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FREE

IF - E - ZINE

Issue #12

**Celebrating
five years!
August 2003 -
August 2008**



Thanks for five wonderful years!

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“A Child of Wonder” Editorial

It is difficult for me to believe I’ve been publishing If – E – Zine™ for five years now. In those five years I’ve moved three times (including once across the country), watched two Olympics (just witnessed Michael Phelps win his seventh gold and heard he had already won his eighth), watched nearly every game of a World Cup, been best man in two weddings, congratulated three friends on becoming fathers, watched my country re-elect an idiot, went from paying \$2 to nearly \$5 for a gallon of gas, read more books and watched more movies than I care to admit, got glasses, caught the biggest bass of my life (17-½”; 6.5 lbs.), written a novel, been to two Wrestlemanias, tasted alcohol for the first time, enjoyed several fine cigars, went through treatment for Hepatitis C, hunted for the first time in my life, grew my first tomatoes, attended every event of a local Golden Gloves championship, mowed my first lawn, watched with the world as New Orleans was flooded, went to New Orleans, went to Disneyworld, reconnected old friends I’ve not seen in a decade or more, watched Sri Lanka nearly get washed away into the sea, said farewell to Arthur C. Clark and Kurt Vonnegut, watched the Giants upset the Pats (and cheered!), watched my Angels win the World Series without me, been rejected by countless publishers and magazines, went from lower-middle class to steeped in poverty and surrounded by neighborhood violence, made new friends, been scared to say what I really thought lest my country invade my home, rowed a boat, practiced yoga, watched Los Angeles burn (some more), learned to crochet, blogged, and ate and slept and done horribly boring domestic things since I published that first issue in August, 2003.

It sounds like I’ve done a lot in five years. I guess I have. But in many ways my life has been quite pedestrian. Through it all has been my little ezine.

If – E – Zine was started so I could practice my writing, to cut my teeth in hopes of making jagged edges into finely pointed fangs.

If – E – Zine was started so I could promote myself without the aide of an agent or PR specialist.

If – E – Zine was started so I could have fun working on it between larger projects, to break up the heaviness elsewhere in life. I think the idea of having fun, of fulfilling my inner geek, of celebrating the things I love speaks to any success the ezine has had these first five years. At the core of If – E – Zine is a fan of science fiction, of horror and of Halloween. A fan that loves the material and history of zines as well as all things speculative, all things filling the world outside human boundaries and the science that pushes at those boundaries, all things creepy and brimming with wonder.

Wait a minute... creepy? Science fiction? Indeed! For what greater horror-maker is there but science? Perhaps religion? Exorcists and mad scientists abound in horror stories because they bring with them the authority of their respective fields, fields that fill our lives to give us purpose and reason... and a horrifying tale backed by purpose and reason is far more plausible, far more horrifying.

No matter where I go, no matter what I do with my life I will always be that boy growing up in Long Beach, California; watching classic movies on the Family Film Festival hosted by Tom Hatten on KTLA; venturing into books with Gumby; entering the

Land of Frooze; enjoying a slice of chocolate cream pie at Millie's on Redondo; playing in the schoolyard of Horace Mann Elementary.

As I sit here writing this on a yellow legal pad while watching some horror movie on TV just the way I wrote my first story on a yellow legal pad at age eight while watching the annual Twilight Zone marathon, I know I am still that little boy.

If – E – Zine and I are children of wonder.

Thank you for five wonder-filled years.

I'll get to work on the next five years as soon as I can.

~ Charles Shaver, ed.



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“From Here to the Stars!”

Part 3

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The city was one huge steel valley after another. Hovercars and ground vehicles alike roared through the streets. The movements, the sounds, the alien planet’s sun glinting off tower after tower rising from the ground – the city appeared a living machine grumbling and shifting and teeming with activity.

In the center of the city rose the highest tower, a tower high enough to scratch the clouds. It was made of pure silver and shone as gold in the setting sun. Every citizen knew who lived in the tower. Every citizen avoided the tower.

In the highest floors of the tower, in rooms close enough to the clouds one could often not see out through windows without peering through some haze, sat the evil Ho the Horrible. His age ancient, his skin wrinkled and lightly tanned. His eyes hinted at an upward curve. His eyebrows began and ended on the far outer edges above his eyes. They were each full of black hair with a single white stripe and hung down to the upper cheeks, appearing as though two tiny skunk tails dangling from his brow. The skunk tail was repeated atop his head where both sides had been shaved to leave a black and white Mohawk. He was gaunt, ten pounds this side of emaciated. He was unnaturally tall, nearly seven feet. Across his forehead he wore a thin gold crown looking more like a metallic bandana. His thin frame was dressed in a purple robe with a high black collar that extended above his head. The robe was trimmed in bright reds made of glowing fiber-optic thread.

His hands were long with bony fingers. Each finger stretched farther with pale, impossibly long, slightly curved fingernails. Each pinky finger, however, had straight silver nails, each deadly thin.

At last, his feet, hidden beneath his robes, were dressed only in bamboo sandals.

“You have failed me,” he said. His voice was deeper than it would appear for such a thin man.

Before him stood a soldier dressed in black militaria.

With an outstretched pinky finger and a swift swoop of the arm, Ho the Horrible’s silvery nail sliced open the soldier’s throat. Blood gushed from the wound as the soldier fell, struggling for life at the feet of his liege. He stopped moving and was at last dead.

“Clean my throne room,” Ho the Horrible said to no one in particular. “And bring me a new robe. This filth has seen fit to spill his vitality upon me.”

Immediately a band of black-clad soldiers came to him. Without word they dragged away the dead soldier, cleaned up the blood, removed the robe gently from about Ho the Horrible’s frame, replacing it with a new, matching robe.

Cósmico entered the grand throne room made of gold and decorated with red, glowing tapestries and rugs. The room was filled with windows three-quarters the way round. The windows vaulted from ceiling to floor. On a clear day all of the city could be seen from here.

With Cósmico came a soldier dressed in heavy and brightly polished armor. Between them walked a struggling Adrienne Lo, her large breasts still exposed from her

fan dance and bouncing as they forced her approach. Cósmico and the soldier held her by the elbows.

“And who is this pretty?” Ho the Horrible was obviously aroused by the woman. His thin frame shivered with excitement as the last of his robe was placed upon him and the collar adjusted.

“This is the woman you requested, liege,” said the soldier in the silvery armor. “The woman you saw through your interdimensional crystal ball.”

“Yes, yes,” Ho the Horrible almost hissed. He stepped forward, cupped her breasts and felt her hips. He licked his lips greedily. Adrienne struggled to get away.

“She will bear me a child perfectly. Her hips are wide and her breasts...” he hesitated with excitement, “are ample.”

Ho the Horrible turned his gaze slightly to glare at Cósmico. “And who is *this*?”

“Liege,” spoke the soldier, “this is Cósmico, a warrior from the same world as the woman. He aided in her capture.”

Ho the Horrible considered Cósmico. He smiled toothily. “And Ho the Horrible thanks you. You have my respects, but you’ll also have a station in my army. How does Capo sound? Would that suit you?”

Cósmico, an alien in this world, did not understand but felt he should say whatever sounded the most agreeable with this strange liege Ho the Horrible. “I am honored.”

“Good,” Ho the Horrible smiled again. “And with it, of course, will come twelve parcels of land and six servants of your choosing. You may choose them from my army or the local populace, whichever pleases you.”

“Am I chattel to be bargained over?” Adrienne raged.

Ho the Horrible looked at her. “Of course, you are only a female. And you will bear me a fine heir.” He looked her up and down. “Perhaps... repeatedly.”

Adrienne struggled, pulling her arm free from Cósmico’s grip, and slapped Ho the Horrible across the face. More guards rushed near, producing odd weapons of all varieties, ready to defend their liege.

“Stop!” Ho the Horrible raised a hand to command them. He rubbed his cheek with his other hand. “How sweet,” he said as he glowered at Adrienne. “She loves me.”

Cósmico grabbed her arm again, squeezing it until she thought he might break it.

Ho the Horrible drew closer, so close his nose almost touched Adrienne’s. He breathed on her for a moment before speaking, “You will produce for me an heir, with or without your will. And while you may not enjoy every bit of what I’ll do to you... I certainly will.” He cackled.

Adrienne struggled to break free, but this time she remained detained.

* * * * *

Tad Manly, King Gato, Super Guapo and Storn were standing on the hilly region at the base of Mount Kaynor. They had made quick work of their travels by flying, but now, looking out at the shimmering city in the setting alien sun they felt torn between exhaustion from their journey and renewed strength at the hopes of finding Adrienne Lo.

“It is called Shazzar,” said Storn. “It is a city unlike any other city this world has ever seen. Its construction is still a mystery to most. It appeared practically over night.

Where Ho the Horrible attained the knowledge to do such things is unknown, but surely he dabbles in the occult.”

There was little difference between the city they now viewed and ones Tad Manly had visited before except in the glimmer and sheen of Shazzar. “It would appear,” he said, “as if the entire city were made of silver and gold.”

Super Guapo and King Gato nodded in agreement.

“We’ll camp here for the night,” said Storn. “We’ll search for your woman at first light.”

Tad Manly shook his head. “No, we must find Adrienne *now*.”

Though they felt Storn spoke wisdom, Super Guapo and King Gato both agreed with Tad.

“We don’t know what they’ll do to her,” added King Gato to Storn, now his loyal subject.

“Of course we do!” answered Storn. “Ho the Horrible takes women from time to time from all over and for one purpose alone: he desires an heir.”

“What?!” the three luchadors cried together.

Storn nodded. “He has yet to have a boy child. He has yet to produce any child. It is said he blames the women, though some argue with the many women he has taken to his chamber, it is *he* who cannot produce an heir.”

Enraged, Tad cried out, “We have to rescue her!” and without further notice flew off towards the city Shazzar.

With little choice, his companions followed.

* * * * *

Adrienne Lo struggled against her captors. They were more of the black-clad soldiers and they were dragging her into the bed chamber of Ho the Horrible. She was screaming, kicking, biting at every bit of their bodies every chance she got. One remarked they had never had such a lively captive.

The bedchamber was dressed in red and gold silks along the walls. It was oval in shape with bright white marble below the silks.

Adrienne broke free from one captor’s grip, her left arm free and she repeated punched the other holding her right wrist. He cried out in pain. More guards came to aid their fellows. She was once more held while she was shackled to an immense, round and silk swathed bed filled completely with down. Her arms were chained above her head and her legs, one of which freed itself from a guard’s grip momentarily and knocked him in the head, sending him reeling until another guard recaptured it, were chained spread apart, her femininity open and vulnerable to anyone who wished to defile her.

She screamed and screamed.

Ho the Horrible entered the room. Several of the guards gently disrobed him. Adrienne, shocked by what she saw, ceased her cries for a moment. When she saw Ho the Horrible’s long, thin manhood, however, and guessed at what he intended, she began screaming louder than before, cursing crude words and whipping around atop the bed in hopes of freeing herself.

Ho the Horrible climbed into the bed, his long limbs making him seem as a spider missing half its legs. He hovered over Adrienne who now held her breath, staring at him.

He lowered himself to kiss her. She craned her neck, bringing her face closer to his and viciously bit at his nose.

Blood poured from Ho the Horrible's face. The skin and thin meat of his nose had been broken down to the bone. He cried out in pain and Adrienne screamed in his face, "*Never!*", defying his desires.

Ho the Horrible broke away from the bed. Several members of the black guard, still in the bedchamber, ran to his side and held him. He called for his robe and he was dressed. Dr. Ecks was called for and he came with supplies to bandage his liege's wound.

Adrienne watched it all in relative silence and joy.

When Dr. Ecks had dressed Ho the Horrible's wound, the evil emperor pointed a scrawny finger at her and claimed, "I will torture you until my seed is minor incident to you."

Adrienne struggled once more in her shackles. She suddenly wished she had learned some of the wrestling moves that her friends had used on a nearly nightly basis so she could fight back.

* * * * *

"The tallest tower is his keep!" Storn cried as they flew.

"How do we get in?" Tad asked.

Storn only shook his head, having never had the chance to see the tower so close let alone discover an entrance.

Tad Manly flew higher, suspecting the higher levels of the tower may be the evil despot's main home.

The tower glittered gold in the last bits of daylight. Tad Manly, King Gato, Super Guapo and Storn hovered a moment, peering into the windows of Ho the Horrible's elaborate throne room.

"If only we had a sledgehammer," said King Gato.

Angry, fearful, Tad Manly did not wait. He flew as fast as he could, shoulder first, into the glass of the tower, shattering it. Glass sprayed inward, some of it falling far to the streets below. Much of it embedded itself in Tad's shoulder, chest and back. Blood trickled from all over his body. He huffed, hovering gently inside the throne room, a headache throbbing in his temples.

His three companions followed him into the throne room.

Black guards scrambled throughout the throne room, grabbing up weapons, mostly medieval but a few firearms. They charged the intruders.

Tad Manly flew at the nearest one. He grabbed the black guard by the arm and twisted his torso, executing a perfect hip toss and sending the enemy crashing to the ground.

Another guard came at King Gato brandishing a heavy halberd. Storn, who had landed and was resting his wings, stepped in front of what he thought was his savior Liro and challenged the offending guard. They exchanged blows and blocks, halberd versus spear, until Storn could at last parry the halberd below its blade and slide his spear along its pole, sinking the head into the enemy's chest. The guard crumpled to the floor.

King Gato watched in horror. He had never witnessed the death of another man and he was horrified by the extremity of the fights now taking place.

Super Guapo grabbed a third charging guard, grabbing him about the chest and hooking his leg with an arm. Super Guapo bent his back and fell, releasing the guard halfway through the fall and damaging him with a release-fisherman's suplex.

Ho the Horrible stormed from his joining bedchamber, angry with Adrienne Lo and disturbed further by the raucous fight inside his throne room. When he laid eyes upon the intruders, he screamed for more guards. The throne room doors burst wide, black guard pouring in. One ran to Ho the Horrible's side, handing him a shield bedecked with etched runes and a thin, long sword with a bright red tassel at the end of its hilt. He entered the fray, swinging and slicing widely with the sword first at Storn.

"How dare you offend my throne room!" screamed the evil emperor. "I'll have your heads!" He swung the sword wide. Storn brought up his spear, but was too late. Though Ho the Horrible's thin frame appeared to lack strength, Storn found he held incredible wiry swiftness. The blade of the sword bit deeply into Storn's face, dragging down from the left side over his forehead, over his eye and slicing open part of his cheek.

Storn roared in pain and mostly fury. The roar rumbled through the throne room and made all within slow their fight to peer at the wounded chogin.

King Gato, seeing his companion harmed, flew forward in tackling spear, knocking Ho the Horrible to the floor and sending his shield and sword flying from his hands. He straddled the emperor and started raining fists down on his face, targeting his bandaged nose. Ho the Horrible struggled, his bandage coming loose and his nose bleeding again. He reached with his pinkies extended and dug them deep into King Gato's flailing forearms.

King Gato screamed in pain as thin, sharp wounds opened up on his arms. The cuts were so thin, so deep the pain was immense. He fell from his mounted position to the floor beside Ho the Horrible.

Ho the Horrible stood. He screeched, "Kill them!"

Storn ran to King Gato's side, defending and fighting over them.

Super Guapo grabbed a single black guard charging at him and used the guard's own forward moment, tripping him, to throw him into the path of two more guards, knocking them down.

Cósmico ran into the room. When he saw the slightly altered formes of Tad Manly, Super Guapo and King Gato, he screamed with rage. He charged at Tad Manly, grabbing him from behind and throwing him backwards in a release snap suplex.

Tad Manly crashed to the floor. He coughed as air exited his lungs.

Cósmico ran up to him and kicked him in the head.

Tad's mind and orientation was reeling, but he saw a second kick coming and he grabbed the foot, pulling on the leg and causing Cósmico to fall.

They both stood at the same time and faced each other.

"Tad Manly! How did you get here?"

"We followed you through that ball of energy! Where's Adrienne?"

"She's the emperor's now! He's going to make an heir with her!"

"Why would you do this? Why would you deliver her to such a... a... *horrible* man!"

"Because he promised me the things we can only imagine in our world. Here I can truly be a king. In our world I have to mock fight with filth like you and watch you get the most beautiful girl around. But here... her I can wield power with soldiers and land of

my own. And,” Cósmico’s voice steered towards lust and devilry, “once Ho the Horrible is through with Adrienne, she can be *mine!*”

“Never!” Tad cried.

They charged at one another.

Cósmico punched Tad Manly in the shoulder, kneed him in the groin, grabbed him by the waist as he bent low and powerbombed him onto the hard floor of the throe room.

As Cósmico approached to further his assault, laughing the whole time at Tad Manly, Tad swept his legs and Cósmico fell to the floor.

They were soon both up again and fighting.

Tad Manly punched Cósmico in the stomach. When Cósmico bent over in pain, Tad grabbed him about the head and jumped, falling backwards to deliver a crushing DDT, knocking Cósmico out.

Ho the Horrible gathered up his shield and sword once more.

In the joining bedchamber, its doors still open, Adrienne Lo screamed.

Once more the fight slowed as the heroes turned to look, recognizing the scream as Adrienne’s.

Tad Manly fought through three more guards, making his way slowly to the bedchamber.

Seeing the odd invader heading for the bedchamber, Ho the Horrible followed.

Dr. Ecks, still inside the bedchamber and also seeing Tad Manly’s approach, attempted to close the doors.

Tad Manly lowered his shoulder and ram through. “You’ll not escape me this time, you doctor of doom!” Once inside the bedchamber, Tad grabbed Dr. Ecks, placed him upon his shoulders and spun him, releasing the evil doctor to go spinning, crashing onto the floor in an airplane spin.

Tad saw Adrienne shackled to the large, round bed. “Adrienne!” he cried out.

She looked up, recognizing the altered yet still the same outfit of Tad Manly.

“Tad! Help!”

He fought through two more guards to get to her side. He bent low, removing his helmet that once was his mascara and kissed her full on the lips. “I love you, Adrienne.”

“And I love you, too,” she rushed. “But get me out of here!”

He nodded and examined the shackles. “I need keys.”

“I have them,” Ho the Horrible’s voice cracked behind him. Tad stood and peered at the emperor.

“Give them here, Ho.”

Ho the Horrible shook his head gently. “She’s mine now. Consider her a spoil of our little war that you’ve brought to my keep here.”

“You evil, ugly sonuvabitch!” Tad cried.

“Hence my name... Ho the *Horrible*.” He cackled with laughter.

“Well, I’m Tad Manly and I’m about to kick your ass!”

Tad replaced his helmet.

The two men squared off.

Tad attacked first. He ran and punched. Ho the Horrible easily dodged it, almost succeeding in tripping Tad. But Tad caught his footing and turned to throw another

punch. This time he connected, slipping his fist around the shield and punched Ho the Horrible's ribs.

The emperor shrieked. He batted Tad away with the shield and brought the sword around, high overhead, slashing at the air before Tad.

Tad backed away.

Ho the Horrible stabbed at him.

Tad stepped sideways, grabbing Ho the Horrible's wrist and pulling. As the evil emperor stumbled forward, Tad lifted his knee, catching a bit of the shield, but most of the force of the blow slammed into Ho the Horrible's stomach.

The emperor let out a large "*Oof!*" sound and bent over.

King Gato, Super Guapo and Storn had fought their way towards the entrance of the bedchamber. Super Guapo, in a moment of respite, turned to look at Tad.

Tad cried out, "Tag team!"

Super Guapo nodded.

Tad wrapped his arm across the chest of the emperor, grabbing his shoulder as though about to deliver a sideslam. Instead of a sideslam, however, Tad lifted Ho the Horrible into the air and brought his down on his knee in a modified backbreaker.

Ho the Horrible cried out in pain, once more dropping his shield and sword to the floor.

Tad held the emperor suspended across his knee.

Super Guapo ran, jumping. He brought a leg down, just in front of Tad Manly so he had to turn his head sideways so as not to be hit, and delivered a leg drop across the face of the teetering emperor. The force of the legdrop sent the emperor reeling to the floor.

Storn grabbed up the evil emperor's sword and ran to Adrienne's side. Tad and Super Guapo had to defend the room at the entrance with King Gato.

With a swift, exacting cut, Storn cut through the chains binding Adrienne to the bed. She screamed as she was released, unsure of the beastly looking Storn. Seeing this, he said, "I am a friend. I came with Liro and Tad."

Adrienne didn't know who Liro was, but if this lion-man was with Tad, she was sure he was a friend.

She grabbed a sheet from the bed, the shackles' cuffs still about her wrists and ankles, and wrapped herself up in it as a dress. She then ran to her friends' sides. "We have to go," she said.

They fought their way back towards the broken window. Tad grabbed Adrienne about the waist. "Hold tight, baby!" he said.

She wrapped her arms around him. "How are we getting out of here?"

He chuckled and launched himself into the air, feeling at the streamers about his biceps with his mind, and flew away from the tower. King Gato, Super Guapo and Storn followed after him.

Adrienne screamed as she looked down into the streets of the city made hazy with distance.

"It's okay," Tad assured. "We can fly now."

Adrienne looked at him, at the other three flying nearby. "What have you guys become?" she asked.

Tad chuckled again. "Something like heroes, I think."

King Gato and Super Guapo flew nearing, asking how she was.

"I'm fine guys, but *where are we?*"

"Somewhere beyond the stars," King Gato said, remembering their odd travel through the crackling ball of energy where they passed through a field of stars.

She shook her head. "How do we get back home?"

Super Guapo shook his head. "We're not quite that far ahead in our thinking. We've been concentrating on getting you back so then we could all go home."

"And I think we should help Storn and his people first," said King Gato. "He did, after all, help us."

The others silently considered this, but gave no reply one way or another.

Adrienne said, "Well, if we're going to spend any more time here, I think I'll need to learn some moves from you guys."

* * * * *

High in the metallic tower of Ho The Horrible, the emperor was helped to his feet. Dr. Ecks and Cósmico joined him at his side as they peered out the shattered window. As the emperor brushed himself off, he asked, "Who were those invaders that stole my heir from me?"

Cósmico replied, "The one in the red, white and blue is Tad Manly, the girl's former love interest."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

"A friend? No. An enemy."

"So when you brought the girl here, you also brought your enemy," Ho the Horrible said accusingly.

Cósmico was silent at this.

Looking at the broken glass, the emperor said, "It would appear we will not tougher defenses, Dr. Ecks.

"Cósmico, you are striped of your land and privileges until the girl is returned to me. You will, however, remain as Capo in my army."

Cósmico said nothing, feeling dejected and hateful of Tad Manly.

"Dr. Ecks," continued the emperor, "seeing the strengths of our new foes, you'll need to make a new suit of armor for Cósmico and, perhaps, myself. Something to match or out-do those of this Tad Manly and his companions."

Ho the Horrible advanced to the edge of the window, looking down at the city far below. He looked out in the direction Tad and his friend had flown, Adrienne Lo in his arms. He spoke softly, "Curse you, Tad Manly... if only you were a tad less manly I could defeat you."

The End

I hope you enjoyed the third and final act of Tad Manly's grand adventures in space!



“Captain Destiny & the Creature from Atrius-99”

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Captain Destiny ran through the thick jungles, Atagar ranging the way ahead of him and yelling encouragement to flee. Behind them came an army of giant gorillas twice the size of any man. Their heavy coats of hair were long, wooly, and almost all black, though some were different shades of deep brown or umber. Their faces were bare, but where it lacked hair the skin had been spattered, almost crudely painted white with monkey paws. Some, very few, had faces painted almost to resemble odd skulls. So rudimentary was the face paint of these few elites that it seemed to Captain Destiny and his good crewman Atagar to be close coincidence, a trick of their reflective, interpretive minds yet exacting enough to make them wonder at the possible intelligence it would take for an oversized, angry ape to paint themselves with a skull. From the mouths of each gorilla sprung forth incredible lower incisors, like lower jaw sabertooths.

It wasn't merely the chase that propelled them forward, but the long spears the gorillas carried. Again, Captain Destiny wondered.

The giant gorillas hooted and grunted behind them as they ran. Their sounds were guttural, short, quipped, controlled.

“Atagar!” Captain Destiny called as they broke from the jungle into the massive clearing they had run through to escape from the giant T-Rex creature three days ago. He caught up with his crewman and said, “Listen to their grunts! They're talking!”

Atagar's eyes narrowed. The wind he was making with his run whipped his light fur about his face. His laser carbine was slipping in his sweaty hand. “So what?” he asked.

“They're talking and those spears that they have flint heads!”

Atagar tried to gulp air deeply so as to ask “So what?” again, but he was too busy running.

“Dammit, man! They're intelligent!”

Atagar finally found strength to catch some air into his lungs and said sarcastically, “Great, then that means they'll know several recipes on how to properly cook us rather than eating our flesh raw from the bone!”

Captain Destiny punched Atagar swiftly, exactly in the temple. Atagar stumbled, looking up with disdain and shock and horror and slowing his pace. They both turned to look at the gorillas now skirting the edge of the clearing rather than chasing straight after them. Atagar forgot the blow he had just taken and asked, “What are they doing? Why aren't they coming after us?”

The captain shook his head. “They're still chasing us,” he assured. “They're coming around the edge of the jungle, maybe in hopes of cutting us off before we reenter the thicker parts. It's as if they don't want to run across this open plain. But now's not the time to ask.” He tugged on Atagar's elbow and they ran off again. “And don't you ever talk to me like that again,” Captain Destiny demanded.

Atagar gave no reply.

They broke through the thick jungle once again, the gorillas trailing far behind. The cries of their pursuers grew louder, agitated and wailing as the two men got away.

* * * * *

“We have to go back,” said Captain Destiny.

Atagar shook his head. “Hit me all you want, I’m not about to get chased by those damn apes again.”

Captain Destiny and his two surviving crewmembers, Nal the fourteen foot tall T’Chaka and Atagar the feral cat-like Calliopian, sat around a campfire later that night near their flying saucer. A small wind kept them cool. Few stars peaked through the heavy jungle ceiling at them. Near Atagar sat a triceratops-like creature. Just three days old, the creature was already eating every plant in sight. The horns on its head, they observed, appeared hollow and each ended with a hole. The creature was quickly sprouting bony spikes all over its back.

Nal looked at his captain and his shipmate curiously. He asked, “What did you two find out there?”

“Another clearing, this one smaller, and in that clearing a great obelisk stretching maybe a hundred feet high with maybe a dozen smaller ones all around it,” Captain Destiny explained.

“That would mean some intelligence exists here,” Nal opined.

Captain Destiny nodded. “And you know one of those small obelisks will fetch a good bonus for us.”

Nal nodded, “We’ve already been promised so little for this trip.” It was another jab at the captain’s low bid to make this trip for their employer, a trip to discover the secrets of this new planets, to scout out its hospitable nature for possible colonization. Captain Destiny glowered at his first mate. “There are more ships than mine that explores the galaxy, more ships than mine you could use to escape your murderous past,” he retorted.

“Murderous?” Atagar asked, petting the triceratops.

This time it was Nal that glowered. “I’m wanted for murder,” he confessed. When Atagar’s back straightened and his eyes grew wide, he added, “We were fighting a fair and legal fight. He knew the possibilities as much as anyone. Their hunt for me is unjust.”

“Was it an arena fight?” Atagar asked, having remembered the romantic tales of the arenas on planets far from his home.

Nal sighed. “Sort of. It was an underground arena. They’ve put a price on my head for the man’s death to make an example of me and all those who ran the racket; to show they don’t tolerate unsanctioned fights. Apparently it’s fine with them to have arena killings under government sanction as long as they get a chance to broadcast it and make money off it. But let a guy try to make money on his own doing the same thing and you’re a murderer, a villain.”

“The obelisk,” Captain Destiny reminded. He had brought up Nal’s past, perhaps inappropriately, so he would change the subject of their conversation back to their mission. But, he thought, he was the captain and he had no obligation to apologize.

“We already have Runt!”

Captain Destiny and Nal both cocked their heads at Atagar.

“Runt?” Nal asked.

Atagar nodded slowly, ashamedly. He shrugged. "I named him Runt." He pet the triceratops creature.

"You named our prize?" the captain asked.

Atagar nodded again. "We can't just keep calling him 'the creature from Atrius-99', can we?"

The captain shook his head in disbelief.

"Runt?" Nal asked again. "Why Runt? Why not Spot or Douch or Lucky? Why Runt?"

Atagar shrugged again. "I figured he was going to be eaten last because all his bigger nest-mates had born earlier. He was the last. And he's the smallest of all of us."

"He's the smallest for now," Nal said. "We don't know how big he'll get."

"We may have to ditch him out when we return if he starts growing faster," the captain said.

"You'd just flush him out into space?" Atagar asked.

"If we didn't have room for him, yeah."

Atagar looked at Runt, petting and pointing in scolding fashion at him. "Then you can't get top big, you hear me?"

Captain Destiny and Nal laughed with Atagar.

Nal nodded, "If we have to rid ourselves of this creature... of Runt, then getting one of these obelisks sounds like a good idea. At least we know it'll take up the same amount of room for the whole trip."

"And won't eat all our food," the captain added.

"But, we're still taking him, right?" Atagar asked.

The captain thought a moment. "Yeah. If our employers don't want him, we can always sell him to a zoo or one of those rich types that love to keep exotic animals." After a moment's thought, he turned to Nal, "Sine you're now done with repairing the ship, you'll have to go with us to get the obelisk. I think Atagar and I would have a tough time carrying one. You, on the other hand, could possibly carry one by yourself."

"How large are they?"

"Five maybe six feet tall."

"Good, that'll give me a chance to stay here with Runt," Atagar said.

"You'll be going, too," said the captain.

"We're going to leave Runt here all alone?"

"While Nal's carrying the obelisk he'll need the two of us to cover him with the laser carbines. I'm sure we can trust the little creature. I doubt he'll want to steal anything from the ship."

* * * * *

Captain Destiny ranged ahead of his first mate Nal and crewmember Atagar. A tropical rain started nearly an hour ago when they first set out towards the obelisks the captain and Atagar had seen earlier that day. Thunder rolled in the distance, but when they came to the clearing and checked the skies they could see the edge of the storm was skirting their location, they would be missed by the brunt of the gray sky-beast.

The three men traveled slowly, perhaps overly cautiously, on foot. Their eyes darted with every step they took, watching for odd animals and possible predators. The

world, however, seemed largely quiet as everything listened to the slow moving storm. Only the rare buzz of a gigantic insect came to them.

They made it across the open field and entered the other side of the jungle. A small roar stalled their progress for a few minutes as they hid, scanning surrounding area. After several more rumbles of thunder they stood up and followed the previous trail Atagar had blazed. All was quiet. Eerily quiet.

When at last they came to another clearing, Nal saw what they had spoken of. It was a giant obelisk carved completely from a single stone. Upon its face danced a collection of mad runic carving. Around it, surrounding it as a fey ring, were a dozen smaller obelisks of similar make and design.

“What is this place?” Nal asked.

“Obviously a place of worship of some kind. I think the apes made this. We ran into them not far from here.”

Nal nodded.

“Nal, do you think you can carry one of those smaller obelisks?”

Nal considered this. He nodded. “I should be able to, depending on the density and weight, but something that size generally gives me few problems.”

“Good,” said the captain. “You’ll carry one and we’ll cover you.”

“Right.”

They advanced cautiously. Nal tested the weight of the nearest obelisk. It was heavy, but he was able to carry it. It was sunk deep into a hole and was taller than originally imagined, but Nal found he could still carry the thing.

“Let’s go,” said the captain once Nal had it lifted over his shoulders, carrying it as though crucified to the stone.

They slipped back into the jungle only to hear the wild cries of angry apes.

“Run!” cried the captain.

His crew did as they were told, Atagar once more leading the charge, Nal behind him and the captain running farthest behind. Captain Destiny looked over his shoulder and found a small army of the painted gorillas chasing after them. Spears were chucked at them, but they all missed or hit trees in the thick jungle.

The three burst out onto the open plain.

Once more the gorillas refused to follow directly, cutting a path around the edge of the jungle in hopes of heading them off. This time, however, they were making progress to that end since Nal was so encumbered.

“We might have to drop it!” suggested Atagar, yelling back at Nal and his captain.

“No!” cried the captain. “We’ll fight them before we leave this behind again!”

But they made their way into the brush before the gorillas got to them. This time, however, the gorillas were so close they could easily follow them into the jungle and not lose them.

“Nal!” Captain Destiny cried. “Are you certain the ship is ready for flight?”

Nal grunted, heaving with breath and labor. He struggled to cry out, “Yes!”

Captain Destiny cried out his orders so both could hear. “Then board the ship once we get to it and we’ll take off right now!”

They kept running, the gorillas further gaining ground.

When at last they neared the ship, they found the area around it covered in something like a spider’s webbing. Atagar stopped short from touching it.

“What in space is this?” Captain Destiny approached, Nal panting at his side with the obelisk still shouldered.

“I-I don’t know,” Atagar said.

“Don’t touch it,” warned the captain.

They heard a low squeak, as if in pleasure, and looked to see Runt spitting, almost sneezing but with sheer joy, a goopy substance shooting from his three horns. The goop stuck to a tree and dried almost instantly into the webbing. The three watched him in horror.

“What is he doing?” asked Captain Destiny.

The other two shook their heads, unknowing.

Gorilla cries made them jump. Runt turned toward them and almost smiled, bounding playfully towards them through a labyrinth of the webbing. They followed him deep into the complex the triceratops-like creature had made. They stood by the ship.

“It’s like he’s making a cocoon,” said Atagar.

Nal placed the obelisk inside the ship just as the gorillas descended upon them. Many of the gorillas, propelled forward by anger, found themselves caught in the sticky webbing. Others climbed trees to make their way over the webbing, slowing their attack somewhat.

“Get inside!” Captain Destiny commanded.

Atagar herded Runt into the ship as Nal started up the flying saucer.

Captain Destiny shouldered his laser carbine and fired a few times, hitting two of the advancing gorillas and sending them falling into the webbing where they stuck.

He entered the ship and sealed it.

“Let’s get going,” he told Nal.

The three of them sat in the cockpit, the captain and Nal piloting the ship. Atagar sat with Runt, watching the world on the view-screens drop away beneath them, gorilla spears bouncing off the spinning shell of the Quequeg.

“I think we’re safe,” Nal said once they reached a decent height.

“Let’s scan the surface a last time before we leave,” said the captain.

As they flew over the nearby clearing they had come to know so well, the clearing the gorillas had refused to cross, their mouths all dropped open. On the view-screens they saw giant etchings so large they had not been able to see them at ground level, etchings they had not seen while crash-landing the Quequeg days before, etchings of gorillas gathered around an obelisk as though worshipping it.

“It would seem my theory of their intelligence was right,” said Captain Destiny.

“It’s amazing,” Atagar marveled.

“I think,” added the captain, “we’ll have to return here soon.”

This last statement hung in the silence between them. Runt broke the silence with a playful toot from his little hollow horns. They each chuckled lightly at the small creature from Atrius-99.

“Nal,” said Captain Destiny, “Take it out and set a course for home.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The End

What a spectacular end to Captain Destiny’s first tale! I hope you enjoyed it!



“Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra”

PART 3

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Creaking doors echoed throughout the dank dungeon as Lizarus opened the cell keeping Zalam captive.

Zalam thought of charging his captors, but feared being caught in the small frame of the door. He instead stepped imperceptibly backwards, waiting for his captors to come to him to catch *them* in the door’s frame.

The golton was nearly as tall as the nine-foot Zalam. Came one of the massive, mindless goltons intent on grabbing the derderoid warrior. Zalam contracted his insect-like legs and jumped. He grappled with the golton, using leverage and his hip to send the stony thing thudding to the floor of the cell. Alarmed, Lizarus commanded the other golton to enter the cell and attack.

Zalam punched this second golton, cracking two knuckles against the thing’s chest. The golton gave no way, showing no effects of the punch.

The first golton, heavy and wide and cumbersome, struggled to stand behind Zalam.

The second golton grabbed at Zalam, pushing him backwards, causing him to fall on the floor.

Next came Lizarus. “Grab him, you doltsss!” he commanded.

Zalam flailed about in hopes of making his capture impossible, but in the end was subdued so strongly by the stone hands of the goltons that his two main arms almost broke.

* * * * *

Falstillis ran to the predetermined spot in time to see Aeris-Ha penetrate his great-grandfather’s magics with his own. He came running into the lost city of Adul-Ra, a trail of snow falling from his boots behind him.

“What is it?” Aeris asked, seeing the urgency on Falstillis’ face and letting the magics return the city to safety and warmth.

“The interloper, he is a warrior and he must be made a friend and used to help the overthrow, but I fear his safety as we speak. We must carry out matters immediately!”

“Did your god tell you this?” asked Aeris.

“That exactly. And once more: when the rebellion is complete, we must kill this gray warrior.”

Aeris nodded. “I’ll prepare the forces. We can attack perhaps in an hour.”

“Good,” said Falstillis. “I will make my way to the castle, befriend this warrior and aide your forces from within Rasiki-Ha’s walls however I can.”

“I trust you will,” Aeris said.

The two conspirators parted company.

* * * * *

Lizarus stoked the fires until the branding irons glowed with heat. He pulled one forth, more a spear than a brand with a long pointed tip. He approached Zalam, tied and bound to a slab of stone. The lizaran's tongue flicked joyously, tasting the heat of the iron on the air.

"I've made all the ironsss I'll ussse on you," explained Lizarus with some pride. "Each hasss itsss own ssspecial ussse. Enjoy what'sss to come. It may be the lassst thing you ever feel."

He pressed the hot iron to Zalam's chest. The pointed tip pierced skin, searing muscle and cauterizing the wound at once. The pain was immediately intense, then immediately numb at the spot where the iron entered flesh. The muscle all around the forming, swelling wound throbbed in agony, rippling and twitching with pain. The derderoid cried out in horror, violently shaking in the hope of breaking free, but the binds held.

Lizarus laughed, flicking his tongue and tasting the sweet, salty sweat of his captive fill the air.

* * * * *

Zalam's screams echoed throughout the palace of Rasiki-Ha. The ancient sorcerer's dry face cracked as he smiled thinly at the sound. He addressed Olmec, who was standing nearby, "Soon we will know all we need to know about this interloper."

Olmec nodded, cringing at the sound of another awful scream. How he hated the wicked ways of Rasiki-Ha! He said, "Lizarus is a master at these matters."

"Indeed," wheezed the ancient one.

Another scream came to them and Olmec's emerald eyes lowered at the sound. He thought of Zalam's words, his claim that the golems and lizarans were still at war and had always been despite Rasiki-Ha's claim and promise otherwise.

With yet another long, woeful wail Olmec's heart sank and he decided the interloper, though a stranger, could easily be trusted over the dreadful Rasiki-Ha and the sadism of Lizarus. He asked to be excused and was granted to go about his way, claiming he wanted to rest within his bedchamber. Instead, Olmec left the throne room and headed for the armory.

The armory, he knew, was rarely highly defended – indeed if at all. He made his way to its doors. It was unguarded as he had expected and he was able to enter without notice... or so he thought.

* * * * *

Rasiki-Ha glowered into the crystal ball. He had summoned the thing to his side as soon as Olmec had left the throne room. Now he watched the golem enter the armory from a distance and, with the flick of a bony old finger, sent a golton after Olmec to foil any plans he may be formulating.

* * * * *

Falstillis was able to gain entrance into the palace through a servant's door. He navigated the labyrinthine halls until he found what he thought may be the bedchamber of his friend Lizarus. Though the chamber was filled with a few items Falstillis could recognize as the lizaran's, Lizarus himself was not there.

A scream, a long horrible scream echoed down the hallway outside the bedchamber. Falstillis' skin crawled in horror.

"No," he whispered, knowing what the scream could mean having heard Lizarus brag many a night over many a pint of ale about his torturous deeds within the dungeon. He feared Lizarus may kill the intruder. He feared failing his god, Norikahn. He feared not being able to find the dungeon in time. He feared the failure of the oncoming rebellion.

Scream after scream lead him the way toward the dungeon.

* * * * *

Lizarus placed a large oar-shaped piece of iron into the fire and instructed a golton to work the bellows below the fire. He then went to Zalam's side. The lizaran's tongue flicked out, almost touching the derderoid's gray face. "He'sss passsssed out," Lizarus said. He removed heavy leather gloves from his scaly hands and placed them on the table next to Zalam.

"Golton, bring me some water," he said as he sat on a small wooden stool.

The golton brought a bucket of water and handed it to Lizarus. The lizaran drank from it deeply and rested, catching his breath. "There'sss been quite a bit of excitement. I'm afraid I've let mattersss get away from me. I don't ussually allow them thingss to get thiss way," he explained, though he knew the mindless golton would not understand.

Lizarus rested a bit, then produced a small bit of tightly wrapped paper from his belt, broke it and waved the powder into the face of the unconscious Zalam.

The powder, a potent mixture of things made by Olmec, brought Zalam back into the waking world.

Lizarus leaned over the derderoid as he tried to shake free again.

"You've a lot of fight in you," said Lizarus. "That'sss fine. I can be patient."

Lizarus stopped the golton from working the bellows, pulled on his leather gloves, pulled the oar-shaped iron free from the burning coals. It was now orange- and white-hot. Lizarus returned to Zalam's side. He smiled his reptilian smile.

Zalam's wide, black eyes grew wider at the sight of this new iron and Lizarus knew the derderoid warrior was finally afraid.

* * * * *

Olmec heard the scuffle and scrape of the golton's feet as it entered into the armory behind him. It had taken him quite a bit of time to find the weapon Zalam had had with him when he was discovered nearly frozen in the snows outside of Adul-Ra. Olmec quickly grabbed the derderoid's tri-bladed sword that had been unceremoniously thrown into a pile of weapons in a far corner. The armory was filled and disorganized this way. Without enemies, Rasiki-Ha's men found no need to keep an orderly collection of arms.

And most of Rasiki-Ha's loyal servants were the mindless goltons much like the one coming after Olmec. As such, the goltons knew nothing of order unless specifically instructed. It was likely that whenever the ancient wizard came into possession of a new weapon he simply told one of his goltons to "throw it in the armory", and it looked as though they did.

Olmec picked up the sword, was surprised that it was lighter in weight than its immense size appeared, and turned to find the golton rushing at him with a widely arcing fist.

Without thought, Olmec raised the sword to protect himself. The weight of the golton's fist slammed into the three blades. The blades bit, slicing a small way through the attacker's stony wrist. Olmec was nearly knocked off his feet from the crashing blow, bending his knees beneath the weight. He turned the blades, pulling the fist sideways, unbalancing the golton and sending him crashing to the floor.

Before the giant stoneman could clumsily stand again, Olmec ran out the armory's door, heading for the dungeon.

* * * * *

Lizarus lifted a small trident out of the dungeon's fires. Its three points glowed with intense heat. He approached Zalam.

Falstillis came rushing into the dungeon. He had followed the screams and they had lead hi right to the lizaran's side.

"How came you to be here?" Lizarus hissed with some anger and fear.

"The screams. I followed the screams. They came be heard throughout the palace," Falstillis panted.

"Rassiki-Ha has ssspiess everywhere. He'll know you've come and will want to know your purposse."

"Then I will tell him," Falstillis said. "Because it happens now. As we speak Aeris-Ha, his own great-grandson, gathers the rebel army and marches them onto the palace."

Joy and fear fought a war upon the face of Lizarus. At last he allowed a wicked smile. "Good," was all he could say.

"And once more, we need this creature you now torture."

"What'sss thiss?" Lizarus' face grew grim, suspicious.

"My god, the one I once told you of over ale within the city, he has told me he will be needed in the fight. Cease your tortures," Falstillis pleaded.

This angered Lizarus. "I will not allow thiss!"

Zalam heard the conversation through a haze of pain and exhaustion. Where once dehydration and weakness ruled him, now awareness and fighting spirit came to be. He said, "Let me go and I'll kill whomever you please. In return I ask only for my safe escape from this hellish city."

Falstillis looked to Zalam then to Lizarus. He was determined to keep him designs against the derderoid secret. He said, "It is a fair request."

Lizarus raged. "Never!"

Then came Olmec, running as fast as his heavy frame allowed, wielding the sword wildly. Without hesitation, he attacked Lizarus. The three-bladed sword was swung wildly at the lizaran and easily dodged.

Lizarus backed away and commanded the two goltons to attack Olmec.

Unknowing Olmec's purpose, Falstillis turned to Zalam bound to the table and worked quickly to free him, saying, "Please, help us. Rasiki-Ha has all of Adul-Ra under captive thumb. We need a hero such as yourself."

One of Zalam's larger arms was freed and he helped Falstillis undo the binds. "Promise you my safety and freedom?"

Falstillis lied. "Indeed, I do."

"Are you a soldier?"

Falstillis shook his head as the last binds on Zalam's legs came free.

"Then stand out of the way," Zalam stood on the slab that he once thought would be his deathbed. He jumped, tackling a golton and they both went rolling to the floor.

Zalam came up first and fast. He saw Olmec still swinging the sword wildly at a retreating Lizarus who was, in turn, brandishing the hot trident.

"Olmec!" he called. "Throw me the sword!"

Olmec did and found himself snared within the arms of the much larger golton.

Zalam caught the tri-bladed sword, snapping on the power at the hilt. The three blades began to hum and vibrate. He jumped at the golton assaulting Olmec and kicking, knocking them over. The golton's arms released their hold and Olmec rolled to his feet.

Zalam turned his attacks to Lizarus.

Lizarus lunged with the glowing trident.

"No!" Falstillis cried. He ran towards Lizarus.

Zalam brought the sword down and up, sidestepping and slicing off Lizarus' gloved hand. Hand and iron fell to the floor with a thud and a clang.

Falstillis came to Lizarus' side, a hand out to Zalam to tell him to stop. Lizarus pulled his wounded arm in towards his belly, cupping the bleeding thing with the other hand and staring in disbelief.

"Our mutual enemy is Rasiki-Ha!" Falstillis said.

An incredible commotion came to them from the heights of the stairs.

"They're here," said Falstillis.

Olmec stood back, kicking the golton that had attacked him to keep him off balance and on the floor. "Who is here?" he asked.

Falstillis looked to Zalam. "An army bent on usurping Rasiki-Ha. It is lead by none other than his illegitimate great grandson." Falstillis' eyes wet, his brow pleading. "Please, help them."

"Can it be true?" asked Olmec. "Is this the hour we find freedom after so many generations of tyranny?"

Zalam considered things.

"Your safe escape is promised," Falstillis lied again.

Zalam thought for a moment to ask for supplies, too, to make the trek through the rest of the mountains, but decided that could be negotiated later. He looked to Olmec.

Olmec's emerald eyes had also gone to pleading. "If matters work our way, will you take me with you?"

Zalam nodded.

Together Zalam and Olmec mounted the stairs.

* * * * *

The goltons came to life, fighting off the intruding ragtag rebel army. Their numbers were immense and their coordination of attack skilled. Rasiki-Ha was not surprised by a rebel attempt. He had, in fact, long expected it. But he did not expect them to be so well trained and numerous.

His bony, aching fingers worked in the air. One by one the gigantic metal suit of armor, far larger than the goltons, came to life. This swayed the fighting within the palace halls to his favor.

At his side floated his beloved crystal ball. Movement from it caught his attention. As he peered into it, he saw first the interloping derderoid run out of the dungeon and join the fray. Then he saw nearby a man he barely knew yet recognized, a man commanding the rebel forces. He saw Aeri-Ha.

At first Aeri commanded his soldiers to attack the derderoid, but having then seen Olmec and Zalam fighting off the goltons, ceased these attacks. Words passed quickly between Aeri and Zalam. An alliance was formed. Together they pressed on, deeper into the palace and closer to the throne room.

Rasiki-Ha's crooked old mouth opened in horror, nearly creaking with age as an unoiled hinge. For the first time in many generations he was afraid.

* * * * *

Lizarus, with his one remaining hand, picked up the trident and shook it. The severed hand loosened and fell to the floor.

Falstillis took the trident and placed it near the fire, then helped Lizarus onto the slab where once Zalam had been bound. As per Lizarus' instructions, he then placed the oar-like iron into the fire and worked the bellows. The fire belched high flames.

"I made that iron," Lizarus said with some pride. "It took me many days to forge. I've made all my irons."

He then – again as per Lizarus' instructions – bound the lizaran to the slab.

The iron heated once more, Falstillis removed the leather glove from the hand on the floor then removed its twin from Lizarus. Placing them on his own hands, he then pulled the iron from the fire. He approached Lizarus. With great uncertainty and sweating profusely he pressed the flat oar-shape onto the stubby forearm of Lizarus, effectively cauterizing the wound.

Lizarus screamed in pain before passing out.

Working quickly, Falstillis removed healing herbs and poultices from the lizaran's belt and applied them to the wound. He then broke a small bit of paper and waved it before Lizarus' face.

Lizarus awoke.

Falstillis unbound his friend and wrapped the wounded hand.

Lizarus looked at the bandages, then said, "In the far reachess of the dungeon iss a room filled with toolsss. They are the toolsss I've ussed to make my ironsss. Retrieve them for me."

Falstillis disappeared into the further depths of the dungeon.
Lizarus stood. He walked to and grabbed the trident resting by the fire.

* * * * *

Zalam lead the charge into the throne room. He did not want such a disorderly charge, but the men followed and Zalam made headway through the sea of oncoming goltons. Olmec disappeared, but only momentarily – long enough to grab his iron staff from his room and return to the fight.

The big, hulking goltons took little damage from the soldiers, but with teams of three or more they could topple the things, rendering them somewhat disabled as they were always immediately concerned with the struggle of standing.

Zalam's sword alone sliced through their stone. Left and right he lopped off sedimentary limbs and heads.

Olmec directed Zalam towards the doors of the throne room. There, with a thrust of his powerful legs, the double doors swung wide and let the invaders in.

Zalam came first, bloodlust boiling, sword ready and thirsty, eyes wide, chest heaving. And he stopped.

He stood, his eyes scanning upwards at the incredibly huge animated armors.

He let little time pass. With the traditional war cry of his people, he jumped, "Grohtak-altohkaaa!"

He wielded his sword masterfully. He sliced through a giant gauntlet, its index finger falling useless to the floor. He swung and sliced, stabbed and kicked.

Olmec was at his side, bashing at the armor uselessly, trying to trip the giant armors with his iron staff.

Aeris-Ha and his men filled the throne room, feebly fighting.

The armors punched, slammed and stomped, killing rebel after rebel. Blood and gore spilled out from under their feet and from between their clenching gauntlets. The floor became wet with the stains of war, slippery with the vitality of rebellion.

Zalam caught sight of the ancient sorcerer atop his floating pillow. "Would he be your Rasiki-Ha?"

Olmec shoved his staff into the knee guard of an attacking armor, pulled it sideways and the thing fell, nearly crushing a few rebel soldiers as they dodged out of the way only to return and hack at the great thing.

"That is he!" Olmec said.

Zalam contracted his insectoid legs and leapt. He turned his sword around mid-air, pointing it downward as a spear. He flew through the air, flying over attacking armored arms and descending onto Rasiki-Ha. His triple blades sank into the thin frame of the ancient one behind the clavicle and near the neck. The blades slid out the back of Rasiki-Ha before he crashed onto the floor beneath the weight of the derderoid.

Instead of pulling the blades free, Zalam forced them out the chest of the dead sorcerer.

With Rasiki-Ha dead, the armor stopped moving.

The rebels cheered, hailing Zalam a hero.

Quietly, Aeris approached and inspected his dead ancestor already turning to dust. He watched his men gather round Zalam, pushing one another to gain a chance to pat their hero on the back.

“You best come quickly, friend Falstillis,” whispered Aeris, “lest his following grows and becomes impenetrable.”

* * * * *

Falstillis, hearing the cheering, left Lizarus in the dungeon as he clumsily worked his iron, attempting to cut the trident below the triple points.

He climbed the stairs and found the rejoicing, victorious rebels dancing and causing a ruckus within the throne room.

He was greeted by many of the soldiers who had already raided the kitchens of the palace and returned to the throne room with kegs of ale and wines. He smiled, elated at the death of the tyrant. He quickly found Aeris and congratulated him.

“Work quickly,” Aeris whispered to Falstillis below the singing, secretly placing a small blade into his hand.

Falstillis nodded, looked around and found Zalam and made his way through the crammed, dancing soldiers. He circled around to place himself behind the derderoid who was gladly drinking deeply from a stein of ale.

He approached, allowing the blade of the knife to extend beyond his hand. He came within striking distance, thinking out where best to stab the tall derderoid. He whispered, “For you, my lord Norikahn.”

With the dancing, the partying, Falstillis went unnoticed by Zalam.

But Olmec noticed. Indeed, he saw the blade in Falstillis’ hand. With three grand strides he picked up his staff and brought it crashing down onto the head of Falstillis who, so intent on killing Zalam, saw nothing until it was much too late.

The staff struck him hard. His skull cracked. Blood leaked from his nose. He gasped, muttered, moaned and fell.

The partying immediately near Zalam stopped, staring at Olmec and the dead body under his staff. Zalam turned to see the messy scene behind him.

Aeris came near, working through the crowded throne room. He first looked at the dead Falstillis. He then looked at Olmec.

“He has a knife in his hand. He was sneaking up on Zalam,” Olmec explained.

Aeris again looked at the body on the floor. He lied, “I suppose some will remain loyal to Rasiki-Ha, though I could not fathom the reason. Falstillis must have been one such man.”

* * * * *

Zalam and Olmec spent the next two days appreciating the city of Adul-Ra and gathering supplies. The party once in the throne room spilled into the streets.

Aeris-Ha took control over the city. He promised to lower the force field that had long kept the people of the lost city of Adul-Ra imprisoned. He first wanted to prepare them, however, to withstand the harsh wintry climate of the mountains.

At last the time came for the field to be lowered. Snow and hard winds quickly filled the city. Most of the citizens found they could not cope with the climate.

With somber goodbyes Zalam and Olmec left the city, trekking out into the deep snow. Zalam had found his furs made from the Änkiot-Ule he had killed. Olmec expressed he did not need such things as golems did not quite feel heat or cold the same as other races.

Aeris-Ha watched them go for a time before returning to his throne room.

Lizarus, unbeknownst to Aeris, Olmec, Zalam – indeed unbeknownst to all – appeared outside the city, deep in the snows. His eyes darted, searching for tracks. His tongue flicked, tasting the air. He hunted, following Zalam and Olmec.

Though he wore thick furs and many layers and a pack at his back, he moved slowly as the cold air chilled his cold blood. Where once had been his right hand now was the end of the trident, strapped to his healing forearm with leather.

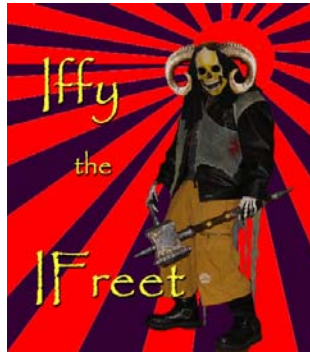
Aeris-Ha sat on an unceremonious chair within the throne room. With a finger he commanded the crystal ball that had once been Rasiki-Ha's to his side. He glowered into it, thinking of his people struggling against the harsh colds. He scanned the mountains with the crystal and found at the base of the range an army of two thousand men. They were camped and appeared to be waiting for someone. He wondered at the army, wondering who they were or what their purpose was. He realized he knew nothing of the outside world, nor would his people know.

Without announcement, afraid for the safety of the people of Adul-Ra, Aeris-Ha reenacted the force field once more, locking the outside world out and his good people in forever.

The End

Zalam finally escaped from Adul-Ra! But now Lizarus is after him and Olmec and Norikahn's army awaits! I hope you enjoyed Zalam in the Lost City of Adul-Ra!





A Little Q&A with Iffy the Ifreet

On Friday the 13th in June of this year, I debuted Iffy the Ifreet, If – E – Zine™'s official mascot. Recently I got the chance to sit down with Iffy and ask him a few questions in the hope of getting to know him a little better. Some of his answers were mysterious, many were hilarious. Here they are.

Do you have a middle name? Hortence. Why are you laughing?

Do you have any aliases? Iffy Baby, The Gin-Soaked Gypsy, The Galactic Gypsy

Birthday: June 13th

Birthplace: A sub-saharan moon in the outer reaches of the galaxy

Current Location: Some backwater burg called Earth

Eye Color: You need eyes to have eye color! I think this Q&A is a little discriminatory.

Hair Color: I don't even have skin, how am I supposed to have hair?

Height: 6'0"

Right-handed or left-handed? I'm a lefty

Your heritage: Demonic

Your weakness: Kryptonite... no, that's Superman. My weakness is anything with boobs. Except men. I find men with boobs creepy... and the least bit arousing... which is also creepy.

Your fears: Men with boobs.

What's your best physical feature? My big bone.

Your bedtime: Once again, I don't sleep.

What's your most cherished memory: Watching the lava world Magmos-X rise on the horizon of Akron-9

Thoughts when first waking up: I don't sleep.

Do you believe in yourself? What's not to believe? I'm unbelievable!

Do you think you're attractive? Hell yeah! Sometimes I can't keep my hands off myself!

Do you get along with your parents? No.

Your perfect pizza: Hawaiian. Pineapple with cheese... who knew?

Goal you would like to achieve in the next year: The same goal I have every year... to rock hard, drink, carouse with the ladies and eat pizza!

Most overused phrase on IM: STFU U F'N NOOB!

Pepsi or Coke: Coke. Preferably with rum in it.

McDonalds or Burger King: Jack In The Box and White Castle

Single or group dates: Whatever she's cool with.

What's your favorite flavor of iced tea? Long Island Iced Tea

Chocolate or Vanilla: Dark chocolate. The darker the better. I especially love Mexican hot chocolate on Dia de los Muertos to go with my candy skull.

Cappuccino or Coffee: Straight cup o' joe

Do You Smoke: Yeah, I'm pretty smokin'! Oh an I like Cohiba Maduros, Toros or Churchills

Do You Swear? Fuck no!

Do You Sing? Yes, usually in the shower. I sing mostly opera. And screamo.

Do You Shower Daily? Yep. Gotta keep them bones clean!

Do You Want to Go To College? Nah, I have enough debt already... and that's just on my gas card!

Do you like thunderstorms? Yeah!

What shoes did you wear today? Motorcycle boots... aka shit-kickers

Have You Ever Been in Love? Once...

Do you want to get married? Nah, I'm good where I'm at.

Do you play an instrument? The xylophone and trombone and a little guitar, but I only learned to play the guitar because the ladies think it's sexy.

Do you drink alcohol? Hell yeah!

Have you gone on a date in the past month? Yep. Eighteen.

Have you gone to the mall in the past month? No. do I look like a teenybopper?

What are some of your favorite bands? The Rollong Stones, The Sex Pistols, Slipknot, Mushroomhead, Misfits, Kraftwerk, Bauhaus, Oingo Boingo, Hank Williams, Sr., Reverend Horton Heat, The Grateful Dead, GWAR, Bolt Thrower, and Rockwell.

Turn-ons? Slipping some chick my bone

Turn-offs? Authority; slipping some dude my bone

Have you ever been dumped? Nope.

Where would you like to visit? I'd like to travel all over this world.

Do you have any gay friends? Tons! And they're all fabulous!

What would you really like to have right now? A drink.

Do you miss anyone right now? Just one...

Are you dating anyone in particular right now? I rarely have a steady girl.

Do you like sushi? Nah. I like stuffed that's cooked.

Have you ever wrestled? Yeah, about six months ago. FYI: Never get drunk at a lucha libre show and mouth off to the wrestlers. And even if you do, decline when they challenge you.

Do you like to cuddle? Yeah! ☺ <3

When was the last time you ate a grilled cheese sandwich? The last time I went to a Dead show. RIP Jerry.

What's the last thing you drank? A zombie. I love me some zombies.

What was the highlight of your weekend? Hangin' with friends and settin' off fireworks.

Have you ever told someone you loved them? Once...

What's your favorite holiday? Halloween!

What's your favorite food? Hot and spicy. Indian and Mexican are favorites.

What's your favorite dessert? New York style cheesecake.

Do you have a pet? I have a boa named Jim, named for Christopher Llyod's character on

the TV show Taxi.

What is the ringtone on your cell phone? Toccata en fugue.

What TV show are you a fan of currently? Pushing Daisies.

What was the last movie you watched? Halloween: Resurrection. Ugh.

What house did you last visit? The House on Haunted Hill.

What's the first thing you notice about the opposite sex? Breasts.

Have you ever broken a bone? Dude, you totally do not want to know how much it sucks for me to break a bone!

Do you have any tattoos? No, but sometimes I'll paint my skull.

What is your favorite flower? White lilies.

Do you like to travel by plane? No, I hate to fly by plane. Odd, huh? I traveled here from across the galaxy, but I can't get in a plane. Besides, I don't have eight hours to waste while sitting on a tarmac. Zing!

I'm told you're a fan of wrestling. Do you have any favorite wrestlers? Sure I do! I have to pay proper respects to El Santo, of course. But I also love Vampiro, Abismo Negro, The Undertaker, and Jimmy Wang Yang. My two all-time favorites would have to be Hallowicked and La Parka.

Religion: Druid

Boxers or briefs? I prefer to go commando.

Is there any song you can't get out of your head right now? "Pulse of the Maggots" by Slipknot

What's your favorite movie to watch on Halloween? Halloween, duh.

What's your favorite holiday? Halloween.

Name one fact about the person you most love: She's dead...

What are you wearing right now? Leather jacket, jeans, motorcycle boots, bandana, a Sex Pistols belt and barbed wire.

Do you speak any language besides English? I can speak in tongues, but I also speak Galoranese. I guess it counts as a dead language, seeing as the Galorans' planet was destroyed.

Is there a sure way to win your heart? Watch old sci-fi and horror B-movies with me.

What was the last thing to make you laugh? Watching Killer Klowns from Outer Space. I wish I had a cotton candy gun!

When was the last time you had butterflies in your stomach? It's been a long time since I ate any butterflies... and boy was Mothra pissed!

Who was the first person to text you today? My buddy Doc Gator

Have you ever been on television? Not yet!

What will you do after answering all these questions? Wash a beer down with a whiskey chaser!

What song can make you sad? "Ben"

What's your favorite sundae topping? Caramel.

What's your favorite sport? Hockey... I love the bone-jarring action and the blood!

Any place you would like to travel to in the next year? Sturgis.

What decade of the 20th century would you rather live in? The 1950s... all those great sci-fi flicks!

Who was your first roommate? My buddy Doc Gator.

The first time you got drunk, what were you drinking? Tequila, vodka and rum... all at

once!
What's your favorite type of comedy? *Deadpan*.
What's your favorite type of horror movie? It's a toss-up between slasher films and B-movies.
What's your favorite type of science fiction movie? Monster movies. Or anything with robots.
Do you have a favorite cartoon? *The Groovie Goolies*

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Thanks go out to Iffy for taking the time to do the interview. Keep an eye out for our new mascot! He may pop up within the pages of If – E – Zine™ at any moment!



“Rescuing the Dead”

PART 3

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Laserfire mixed with spent cordite and sizzled the air. The Sarge bounced and landed behind one of the massive hikima willows that dominated Dakkaran. He swung his PLR-3a out, pivoted on his right boot unseen beneath murky water and fired a three round burst of 10mm recoilless before he ducked behind the tree. The enemy Altean soldiers answered with rifle fire of their own, peeling bark away from the ancient willow.

The Sarge called over the com-link, “C’mon, lemme know when you’re all in place.”

It was his plan of action, his tactic the soldiers of 32nd Squad were following. An L-shaped formation with Over Private Harn Pickles and his Spider Launcher behind the two lines.

They had been bouncing deep into enemy territory for a few hours when they had accidentally stumbled across two squads of Alteans. That meant the 32nd Squad was outnumbered two-to-one.

“I’m in place,” Diego called over the com-link. “Got me a nice little boulder down here on the end of the line. And a nice view.”

Diego switched his PLR over to laserfire and shot once around the boulder. The laserfire hit an ancient hikima, igniting it with a small, smoldering flame above the heads of the Alteans.

The enemy soldiers peered at the boulder behind which Diego was hiding. A few turned and concentrated their efforts at him.

With the Alteans momentarily distracted, the rest of 32nd Squad was able to safely bounce into position. The Sarge, who had seen the laserfire come from Diego down the line, witnessed the end result as the rest of the squad called in to say they had taken up their positions. Only Over Private Pickles remained outstanding.

“Good job, Corporal Diego,” the Sarge commended, then added, “Where in space is Harn?”

“They got me pinned down, Sarge. I guess I make a nice, big target for ‘em.”

The Sarge heard Harn chuckle at his own joke.

“Give Harn some cover fire,” the Sarge ordered.

As he said this, all five of the Gregor soldiers opened fire. The Alteans had to duck the concentrated effort. Harn bounced to his position with one quick blast from his jetpack.

“Set!” called Harn.

“Work that Spider!” said the Sarge in return. “Don’t leave a single one standing.”

“Hoo-boy!” Harn cried.

Six spindly robotic arms arced out from Harn’s back as he stood up. They gave him the appearance of being a giant spider with its legs splayed out, giving the Light Anti-Personnel Support Artillery Eight – or LAPSA-8 – its nickname.

The end of each armiture was fitted with a mini-missile launcher with two mini-missiles each. Harn fired four of the six launchers. Eight small explosives rocketed outward at the Altean soldiers. Ancient hikima willows long left standing cracked and fell as the landscape was peppered with the explosions. Two Alteans died instantly, one was severely wounded – his arm dangling from a few sinews, the weight of his armor pulling it finally free from his body. The surviving Altean soldiers scattered in retreat, hoping to fall back to a better position on higher ground.

Harn launched the last four mini-missiles. They streaked through the air at the madly retreating and exposed soldiers.

Four more explosions rocked the landscape. Three more Alteans died and two more were wounded.

The Sarge gave the command to chase and 32nd Squad went on the bounce, charging their enemy, gunning the last of them down.

* * * * *

With the Alteans dead, 32nd Squad took a moment to police the area and confirm their kills.

“I’m certain they called in before they died,” the Sarge told Field Marshal Fisk. “There’ll be more here soon. We have to keep on the bounce.”

“And they’ll know we’re deep in their territory,” added Fisk. “We have to assume they’ll be hot on our tail from here on. That means more caution and we absolutely must not have another confrontation.”

This unnerved the Sarge. He had taken command of the squad, doling out orders despite the fact Field Marshal Fisk and Lieutenant Boa – both his superiors – had been present. He had to apologize for the infraction, though no one had mentioned it, and felt it was only proper to apologize in front of the entire squad.

“Field Marshal, Lieutenant, I’m sorry for taking command when the fighting started.”

“As you should be,” Lt. Boa reprimanded.

“I didn’t hear *you* barkin’ any orders,” Harn said.

“Over Private! Stow it!” The Sarge responded.

Lt. Boa answered with her typical storming away with Spooks in tow.

Harn opened a private channel over the com-link to Diego, saying, “Me an’ my big mouth get into a lotta trouble. That’s why I’m still an Over Private despite my Confirmed Kills Count and Campaigns Served Number.”

Diego quietly smiled, but said nothing.

Field Marshal Fisk removed his helmet, looking at the Sarge. He almost reeled from the dank, mildewed smells of the swamps of Dakkaran.

“You did fine,” said Fisk. “I wouldn’t have taken command anyway. I’m out here for this one mission. Your squad needs to learn to trust you, so I’ll stand clear of this stuff. When it comes to those people we’re looking for, however, I’ll speak up and you’ll be quiet. Until then, I’m simply one of your grunts. Are we clear?”

The Sarge nodded. “Yessir.”

* * * * *

Night crushed down on Dakkaran turning its gray misty swamps into slowly shifting darker grays. The change was so subtle the soldiers of 32nd Squad barely noticed and when they did it was long after dusk.

It had been a long, hard bounce since their encounter with the two Altean squads. They had seen two more since then but avoided contact. They were still operating under the assumption they were well-known and being hunted. As such, they kept their respites from the bounce brief.

On one such break, Field Marshal Fisk approached Sgt. Drake, offering him a cigar. The both had removed their cephalopodic helmets. The Sarge gratefully took the cigar, watched Fisk light one of his own and asked, "Aren't you afraid the smoke or heat will give us away?"

Fisk gestured to the fog hanging thickly all around. "Who could see through all this soup?"

The Sarge accepted the cutter-torch tool from Fisk and lit his own cigar.

"Where'd you learn that tactic we used back there?" Fisk asked.

The Sarge shrugged, handed the cutter-torch back and said, "I dunno. It just seemed a natural thing to do: set up a line of defense with a smaller line to protect your flank and set a heavy behind both lines with a three-hundred sixty degree fire line. I've used it before, but it's not the only trick I've got. You just do what you need out here in the field and that one thing works."

"It's a good bit of thinking." Fisk pulled on his cigar and let the smoke roll out his mouth thickly, hanging in the air and drifting away slowly. "It's the kind of call an L-T could make."

"I'm sure Lt. Boa would've done fine if I hadn't taken over," Sgt. Drake defended.

"That's not quite what I meant."

The Sarge then understood the suggestion. "I'm no leader," he said.

"Oh? You're actions speak otherwise."

"I'm just a grunt, a mud-mucker."

"You've got the Confirmed Kills Count and Campaigns Served Number. Why not?"

"My job is here," answered the Sarge. "Besides, when would I have the time to study for the tests? All that research and history may be fine elsewhere, but out here in the field I've done well enough without it."

"Alright, Sergeant. Alright."

Fisk smoked his cigar. They stood together in the living swamps of Dakkaran for a moment.

Fisk said, "I once had a similar conversation with one of my superiors long ago. I was a sergeant then – though a bit younger than you – and I thought the natural order of things was advancement. Little did I know then of the military's needs outweighing a soldier's wants or ideals.

"I like being in the field, too, Sergeant. That's why I practically bullied my way from Command Marshal to Field Marshal.

"If you're happy where you're at, Sergeant, that's fine. But I happen to think you'd make a damned fine leader."

The Sarge rarely received compliments. He wasn't certain how to respond. His training finally kicked in and he replied with a crisp, almost robotic, "Thank you, sir."

* * * * *

32nd Squad spotted them from a distance. The fog had thinned considerably and they were able to see some ways with nightvision and thermal imaging.

"They're civilians," said the Sarge.

"How do you know?" asked Lt. Boa.

"I see no weapons or armor."

"That doesn't mean they're not soldiers."

The few people they were discussing were nearly a klick away and standing before a cave's entrance within a small mound that rose out of the murky swamps.

"What should we do, L-T?" The Sarge verbally kow-towed.

Lt. Boa was hesitant, saying, "Field Marshal Fisk is the superior here."

Fisk said, "This is what I came for."

Fisk lead the 32nd Squad towards the people at the cave.

The people saw them materializing from the swamp. They hid within the cave's entrance, wondering why one of the approaching soldiers had removed his helmet and was hailing at them.

"They've seen us," one of them whispered.

It was Fisk who had removed his helmet, telling the others to keep their helmets on until ordered otherwise. Their guns were at their sides and the empty hands of the soldiers fidgeted nervously.

They stopped before the cave.

It was decided one of the men in the cave would call out.

"We are not soldiers," he called. "We have no war with you."

"I know that," said Fisk. "We are looking for Lia's parents. We have her and she is well."

The Sarge twitched at this, wondering if it was a lie. He then heard some low whispers. One man appeared, stepping from the entrance. He was dressed in rags.

"You are not Alteans," he said. "Are you Gregors?"

Fisk nodded.

The man eyed the other soldiers of 32^{ns} Squad.

Fisk commanded them to remove their helmets.

"Sir!" Lt. Boa protested.

"They're not soldiers. Remove your helmets," Fisk said.

Lt. Boa was the last to remove her helmet. She did so slowly, reluctantly.

"Ilga?" a voice called from the cave.

A middle-aged man stepped out of the cave, stepping around Fisk and approached Lt. Boa.

"It is, isn't it? Ilga? By space, it is! I've not seen you in, space, two decades, but I recognize you! You look like your mother!"

The soldiers grabbed their weapons uneasily as, to their horror, the man reached out and hugged their lieutenant.

Lt. Boa was slow to do so, but she hugged the man in return.

“It’s good to see you, Repar,” she said.
Their embrace ended, Lt. Boa said to Fisk, “Sir, this is Repar. He’s my cousin.”

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Holy crap! What’s this new development? Will the Sarge and the soldiers of 32nd Squad make it out of enemy territory deep in the swamps alive? Check back in issue #13, this year’s Special Halloween Edition of If – E – Zine to find out!



Reviews

Breaker! Breaker! – A classic 80s Chuck Norris movie. And, as any Chuck Norris movie, it's loaded with cheesy-goodness. Cram-packed with stereotypical hillbillies and truckers, this movie sadly is far from Norris' best. Even the action is minimal, though admittedly funny. It may be worth a chuckle, but I'd say skip it for some of his better flicks.

Indy 4 – A decent film overall, but doesn't quite stand up to the first three. I'd like to see Shia as a 1950s pulp hero, but they'd have to take the movie someplace completely different from the original Indy films to make it work. Shia on his own in a 1940s world wouldn't work.

The Stand by Stephen King – I finally tackled this beast! And, I have to say, it was an easy read. I don't see it as epic as *The Lord of the Rings* (as Stephen King hoped it would be), but it's definitely an amazing piece of literature. Is it his masterpiece? Well, it's absolutely the best thing I've read from him to date. A must-read for science fiction fans.

“Among Thieves” by Poul Anderson – A respectable short story from Mr. Anderson. I liked the plotting and back-biting of the characters.

Rome – Season 1 – I picked up season 1 at the library on a whim. It's actually not too bad. And it's filled with tons of sex and violence! That's a sure sign of quality... right?

First & Only by Dan Abnett – I erally loved this book when I first read it. Set in the world of Warhammer 40,000, it's about a unit of space marines. I definitely suggest this.

CHiPs – Season 1 – I have a confession: I LOVE CHiPs! Season 1 was good, but I can't wait for the rest of the seasons to be released on DVD. If you like 70s cheese, go with CHiPs! You da man, Erik Estrada!

My Side of the Mountain – I first read the book in junior high school when I was about thirteen years old. Recently I watched the movie. It's a fun movie and great for kids.

Fright Night – A classic in horror! I first watched it as a kid growing up in Long Beach. The suave vampire-next-door even made an appearance in my dreams as he attempted to drain me of my blood! If you love horror, give this movie a try.

History Channel's History's Mysteries: Amityville – An okay documentary about the infamous Amityville Horror. It may be fun for background noise at your next Halloween party.

The Invasion – The recent remake of the classic *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* starring Nicole Kidman... BLOWS. While I admit the director did well enough to keep the tension up in this movie, the slow pace, inconceivable plot that's far too current and lack of real acting damages this film beyond repair. Well, no, this film *could* be repaired: if Nicole had shown a little skin. Skip it!

Cloverfield – I don't think this film is as amazing as some tout, but I also hail this as a great addition to the kaiju (aka giant monster) movie history. Overall, I don't like the design of the monster. It's much too generic. It lack personality. If a sequel is to be made, and I hope one is made, they'll need to concentrate more on the monster and make him the real star of the movie. It was fine here to use him as essentially backdrop. But the future of this possible franchise needs to learn from other kaiju films and explore the monster itself. And make it really stand out! Truth be told, this damned thing looks like a Genestealer from Warhammer 40,000 or an alien from *Aliens* or some other generic

fright-fest. The monster needs to be made bigger and better. This is worth watching for any kaiju fan.

Rambo – There is basically minimal plot to this movie. Some may say there's no plot at all. But the gore in this movie is INTENSE. Not intense like High Tension where it disturbs you, but intense in that it's so over-the-top you simply can't stop watching. If you're interested in seeing people literally get torn apart by machinegun fire, then this movie is for you. Otherwise stick with the original First Blood movie. It's still the best in the series.

10,000 BC – So, if I were going to make a prehistoric action-adventure movie, how could I fuck it up? I got it! I'd make it a love story! Yeah, for an action-adventure movie, the action is forgettable and the prehistoric critters rarely make an appearance. Skip this trash.

Halloween: Resurrection – Speaking of trash... a sure sign of a horrible movie is Busta Rhymes telling Michael Myers "Happy Halloween, muthafucka" just before he goes buck-w with kung fu. Seriously? Who smoked what and thought this shit up? Skip this one entirely.

Hellboy 2: The Golden Army – I was not a fan of the original Hellboy. I was hoping Hellboy 2 would be better. And it was, but only marginally. If you're a comic book fan, then you should be reading the comic book instead of watching these movies. But if you want to, you might get a kick out of part 2. It's a'ight.

Batman: The Dark Knight – The blockbuster hit of 2008. This movie is in league with Heat or Casino or other crime dramas. Spider-man 2 and Dark Knight are easily the best comic book movies ever made. I want to see this movie again and again. There's just so much packed into it that you can't catch it all at once! An amazing film! It will go down in history with Frank Miller's Dark Knight Returns as some of the best Batman tales ever made.

Gotham Knight – A series of nine anime stories, a la Animatrix, about Batman. It's a good compliment to other Batman stories. I'd suggest it.

Meet the Spartans – Wow... utter crap. The only worthwhile in this movie was to see Kevin Sorbo say, "I'm about to go Hercules on your ass!" and you could probably find that online. Skip it!

Hitman: Enemy Within by William Dietz – I was looking for a good, light, fun read after having tackled some heavier stuff like The Stand. I found it in this book. And it was pretty good! If you like the video game series or action-packed crime fiction, then you might like this.

