of him. The searing lasers heated the water around him. He brought himself under control. The water was boiling and bubbling from heat. He felt his arms being tugged at by hands, human hands. As they pulled him up above the surface of the water he saw that Arkin and Kirby each had one of his arms in theirs and with their free hands they were firing away with their PLRs. Hissing steam clouded Hanks visor.

Hank wiped his visor clear. He could see his own PLR, made of a durable and airtight molded plasteel similar to his Combat Suit, bobbing up and down just below the water's surface. He also noticed blood mixing into the water, swirling like a dancing dye. He wondered where The Sarge was and prayed desperately for Arkin and Kirby to shoot true. He prayed for the death of his former captor, whatever it was.

Arkin and Kirby finally pulled Hank up and out of the water completely. A bloody stub of a tentacle remained latched onto his leg. The carcass of a blobulous creature floated to the surface of the water. With a burble and a gurgle, it slowly sank from sight.

"What the fuck was that?" Hank yelled over the Com Unit.

"Get Diego over here," Kirby ordered Arkin. Arkin in turn went on the bounce immediately. Kirby then tried to soothe Hank. "It's alright, Hank. It's dead."

"What the fuck was it?" Hank asked again.

"Not sure," Kirby laid a hand on Hank's chest.

"I'm losing feeling in my leg," Hank said.

"Diego'll be here soon." Kirby said. "He'll be here and patch you up in no time."

"Where's The Sarge?" Hank asked, this time in a slower, more controlled voice, though he was still panting.

"They went after whoever was out there. Whatever they saw." Kirby answered.

"Who was it?" Hank knew it couldn't be the enemy. The enemy would have taken the advantage of him being pulled under and hit the squad hard with everything they had. But for Diego and The Sarge to have gone off after them or him or whatever it was alone, leaving the other three behind meant that it wasn't the enemy. It also meant that it or they

were important. Unless it was a lone soldier. It had to be someone who didn't serve as a major threat. Hank found himself coughing from the strain of his encounter.

"Here they come," Kirby announced. Hank looked up to see Diego in the lead, his jet pack controlling his speedy descent towards Hank.

"It's okay, buddy," Diego called before he was even on the ground. "I'll getcha fixed up quick, buddy." Diego dropped to his knees beside Hank. Hank raised a hand and patted Diego on the arm to reassure him that he was going to be fine. Diego pulled an airtight plastic medical bag of his back. He carefully lifted Hank's wounded leg up while Kirby held his back so he wouldn't fall backward into the water. Diego pulled one edge of the tentacle up, revealing large spikes, gleaming metallic, penetrating deep into Hank's leg. Blood flowed everywhere. Hank caught Diego shaking his head in disbelief and knew that he wasn't in good shape after all. Hank felt the blood loss stirring in his head. His eyelids bobbed up and down. He knew he wasn't going to remain conscious too much longer. At the sound of shuffling feet in water, Hank opened his eyes again hoping to see The Sarge. But walking before The Sarge, quietly and with tears of fear in her eyes, was a small girl in a gray, swamp-stained dress.

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"What's the mater with her, Diego?" The Sarge asked. Diego was checking over the small girl who cooperated, though somewhat reluctantly and only after he had given her some Correllian chocolate.

"Not sure, Sarge." Diego stood, asking Arkin to watch over her. He and The Sarge took a few quiet, watery steps, backing away from her. Diego, though still using the private line on the Com Unit, spoke softly. "She's healthy as can be, all things considered. Maybe a bit of malnourishment setting in. By the looks of her dress and such, I'd say she's been in the swamps maybe three weeks. Other than that she's ok."

"At least," said The Sarge.

"At least," Diego agreed.

"Which would explain the malnourishment."

"Right." Diego confirmed.

The two men looked at the girl who was just finishing up her candy. Arkin seemed to be taking a shine to the little girl.

"Why won't she talk? Is she just scared?" The Sarge asked.

"Normally I'd say so, but not this time."

"Why not this time?"

"I checked out her throat." Diego started. "Granted it's just a prelim check, I mean there's only so much I can do out here in the field. At least as far as giving her a full check goes--"

"Just get to it," The Sarge urged.

"Her throat muscles look... well..."

"Well?" The Sarge urged again, impatiently.

"Well, I can't really say. But they look under-developed. I mean, they're healthy enough. It's just as if..." Diego trailed off in thought.

"As if what, Diego? Come on now, we can't stand here all day. What the hell is wrong with her?"

“Well, it’s as if she’s never used her vocal chord, per se. As if she’d never been taught to talk. I don’t think she can talk. I think she’s a mute.”

A confused look overcame The Sarge. Thought flowed over him like a watery ripple left by a critter in the swamp. “What about Hank?”

“Whatever the hell that was that bit into him, it bit deep. He’s our biggest concern. I think it mighta been one of those Swamp Ahks that some of the other squads have reported seeing. It had massive claws. Sunk in deep into Hank’s leg, maybe even broke bone. I patched him up real good, sealed it off with the airtight bandages to keep water out, doped his leg up to the high-heavens, but he suffered the wound while his leg was already under water. It mighta been infected with any one of a multitude of gunk that floats around in the murk.”

“So we should get him back soon.” The Sarge said.

“Yeah,” Diego answered.

“Alright, tell the boys we’re moving out. We’re dumping this recon and going home. You watch Hank.” The Sarge looked over at Arkin and the girl who were playing some sort of game together. “Put Arkin on the girl. Tell him to watch over her and keep her quiet.” As soon as The Sarge said this last bit, he realized his folly.

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The squad had been on a slow bounce for quite some time. There were few signs to show the differentiation between night and day in the Dakkaran swamps. Everything in the swamp stayed a charcoal gray at all hours. Diego checked his timepiece, showing him that it was just past sundown local time. He looked to Hank, his arm wrapped around his shoulders. Hank was well enough and he felt no pain, but he was still favoring his wounded leg. It just couldn’t support the weight. He had been able to move his toes, but not without some pain. Now, as the day dragged into night unnoticed, Hank grew more tired and limped even more. That’s it, Diego thought, that damn leg of his is broken! The Sarge signaled for an All-Stop, then for a ten-minute rest. After The Sarge and Kirby checked the perimeter, everyone relaxed a bit. The Sarge approached Diego and Hank.

“How’s he doing?” he asked Diego.

“It’s slow-going, Sarge.” Diego answered as he sat Hank down, then lifted his leg out of the water to check the condition of his bandages. “Bandages are holding.”

“Good.”

“When the shit hits the fan, Sarge, just hand me my gun and I’ll shoot with the rest of ‘em. I just won’t be too mobile.” The Sarge could almost hear Hank smile as he said this.

“Will do,” The Sarge answered. He then moved on towards Arkin and the little girl and asked of her condition, too.

“She’s doing fine,” Arkin said. “Since you gave Kirby my rifle to carry, I got enough room across my shoulders to carry her. She even seems to like it.” He lifted his visor to flash a smile at the girl and she smiled affectionately back.

“Get anything out of her?” The Sarge asked.

“Nah. She grunts real quiet-like every once in a while, but that’s it. She ain’t talking.”

“Diego says she can’t talk. Her vocal chords under-developed.” The Sarge said.

“So, that’s why you’re so quiet.” Arkin smiled and tickle the girl’s belly. She squirmed appropriately and grinned widely, her big blue eyes closed in happiness. But not a giggle one came forth from her. Diego soon joined them. “How is she?” Diego asked as he walked up.

“She’s fine,” The Sarge said as they watched Arkin tickle the little girl again.

“I wanna check her over again anyway,” Diego said and The Sarge agreed.

The Sarge absent-mindedly pulled out a cigarette and lit it, taking a quick drag. The glow of the cigarette reflected in the water caught his attention. He realized that he shouldn’t be smoking. Though they hadn’t run across the enemy once on this recon, that didn’t mean that the enemy wasn’t out there. Any little thing could make them stand out against the charcoal and muddy color of the swamp. He took another quick drag, then tossed the cigarette into the rippling water.

Rippling water! The Sarge thought. Arkin and the girl were taking turns drinking from his canteen while Diego ran a scanner around her. All three made little else movement. The Sarge then looked to Kirby, who was enjoying his downtime against a tree and looking half-asleep. An unsettling nervousness streaked through The Sarge. He looked over to find Hank, but found nothing but more rippling water and a bare tree he was once leaning against! Terror over ran The Sarge. Hank was gone!

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“Maybe he just went for a piss?” Arkin suggested.

“On a broken leg? And not tell us about it? And without making so much as a grunt in pain?” The Sarge sounded angry. But Arkin wasn’t sure if he was angry because of the question he had asked or because one of his men had disappeared damn near right under his nose.

“His leg was broken?” Arkin asked.

“That’s what Diego said.”

The two stalked the swamp, looking for any sign of anything. The Sarge had left Kirby and Diego back with the mute girl while they checked the perimeter.

It had been about a half-hour by the time The Sarge and Arkin returned.

“Well? Did you find him, Sarge?” the words busted out of Kirby’s mouth. The Sarge answered with a simple, slow shake of the head.

“Well what the hell’s goin’ on here? How can he disappear? How can a man – a wounded man no less – just up and disappear?” Diego demanded.

“Diego,” Kirby tried to calm Diego. He repeated his name over and over.

“What’s goin’ on? He wasn’t more than a few meters away!”

“Diego, settle down,” Kirby tried again.

“What the hell’s goin’ on?” Diego raised his voice to a yell over the Com Unit.

“Diego!” A tone of authority entered The Sarge’s voice for the first time. Diego’s frantic rambling finally came to a stop. Diego pressed his back against a tree and slowly slid into the stink-water of the swamp, sitting himself down.

Kirby laid a hand on The Sarge’s shoulder. “What’re we gonna do, Sarge?” he asked in a pleading way. The Sarge said quite simply, “Pack up. We’re heading for Base.”

“What d’ya mean we’re heading for Base? What about Hank?” Diego’s voice rose as he did.

“Yeah, that’s what we should do. We should head for Base!” Kirby said.

“We can’t! Hank’s missing! He could be out there just taking a piss for all we know and stumbled or something!” Diego was becoming demanding.

“And we have a little girl to take care of,” Arkin piped in picking up the girl in one arm.

The Sarge steeled himself, raised his visor and that of Diego and stared deep into his eyes. “He woulda told us. He wouldn’t have gotten far. And we woulda heard him. The water here is shallow for miles all around. Arkin and I did the recon ourselves. Nothin’ coulda pulled him under. So all I can do is assume that something or someone somehow came in here and took him far and fast. And that he’s dead.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, Sarge,” Diego pleaded.

“I didn’t say it made sense.” The Sarge’s eyes wandered over the rest of his squad. “We got a man missing and a little mute girl to contend with. Our mission is over. Pack up. We’re headin’ for Base.” The Sarge’s eyes steeled over to let Diego know he meant business. They all quietly went on the bounce.

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They’d been on a slow bounce for a while. The Sarge had ordered them to go on foot. If someone had somehow stolen away with Hank, who knows if they could still be out there? Watching. Looking for any sign. The Sarge was sure that someone had to have taken Hank. There was no other explanation. He kept rolling it over and over in his head, though.

Kirby was on point. The Sarge had decided that Kirby was the best choice for point. Diego’s mind was too wrapped up in having lost his best buddy Hank and Arkin was doing too good a job with the girl to use him. And The Sarge himself wanted to bring up the rear and keep an eye on his men. He would be damned if he lost another man.

Kirby’s hand signal for an All-Stop caught The Sarge’s attention. He dropped to one knee like the rest of the squad. He waited, eyes darting around. Kirby must have seen something to bring them to a stop. He looked and looked. Pretty soon he got impatient. It wasn’t like Kirby – or any of his men – to wait so long without reporting. Then The Sarge saw the signal. Kirby was calling for him.

Arkin had lifted his visor and was speaking softly, soothingly to the girl as he passed, yet maintained a vigilant watch. Passing Diego, he noticed the man eyeing the surroundings nervously. Good, thought The Sarge, maybe he’s snapped out of it. He should know I didn’t want to leave Hank behind anymore than he did. But what else could I do? We looked for him. We did what we had to do.

Kirby was leaning against a tree, his head resting on an arm, his visor up and his face contorted in an odd way. The Sarge knelt next to him. He lifted his own visor.

“Kirby, what is it?” he said. Without raising his head, Kirby pointed ahead of their path with a hand that held an Optimagnifier. The Sarge took the thing from Kirby’s hand and peered through it. For a moment The Sarge stopped breathing. He dropped the device from his face, then looked again.

“Diego,” The Sarge closed his visor and spoke into the Com Unit. “Stick back here with Arkin and the girl. Kirby and I are going on a head a bit.”

“Isn’t that against protocol, sir?” Arkin asked. “I mean, we have one man missing. Should we really split up?”

“This isn’t any normal circumstance. Just do as I say.” The Sarge commanded.

“Kirby, let’s go.” Kirby didn’t move.

“B-but, Sarge.”

“Come on. Let’s go!” The Sarge pulled Kirby to his feet. He actually wanted Diego to go, in case Hank was still alive. But with Diego and Hank being best friends and given Hank’s current situation, The Sarge decided against it.

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Kirby couldn’t take it. Something churned deep inside him, in his soul and in his belly. He hunched over and spewed forth an acrid collection of rations and bile from his stomach. Before him and The Sarge, suspended by multitudinous black ropes from a massive lökwa tree, swaying gently in the noiseless wind, hung a naked Hank. A masterful cut had been made vertically in his flesh about a quarter inch deep, from his mid-sternum and down through his navel. Another cut had been made horizontally, perpendicularly across the first cut, to form a sort of cross. From these wounds came spilling forth his bowels. His intestines bobbed gently, floating atop the swampy waters. Kirby heaved and heaved, but now was coughing up nothing but an air that stung the back of his throat. The Sarge ordered Kirby to lift his visor so they could speak feely without the others hearing. Kirby did. The tinge of iron-scented blood immediately filled his nostrils. Realizing that it was the blood of Hank, he again threw up.

“Let’s cut him down,” The Sarge said. Kirby straightened, wiping his mouth with his glove.

“Who the hell did this?” he asked, a hint of rage floating through his voice.

“I don’t know. And I don’t intend to find out. We’ll cut him down, stash the body and leave.”

“Wait! Aren’t we going to bury him?” Kirby was shocked.

“No. Whoever did this to him did it for a reason. They didn’t go through all this trouble for nothing. I don’t plan on waiting around to find out that reason.” The Sarge pulled a long machete from the back of his Combat Suit and went to work on the vine ropes. As he cut, Hank’s body jerked and gave an audible grown. Both the Sarge and Kirby leapt in horror. Waiting a few seconds, Kirby approached the body of his old friend. Removing a glove, he placed a hand on Hank’s neck.

“He’s still alive!” Kirby exclaimed.

The Sarge lowered his visor. “Diego, get over here, now!”

It didn’t take long for Diego to get to them. He had taken the sight no better than Kirby.

After Diego had pulled himself together long enough to check on Hank, The Sarge asked, “Would he make it to Base?” Diego, reluctantly, shook his head. The Sarge approached, lifting his visor. He then lifted Hank’s head with one hand. Hank’s eyes lolled around in their sockets, fighting without thought to focus to discern his surroundings.

“Hank, who did this to you?” No answer came. “Hank, who did this to you!” The Surge urged. Hank’s lips quivered, blood and watery mud pouring from them, as he whispered in a sigh with great effort. He spoke only two words, two words that took every ounce of strength to utter before he died. Two words that shook the very souls of his squad-mates.

“Death... Dealers...”

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The four men crouched, their backs almost to each other, watching the swamp for any sign of movement as they spoke to each other. Arkin still had the girl, now cradling her in his arms, her eyes drooping with weariness. Somehow, though, she fought her instinct to sleep and kept her eyes open, too. She seemed to know something was wrong.

“Dammit, I say we go back there and cut Hank down and take him back to Base. He deserves that,” Diego demanded.

“No,” The Sarge said.

“What? So, you’re really gonna do it? You’re really gonna leave one of your men out here like... like that?” Diego was yelling into his Com Unit.

“Diego, pull it together!” They all had their visors down, but with the way The Sarge’s head jerked around toward him Diego knew he was on the receiving end of a horrific glare. “Like it or not, Diego,” The Sarge continued in a lower tone, but with the same amount of force, “Hank’s dead. You saw him die yourself. You’re the one who declared him dead after he sputtered out those words. Now, whoever – or whatever – did that to him did it for a reason! And I’m not about to stick around and found out what that reason is! I have three other men and a little girl to take care of. Get us back to Base is my main priority.”

The four sat in silence for a long time. Finally, Kirby said, “I don’t like this at all.”

The Sarge looked at his timepiece. It was just past midnight local time. He and his men had been on the bounce for a good six hours without much of a stop. In fact, the last twenty minutes, or however long it had been, since they found Hank was the first long period of rest they had had... and they weren’t resting much.

“Take your blues,” The Sarge said. Men had been concentrating on the swamp, and on Hank, and on their situation at hand. So when The Sarge spoke they all gave a little jump. They immediately saw his insight and grabbed one of their five little blue pills that came in their rations pack at their waist. The pill would keep them awake and alert for hours to come. Just the one should be enough to get them all safely back to Base.

The Sarge raised his visor, popped the pill in his mouth, and took a swig from his canteen. “Let’s move out.” He commanded as he lowered his visor. “And no J.J.s.”

* * * * *

Diego switched over to his private channel with The Sarge. The Sarge did so in return. “Sarge, what the hell’s goin’ on?”

“We’re heading for base,” The Sarge said, not knowing what else to say.

“I mean... Hank... I-I just can’t shake that. What kinda sick bastard woulda done that to another human being?” Diego said.

“Pull it together, soldier.” The Sarge said.

“But what about what Hank said,” Diego’s question went unanswered. “Sarge?”

The Sarge looked ahead and could make out the silhouetted images of Arkin and Kirby. He then turned his attention to Diego. “Now listen here, Diego. You know Hank was more suspicious than the next guy. Whatever happened to him whatever he had to go through, maybe his mind just turned it into a horror he could truly understand. Maybe because whatever he went through was far worse than even those damned little stories he used to tell us! I don’t know! I don’t like this any bit more than you. But you’ve got to pull yourself together! I need you here and now, not back there! We need you!”

A sudden scream came over the Com Unit.

“Sarge! Sarge!” The ‘whoosh-whoosh-whoosh’ of Arkin’s Marduke accompanied his yells for The Sarge. Instinctively, The Sarge hit his J.J.s and within a fraction of a second he was next to Arkin. Diego floated in just behind them. The girl was kneeling in the waters up to her neck, holding onto Arkin’s leg for dear life. Arkin’s hand rested atop her head gently, as if to protect her.

“Arkin! Cut it!” At The Sarge’s command, Arkin stopped using his Marduke. The whole swamp went quiet. Even the usual hum of insects subsided in the moment of explosive terror.

“Where’s Kirby?”

“I-I...”

“Dammit, Arkin! Where’s Kirby?”

“They... they took him.” Arkin squeaked out. His head remained stationary, looking deep into the swamp.

“They who?” Diego piped up.

“I dunno.” Arkin said. “I just saw shadows... and then Kirby went under. But weird like. He went under with force. Like he had been pulled under.”

“He’s under the water?” The Sarge asked, scanning the area. Smoke from the exploded rockets rolled around lazily.

“Yeah, Sarge. I-I woulda used my PLR, but Kirby still had it. All I had was my Marduke!” Arkin’s voice rose a bit in terror. The Sarge knew what he was thinking of and wanted to get his mind off the idea that he might have killed his own buddy. “Keep an eye on the girl. Diego, stay with them. I’ll look for Kirby.”

“But, Sarge, you can’t go out there alone!” Diego protested.

“You heard me,” The Sarge said as he turned and walked forward. The Sarge had only taken a few steps when something came bubbling forth from under the water. It was Kirby floating atop something. The Sarge rushed forward with Diego joining him. Even Arkin grabbed the little girl and walked closer to get a better look.

“Don’t look, honey,” Arkin said. He shielded her eyes from the scene with a gloved hand.

As The Sarge approached, he saw the water get darker where the ground dropped out. Kirby was still a good two meters away. “Diego,” he called over the Com Unit. “Get a branch or something he can grab onto.”

The dark of night and the smoke of rockets kept them blinded to most things in the area. They could barely even see Kirby.

Kirby rose himself off of whatever it was he was using as a floatation device. His visor was open and muddy water poured from his mouth. He reached a hand out toward The Sarge as Diego came over with a branch.

“Sarge,” Kirby’s voice cracked with strain. “S-Sarge... run!”

Diego reached out with the branch, The Sarge helping him to steady himself. Kirby reached, but slipped down and across his float before he could grab branch. The Sarge lifted his own visor.

“Kirby? Kirby!”

No answer came. Kirby didn’t move. Diego reached out, straining, and hooked a part of the branch on the float, pulling it and Kirby closer to them. As Kirby got closer, they finally caught details that once again made Diego want to vomit. Kirby’s legs had gone missing. Only bloody stumps remained. He was also wrapped up in black ropes. But Diego maintained a clear head, mostly, and pulled Kirby in closer. When The Sarge could finally grab him, he did. He pulled Kirby onto the sunken ground where they stood.

Not waiting for Diego, The Sarge removed Kirby’s helmet, removed his own glove and pressed a finger to Kirby’s neck.

“No pulse,” The Sarge sighed.

“Sarge,” Diego said. “Look at this.”

The Sarge turned to look at Diego. He had pulled the thing Kirby had used as a float closer. It was half a torso. From the waist down the body was missing, mixing its remaining blood with the ugly waters of the swamp. What was left of the torso was housed in an all black Combat Suit, much like their own. But one thing stood out from the armor. Its helmet, while made of the light plasteel that their own helmets were made of, had been molded to look like a great horned skull. The Sarge sat staring at it for a long time.

“Is this your idea of superstition?” Diego demanded. “What the hell do you think this is?”

“Oh, no,” The Sarge turned and found Arkin had moved closer, still shielding the girl’s eyes, and was surveying the scene. “Oh, Sarge. I didn’t kill him did I? Sarge?”

“No, Arkin. No.” The Sarge stood up, put a hand on Arkin and push him gently backward. “Diego,” he called over his shoulder. “Check Kirby.”

Diego went to work, scanning the body of his fallen squad-mate.

“He drowned,” Diego announced. Great waves of relief flowed through Arkin. “By the looks of it, he was being pulled down under the water. His visor’s up and his lungs are full of water.” The three men looked again at the two bodies. The girl was becoming impatient in her blinded state.

“Well, Sarge? You never answered me. Why? Because now you know Hank was right!” Diego’s voice rose with each word.

“Cool it, Diego!” The Sarge barked back.

“Fuck this. I’m outta here!” Diego said. He slapped his visor closed and his J.J.s roared to life. With a leap and a bound and something resembling an exaggerated, almost superhero bounce Diego was floating away in a long, wide arc.

“Diego!” The Sarge yelled as his own visor and J.J.s followed in pursuit. The Sarge pushed his J.J.s hard, to their maximum thrust, and soon found himself floating down on top of Diego. He positioned himself, planting both feet into the back of Diego. Both men fell into the murky waters. They were soon a scrambling, swaying, thrashing

and slashing mess of mud and water and arms and legs as they fought each other. Diego caught hold of The Sarge's helmet, then his J.J.s. The two men went flying across the swamp, parallel to the waters. The Sarge's head and back slammed hard into a lōkwa. The J.J.s thrust harder and harder. The Sarge's helmet creaked threats of cracking from about his head.

Seeing this melee, Arkin sprang into action. He was soon near the two battling soldiers. He dropped the girl off, hit his J.J.s and peeled Arkin off of The Sarge.

"Dammit, Diego! What the hell is wrong with you?" Arkin yelled into his Com Unit.

The three knelt, puffing and panting in fatigue and with a horror of each other. Diego lifted his visor, and soon so did the other two.

"We... should be... getting outta here," Diego squeezed out between gulps of air.

"We will!" The Sarge's voice was hoarse.

Arkin stared at Diego, completely in awe of his actions. Diego looked at him in return without apology. His eyes, Arkin saw, soon shifted. Diego was looking behind him. Arkin remembered the little girl. He turned. Surrounding the girl were two more creatures, dark beasts of the night, dressed in black armor who for all the galaxy looked exactly like the soldier who had attacked and killed Kirby mere moments earlier, the one who came bobbing up like a floatation missing half his person. Surrounding the girl were two more Death Dealers.

One grabbed the girl, turned and hit his own J.J.s to make a massive bounce, landing far away. The one that remained reached for his belt, pulling forth a thing like a ray gun and hilt of a foul, demon-forged sword. With a pop and a click, a beam of blue energy sprung forth from it creating something like a hand-held bolt of lightning.

Arkin, mad with failure for guarding the girl, leapt towards the defiant Death Dealer. He grabbed the enemy soldier, twisting and turning his, fighting for a hold on his Combat Suit. But with every move he made, the Death Dealer had a counter. Finally, the Death Dealer saw an opportunity to strike. He sunk the blade of electro-energy deep between the ribs of Arkin. Arkin thought it odd that he could feel the havoc being wreaked upon his heart.

The Sarge was then on the Death Dealer, grabbing his arm, yanking hard to pull the wicked weapon from his squad-mate. This threw the Death Dealer off balance. Arkin quickly grabbed the horrific visage of the helmet and, with all his might, tugged hard, twisting and contorting the enemy's neck. An audible few cracks were made. The Death Dealer slumped away into a watery grave, his blade slipping from Arkin's chest.

Arkin, too, slipped. His eyes opened briefly to see Diego above him, working furiously to save him. Arkin knew Diego's abilities as a medical man were great, but the damage done to him was far greater. He grabbed at Diego weakly. Diego stopped to look at him.

"Save Arlia," came the bloody whisper from Arkin.

"Arlia?" Diego questioned.

Arkin smiled. "T-That's w-what... her name. The girl. Arlia. She told me."

"She spoke?" The Sarge asked.

"N-No... not... exactly. She thought it. She can think things into my mind."

"Telepathy?" The Sarge asked.

“That would explain why she couldn’t speak. Why speak when you didn’t have to?” Diego offered.

“But why didn’t she... think to any of the rest of us?” The Sarge asked.

“She h-hates soldiers. They destroyed her home... k-killed her parents.” With every word The Sarge could see Arkin weakening. “I told her I-I didn’t blame her. B-Both sides fight to save this planet and its people, crappy as it is. B-But w-what good is defending the ch-chickens... if you’re o-only gonna destroy the eggs?” Arkin’s eyes rolled in his head. “S-Sarge... they’re after her!” Not long after, Arkin joined his attacker in the watery grave. Both The Sarge and Diego bowed their heads for a fraction of a second, then Diego spoke.

“Let’s go.”

The Sarge gave him a questioning, almost wary look. Diego answered. “After seeing that,” he pointed to Arkin, “What else can I do?” The Sarge nodded and they were soon on the bounce, their J.J.s working at maximum speed.

It didn’t take long for them to catch sight of the lone Death Dealer holding the little mute girl Arlia. Unsure if they could catch up, The Sarge fired his PLR high above the Death Dealer’s head to let him know they were on his tail. Soon after the Death Dealer disappeared.

The Sarge and Diego floated to the swamp’s surface. They readied their PLRs.

“He couldn’t have just disappeared.” The Sarge said through his Com Unit.

“They did before,” Diego reminded.

They stalked the swamp.

“So they wanted the girl all along,” Diego said. “Why? Are they really researching telepathy and psychic combat like Hank said?”

“He’s gotta be around here somewhere,” is all The Sarge said.

A shadow of a movement broke the landscape ahead of them. They jumped, bringing their PLRs in on the thing, but it was too late. It had already disappeared. Diego cursed over the Com Unit. Another movement. Another jump. Another curse from Diego.

“Keep it together, Diego. And don’t shoot unless you can get a clear shot. We don’t wanna hit the girl.” The Sarge warned.

Another moving shadow, this time swifter than before, and the Death Dealer was atop Diego, electro-blade in hand. The Sarge spun his PLR around, thrust it deep into the foray of the struggling soldiers only to have it slapped away by the Death Dealer.

A pounding headache screamed through The Sarge. Diego gurgled out a cry of pain, grabbing for his temples. The Death Dealer followed in like. He dropped Diego, a scream flowing from out of his animal skull helmet. While Diego and The Sarge experienced pain, their enemy seemed to be experiencing a totally different agonizing horror. With a violent shake, blood sprayed from under the skullish helm. It then rolled away from the body, splashing into the swamp waters. The headless body lifted slightly, as if floating, and flung itself sideways into a deeper end of the waters. Where the body once was stood Arlia, the little mute girl.

Diego looked back at the helmet. It was empty of a head, save a mess of brains, flesh and blood. Diego gagged, lifted his visor and for the second time that night threw up.

The Sarge, too, looked at the disgusting mess of the helmet, then looked to the girl. He sighed. “So that’s why they wanted you.” He approached her carefully. She acted

scared, but let him take her into his arms anyway. He shouldered his PLR and then turned to Diego who was still hunched over. He laid a gentle gloved hand onto his back. “You okay?”

Diego took his time before answering. “No.”

The Sarge paused a moment, watching over Diego. When he straightened, Diego looked at The Sarge. “It’ll be a long time before I’m okay.”

The Sarge nodded. “Let’s get back to Base,” he said to Diego. “Let’s go home.”



Reading & Viewing List

I've little in the way of a theme for this issue to use as a guide for a reading and viewing list. For this issue I have compiled a list of books and movies that I have recently read and viewed. Perhaps you can glean some insight into a book or movie or two that may interest you.

- 1.) **The Stranger by Albert Camus** - Considered one of the foremost existential writers, Camus wrote The Stranger with simplicity. It contains absolutely no overtones of the pretentious of other philosophical writers. It's a short and simple read comprising only of about 120 pages. I highly suggest this to anyone looking for a quick read that could leave you thinking.
- 2) **Dune by Frank Herbert** - I mentioned this book in the first issue of If - E - Zine™ in the reading & viewing list there. The book is far, far, far more easily understood than the movie. Perhaps that's because Lynch has the capacity for pretentiousness and elitism. I've seen the movie about four times. One hundred pages into the book I already understood more of the story than I had after watching the film so many times. While the movie is beautiful and fulfilling on some level, it is not as accessible as the book in the area of comprehension. Actually, the book is damn good.
- 3.) **Exile and the Kingdom by Albert Camus** - Exile and the Kingdom was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. This is actually a collection of shorts written by Camus, but all with more or less the same theme. Each of the six stories deals with one character placed within a social institution -- be it marriage, religion or academia -- and how each simply desires for something better, yet accepts what it is that they have out of mere contentment. Another thing I noticed was that a few of the characters became very perturbed when new elements were introduced into their humble, contented lives that drove them to some sort of resentment or action. Interesting indeed.
- 4) **Lost on Venus by Edgar Rice Burroughs** - A pretty fantastic jungle adventure set on the planet Venus. It's actually preceded by another book that I have yet to read. But, thus far, this book is enjoyable and it's easy to get lost in.
- 5) **Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad** - Of all the books that I've ever read, I've never had so much trouble getting through one as I had with Conrad's Heart of Darkness. Largely, at first, it was do to the unnecessarily and overly profound vocabulary with which the man writes. I have problems with writers that do this, but that's a discussion for another time. Once I got past this detail, the rest of the book went by with some ease. But still, there was so much compacted into the mere three chapters of this book (~120 pages in all) that it was difficult at times to take it all in. Every sentence was important and meant something. Not a word was misused, although the phrase "heart of darkness" and it's many other various forms in which it appeared throughout this story was reminiscent

of Peter Jackson's Fellowship of the Ring movie in which the One Ring was portrayed in Frodo's hand about every fifteen minutes or so. Conrad beats you about the head with the phrase, and it makes me question the validity of his skill. Speaking of movies, Apocalypse Now! is a remake of this story. I have seen the movie too many times to mention. I must admit that while the element of the Vietnam War was added to contemporize the story, the movie stayed very true to the original material. Kudos to Copola, and to Conrad.

6.) **The Angry Red Planet** - For a long time I have heard about this film, not truly ever understanding why. Now I know. It is well-known amongst sci-fi enthusiasts most probably because it is a terribly bad film. But, if you can get beyond the bad acting and the fact that the one woman seems to have a fresh coat of lipstick each scene, the film has some redeeming values. Released in 1959, this is a classic '50s sci-fi flick packed full of monstrous aliens seemingly bent on the destruction of the ship of heroes. The cheese factor is abundant, which only adds to its charm most of the time, and the scenes outside of the ship on the surface of Mars are uniquely filmed. There's a slight punch at the end (which I'll keep secret, though don't expect TOO much) that shows the aliens as something perhaps more than vicious monsters. If anything, the twist at the end of the movie shows the change that was occurring in the late 1950s and early '60s in sci-fi literature of making aliens a bit more complex than flesh-eating monsters bent on human genocide.

7) **The Science Fiction Encyclopedia ed. by Peter Nicholls** - This is definitely an encyclopedia with alphabetical listings from Vance Aandahl and Edwin A. Abbott to Z.P.G. (Zero Population Growth) and Jerzy Zulawski. It covers everything you could possibly imagine relating to sci-fi including mentions and descriptions of writers, films, art and magazines. It reads most of the time like an historical text concerning the field of sci-fi literature. This is an indispensable resource for writers and fans of sci-fi. I've also found it a great resource for ideas, historical knowledge and inspiration.

8.) **Onibaba** - This Japanese film is an incredibly suspenseful horror flick. It's about two women farmers trying to survive in war-torn 16th-century Japan. The men of the area have all been recruited to fight in the war. One day, one of the men from the area returns claiming that he and the son of the older woman ran away from the fighting, but that her son was killed in the escape. A love interest develops between the man and the daughter-in-law which the mother forbids. A dramatic story unfolds including demons and all forms of sin. A definite must for those who like samurai films or tales of horror-fantasy.

7) **Conan the Invincible by Robert Jordan** - This was actually one of three books collected into one hardback edition called The Conan Chronicles. While Conan the Invincible is written with a classic flare like the original Conan was meant to be, the second book (Conan the Defender) was incredibly dry and boring. I was about halfway through the second book when I realized that not a damn thing had happened and that Conan was still running around a city somewhat aimlessly without a fucking clue as to what was going on. It was like a bad mystery with little sword & sorcery action expected from such fantasy. While Jordan's voice is strong through both volumes, the first is the

best. I never even touched the third after being bored to tears with the second one, though I have a hunch it's probably a good novel. The first, at least, is a very good read.

8) **Planet of the Apes by Pierre Boulle** - There are times when people will ask my opinion on things. And there are very few times, special moments, when I simply cannot put things into words. I instead find myself telling people "You have to experience it yourself." I'll venture to guess that we've all had those kind of moments. And both the movie as well as the original book written by Pierre Boulle called 'Planet of the Apes' are two of those things you simply just have to experience yourself. Both are very good and while the movie strays a bit from the book in some things, the overall ideas and themes remain the same. You'll even find some of the groundwork for a couple of the sequels for the movies within the pages of the book. It's an easy read, and an exciting read (though there is not nearly as much action as the movie has... but the tension and drama remain high). An incredible piece of science fiction.

9.) **Konga** - I've seen a lot of bad sci-fi flicks in my day, but this 1961 flick starring Michael Gough is one of the worst. Filled with melodrama more befitting an episode of Dark Shadows, the film's biggest problem is it's sloppy writing and mediocre acting. When you have dialogue like "What would you like for breakfast? Another side of murder!?" some sort of flag should go up. But, I love my cheesy sci-fi flicks just as much as I love my The Day the Earth Stood Stills and Invasion of the Body Snatchers movies. Hell, I take pride in being a Godzilla fan! Therein lies the saving grace of this film: it is cheesy almost to the point of entertaining... almost. I guess I just have a soft spot for a film that starts with a chimp as a pet that grows into a man in an ape suit and then grows into a man in an ape suit wandering a miniature city that he commences to destroy. The story is simple: a mad scientist develops a theory that carnivorous plants and humans are closely related. Developing a serum from plant samples, the scientist then injects it into his pet chimp. To test the new man-ape's loyalty and intelligence, the scientist sends it out on a killing spree. Well, it's not much of a spree. But you get the idea. If you like cheese... this might be worth your time. If you can't stand such films, stay very far away.

10.) **Outnumbering the Dead by Frederik Pohl** - This is the first work by Pohl I've ever read and it hit home. Hard. This novella is set in a future where human beings, thanks to a medical procedure done to the fetus, are immortals. But accidents happen and a few, a rare few, of the procedures are unsuccessful. The main character of this story, Rafiel, experienced such misfortune. He, unlike the other trillions of people in the galaxy, is mortal. Pohl eloquently and simply tells the tale of this man's final few weeks. With tact, tenderness and a scrutinizing eye, Pohl tells us of our own reality and of our own mortality. A beautiful piece of work.

